

BOOK REVIEW

Cloete, N., Maassen, P., & Bailey, T. (Eds.). (2015). *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*. Cape Town: African Minds.

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Manuel Castells (2001), who is regarded as one of the most influential social scientists commenting on the role of higher education in contemporary global consciousness, describes the roles of universities as the generation of new knowledge, the conceptualisation and diffusion of ideology and forms of knowing, the recreation of elites, and the development of skilled labour. The tension between the utilitarian role, on the one hand, and the generation of new forms of knowledge and the contradictions inherent in this, on the other, is the focus of this widely influential new book. The African university, despite calls for it to act as an instrument of development in the post-colony and engine of an African renaissance, has struggled to assert itself within the paced global knowledge economy which requires the university to ‘become a central actor of scientific and technological change’ and to become the centre of ‘cultural renewal and cultural innovation ... linked to the new forms of living’ (Castells in Cloete et al., 2015, p. 2).

Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education builds on these premises and explores the trends and debates around the intended and emerging identity of African flagship universities in eight countries by relying on comparative indicators and sets of data. Empirical data from universities and governments on research levels and outputs, numbers of students and staff, and contextual factors, are used to present a textured analysis of the eight flagship universities, which are the University of Botswana, University of Cape Town (South Africa), University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique), University of Ghana, University of Mauritius, Makerere University (Uganda) and University of Nairobi (Kenya).

These eight universities formed the sites of the extensive and comprehensive HERANA (Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa) project, initiated by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) in 2007 with funding support from the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation and other benefactors, and which has focused on exploring the multitude of factors which influence universities’ ability to contribute to knowledge creation and development more broadly, and, indeed,

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on the importance of the role and function of the research-intensive institution itself. The book cogently argues that only a select few institutions are required to drive the African knowledge and research agenda, but that this function needs to be performed in order to remain part of the global debates in the global knowledge economies and to ensure the innovative renewal of knowledge which creates possibilities of change.

The book is divided into four sections, and each section engages in depth with issues of performance, research incentives, governance and policy context, and the ‘universities’ third mission of engagement’ understood in systemic terms. Overall, African flagship universities are struggling with playing ‘catch-up’ (Scott in Cloete et al., 2015, cover) with any of the comparative regions, including those of South America and India, and many factors are discussed which may assist regions and countries in focusing their energy on developing conditions which encourage a differentiated higher education sector in which a research-intensive university can flourish (Altbach in Cloete et al., 2015, p. 20).

The desirability of a flagship and world-class university is not left uncontested. Cloete et al (2015, p. 22) cite Altbach (2013) and assert that flagship universities play unique roles within the academic system. Even though only a small percentage of universities in the developed regions fulfil the criteria for research-intensive institutions (China 3%, US 5%), at least a select few are required to serve the range of functions espoused by Castells, which is to renew and innovate in order to carve new ways of knowing so as not only to reproduce existing systems and ways of being. Even secondary knowledge production sectors rely on PhD productions of the universities and, based on the data presented in *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*, African universities need to develop their capacity and need to engage policy contexts, so as to become more enabling to contribute significantly to the region’s knowledge generation and systemic renewal (Cloete et al, 2015).

In discussing the extensive and detailed evidence from the eight flagship universities in Southern, East and West Africa, the editors Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracey Bailey have attracted the most impressive collection of contemporary scholars, authors and researchers. Each chapter is authored by a team of widely published African scholars and scholars of Africa. Manuel Castells describes the book as ‘mandatory reading for academics, policy-makers and concerned citizens, in Africa and elsewhere’ (Cloete et al, 2015, cover) which sums up the extraordinary value and significant contribution these authors make to the evolution of our thinking about higher education in Africa and beyond.

The chapters are embedded into the framework discussed in Chapter 1. The following chapters describe performance, alliance and international research cooperation by means of in-depth and accessible comparison and discussion of empirical data. Chapter 5 argues cogently that political will beyond the higher education sector with a lens across the African region is required to vitalise the notion of ‘brain circulation’ and PhD mobility, which has the potential to significantly stimulate research and knowledge creation. The following chapters then discuss research incentives exploring contextual, policy and individual factors. The chapters also discuss governance and funding councils and their intended and implicit roles in terms of steering and coordination in the eight countries.

Chapters 10 and 11 present research on the university's 'third mission' around issues of dialectic interconnectedness of the knowledge creation project with society and the world 'out there'. Useful indicators are presented which assist in navigating the 'ideological quagmire' of the engagement terrain (Van Schalkwyk in Cloete et al., 2015, p. 205). As part of the university's 'responsiveness' to local development needs (DoE, 1997), and in line with notions of the co-creation of the academic agenda, facilitated in problem-focused pedagogies, the importance and complexity of the 'contextual factors that are impacting on knowledge production' (Bailey, 2010, p. 18) are deliberated.

Chapter 10 asserts that 'citizenship education is an essential part of contextually relevant education in democracies' (Luescher-Mamashela et al. in Cloete, 2015, p. 231). This chapter links higher education's role in citizenship development via the notion of student engagement to the academic project and the development of graduate attributes. In the course thereof, it shows that 'the multiple roles that African flagship universities are meant to play in development ... coincide empirically in terms of student engagement' (p. 257). This expansion of the HERANA project to include key aspects of the student experience makes this book particularly relevant to student affairs professionals.

The chapters present extensive data in extensive and accessible tables, graphs and figures on each university's knowledge production, based on mined data, with a focus on many variables. This is the area which, on the one hand, is the strength of the book, having clearly required extensive empirical research. However, on the other, while not supporting the reductionist notion of the quantification of higher education into parts such as 'outputs' and 'rankings', the book bases its important findings and conclusions on these indicators. There is much critique which laments the 'quantification and evaluation of academic work; and increasing dependence on these quantitative measures to define and assess academic productivity and efficiency' (Bode & Dale, 2015). The 'uncritical dependence on quantification not only masks but also exacerbates problems in higher education' (Dale, 2012, p.5), which might include 'development challenges in the university's own backyard' (Duncan in Chetty & Merrett, 2014, p. iii). The book's heavy reliance on data is its strength, in that it is a sober voice among the romantic and melancholic narratives about African higher education. At the same time, this heavy reliance on data shifts the indicators of success into a reductionist framework and – because this book is likely to be highly influential and referenced widely – it might make the quantification discourse normative.

Having said this, I thoroughly enjoyed the neatness of the empirical research on which the book rests, even while knowing that African higher education, much like higher education across the globe, is anything but neat, but full of messy contradictions and paradoxes.

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