

A guide to research in African universities

Book review

Title: *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*

Edited: Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracy Bailey

Publisher: African Minds

Reviewer: A.B.K. Kasozi, Associate Professor, Makerere Institute of Social Research

This book studies factors which contribute to the abilities of African universities to produce knowledge. It is a book worth reading by those interested in research, knowledge production and postgraduate training as major components of university offerings in African institutions.

The book is part of a larger study by the Higher Education Research and Advocacy

Network in Africa that was initiated by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation in 2007.

The aim of the study was to investigate the relationships between higher education and development, (economic and democratic) in Africa.

Realising that the world economy is driven by knowledge and that countries which have linked higher education to development such as South Korea, Finland and others have registered massive

growth, the several investigators who have contributed chapters to this volume examine the factors that influence the 'performance dynamics of African universities' particularly their knowledge production abilities and their relationship to economic development.

The book argues that "Africa needs a group of research-intensive or research-led universities to spur the production of knowledge relevant to African development. This is because in the current global setting, the university is the core of any country's research and innovation system" as it is the location of the most learned in society and trains researchers for every knowledge-producing institution in the public and private sectors.

The study examined eight 'flagship' universities namely the University of Botswana, the University of Cape Town, the University of Dar es Salaam, Eduardo Mondlane, the University of Ghana, Makerere University, the University of Mauritius and the University of Nairobi. The study focused on the "academic core" of these eight universities that is teaching, research and external engagement.

A set of indicators, including the proportion of enrolment in science and technology, outputs of masters and doctoral students,

student to academic staff ratios, research funding per staff, ratio of graduates to enrolments, doctoral graduates per permanent academic staff, research and publications as well as sources and amount of funding in key discipline areas were used to assess the performance of these eight institutions.

After reviewing collected evidence, the book concludes that in Africa, only the University of Cape Town had the capacity to deliver 'high output research, scholarship and delivering knowledge' that can enhance national and regional development. For instance in 2011, it had 1,517 items of publication.

Makerere was rated a distant second, not only because it produced less knowledge than UCT (382 items of publication) but its research funding was over 80% dependant on external donations whose conditions local researchers must abide with.

The study emphasises that Africa needs

"academic institutions committed to the production and dissemination of knowledge in a range of disciplines and fields, and equipped with the appropriate laboratories, libraries, and other infrastructure that permit teaching and research" at the highest academic level.

Security of funding the research function is key to maintaining this infrastructure. Only home derived funding is secure.

The book stresses the key functions of universities as (a) producing evidence based knowledge, disseminating it to society and enabling its utilisation, (b) the training of the labour force, (c) the selection of dominant elites and (d) producing values and social development legitimization. For

understandable historical reasons, colonial and post-colonial African states saw the university mainly as a producer of skilled labour.

Production of knowledge was not a major item for funding. When the World Bank grudgingly accepted the role of higher education in development, after harsh criticisms from academics for not encouraging the funding of higher education, it focused mainly on the "development" of the labour force for the market.

Thus, many African leaders see the university as a mere teaching institution to produce workers for the public and private sectors.

The university's role as a producer of "knowledge and its application in society" is not prioritised or well-funded.

Unfortunately, the neglect of the knowledge production functions of African universities came at a time when global economies were increasingly becoming knowledge driven.

Africa's failure to finance this function of the university has left the latter as a mere teaching institution, just like a high school or polytechnic.

This neglect partly explains Africa's backwards in contributing to world knowledge, commerce and industry. As of now, Africa

"Africa's failure to finance this function of the university has left the latter as a mere teaching institution, just like a high school or polytechnic."

contributes less than 3% a year to annual scientific research and scientific publications. Chapter six by Gordon Musiige and Peter Maassen on faculty perception of factors that influence research at Makerere University reveals a lot about Uganda's flagship university. Although Makerere produces over two thirds of Uganda's scholarly publications, it is still a teaching institution. The state funds it as a teaching institution for undergraduates whose numbers dilute the quality of education delivered and weakens its research component. Neither the state nor the central administration contributes much to its approximately \$80 to

\$90m annual research expenses. In 2013, the university's research income was \$85.10m and almost all of it was from donor funding. While donor support is welcome, there are many problems with it.

Donors' priorities determine research areas, output, and methods of distribution and are dependent on good national diplomatic relations with source countries.

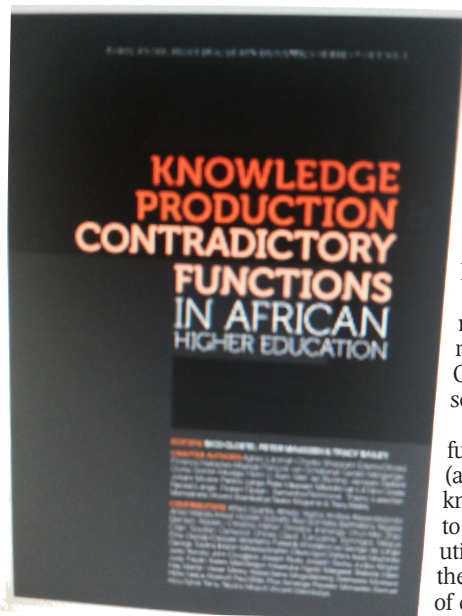
Recently, when the controversy over the homosexual legislation was hottest, it was feared that research funding to critical areas of scholarship might be cut. The Uganda state should wake up to this critical funding gap and allocate at least \$100 million per year to Makerere for research alone.

The book concludes by appealing to all stakeholders to encourage the development of a "pact" among all social groups based on the understanding that universities play a major role in creating knowledge necessary for development.

This pact, based on that, should facilitate the funding of research and knowledge production at African universities.

Although many writers have contributed to this volume, the editors have done a good job in weaving the theme of the knowledge production function of universities in all the chapters. This is impressive.

However, the volume I read, an electronic one, had no index. I hope the hard copy one will include this necessary section.



The cover of the book reviewed



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
Kampala · Uganda

Come Prepared to Learn, Leave Prepared to Succeed

REGISTRATION OPEN
APPLY NOW!
Aug - Sept 2015

OUR PROGRAMS

- Foundation Program
- Undergraduate Programs
- Diploma Programs
- Executive Programs



EACH STUDENT GETS A FREE LAPTOP
Terms & Conditions Apply







Victoria Towers, Plot 1 - 13 Jinja Road, Kampala, Uganda
+256 417 727 000 / +256 75 996 146 / 130 admissions@vu.ac.ug

 victoria university kampala uganda
  @vukampala
  www.vu.ac.ug