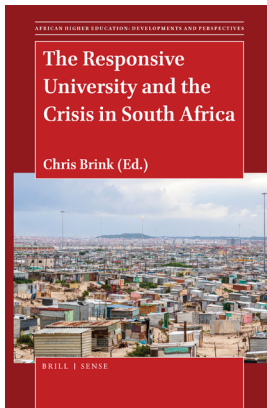




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The responsive university and the crisis in South Africa



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Are South African universities disengaged from civic duty?

A doorstopper of a book, the mathematician and former university vice-chancellor, Chris Brink, brings together 24 academic leaders to compose 16 chapters of more than 380 pages of writing on what he calls 'the responsive university'. Its origins lie in the editor's 'unease about universities' engagement, or lack of engagement, with civil society' (p.1).

The book is divided neatly into two equal sections of eight chapters, one global and the other South African. Its thesis is simple: the modern university faces a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of its publics which is best addressed through a responsive university that actively engages its communities. To his credit, and unusual for edited collections, the editor Brink has a short framing introduction and a closing synthesis, which to some extent hold together the rather diverse chapter contributions.

The 'global context' section offers some rich cases of innovative and experimental instances of responsive universities, from Tufts and the University of Pennsylvania in the USA to Newcastle (UK) and a Hong Kong Polytechnic. The terrain covered is familiar to academics long engaged with the politics and policies of responsiveness, such as mandatory public service coursework embedded in all areas of study versus centre-based initiatives that encourage and incentivise outreach into communities surrounding the university.

The South African section consists of writings prepared in the heat of battle, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the student protest moment of 2015–2016 when the call for 'a free, decolonized education' echoed across the country. Perhaps inevitably, the chapters contain a mix of anguish and analysis with a good dose of normative writing about *what should be* given the wake-up call brought on by the #mustfall moment.

I have always found strange the endless exhortation for South African universities to be more responsive to their surrounding communities. Show me a single university without a school outreach programme or a law clinic or a mobile health-care facility. As the book acknowledges, the pandemic evoked a massive response from higher education institutions. The reasons for such high levels of responsiveness lies within the very nature and origins of our public universities that, unlike their Western counterparts, did not emerge from monastery cultures or ivory towers but with a strong connection to the professions and a sense of service; for example, some of our first universities started with small theology faculties endowed with a sense of outward mission long before there were schools of accounting or theoretical physics.

The problem is not that our universities are unresponsive to external or community needs; it is that their responsiveness is not intellectually and politically problematised. Two examples must suffice. Underlying much of the responsiveness to development is of the hand-out variety of outreach programmes. Responsiveness is not intellectually linked to the mainstream curriculum or programmatically included in a service-learning orientation within the broader university culture. That kind of responsiveness is a fractured business that depends almost entirely on faculty- or departmental-level initiatives that come and go with an energetic, outward-looking personality in that academic unit. Responsiveness is not, in short, conceptualised, let alone systematised, within the knowledge production (research) or knowledge exchange (teaching) functions of the South African university.

In a similar vein, South African universities are often characterised by a knee-jerk responsiveness to the pressures of the day. Put bluntly, our universities are sometimes too responsive to external or internal demands *before thinking things through*. Our forthcoming book on the decolonisation of knowledge makes this point empirically after more than 200 interviews with leading academics across 10 universities.¹ What happened?

On the fright occasioned by the demands for decolonisation, South African academics of all stripes declared their unthinking loyalty to the threatening new concept and proceeded to make up its meanings to fit their own capacities and ideologies; in consequence, a potentially radical concept for curriculum change was quickly and effectively defanged, to borrow from feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed.

Unsurprisingly, by the time the next fad came along, academics at places like the University of Johannesburg jumped gleefully onto the 4IR bandwagon as performance metrics changed to signal the new responsiveness. In her chapter contribution to the book, Lis Lange tries valiantly (and, in my estimation, unsuccessfully) to descriptively capture 'South African universities between decolonization and the fourth industrial revolution' (p.272).

That South African universities sit atop a serious developmental crisis inherited from colonialism and apartheid, and exacerbated by state capture and ineptitude, is not in dispute. That universities are unresponsive is, quite frankly, nonsense. Consider this: the University of Fort Hare runs the sewerage system for the broken municipality in Alice. Rhodes University in Makhanda (the former Grahamstown) is regularly faced with closure because local government there cannot maintain the water supply to the city and its main employer, a site of higher learning. Here you have a situation, mused a former vice-chancellor of this institution, where the municipality could well be the reason for institutional dysfunction.

None of these complexities about the campus-community interface are captured in the chapters of this book which are also uneven in quality, length, and focus. What the book does offer, however, is a compendium of interesting ideas about responsiveness in practice and the case for more engaged universities in other parts of the world.

Reference

1. Jansen JD, Walters CA. The decolonization of knowledge: Radical ideas and the shaping of institutions in South Africa and beyond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Forthcoming 2022.

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