

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE ‘NEW’ AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Makerere University in Transition 1993–2000: Opportunities and challenges, by Nakanyike Musisi and Nansozi Muwanga. Oxford: James Currey, with the support of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2003. xix + 103 pp. £9.95 paperback. ISBN 0-85255-426-5.

Higher Education in Tanzania: A case study, by Daniel Mkude, Brian Cooksey and Lisbeth Levey. Oxford: James Currey, with the support of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2003. xiv + 104 pp. £9.95 paperback. ISBN 0-85255-425-7.

Higher Education in Mozambique: A case study, by Mouzinho Mario, Peter Fry, Lisbeth Levey and Arlindo Chilundo. Oxford: James Currey, with the support of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2003. £9.95 paperback. ISBN 0-85255-430-3.

IN 1931 THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION COMMITTED \$250,000 to the nascent field of African Studies by funding the new International Institute for African Languages and Cultures (IIALC), later renamed the International African Institute. The missionary Joseph Oldham and anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski convinced the Rockefeller trustees that the IIALC's extensive programme of research and funded fellowships would inform the practical ‘social engineering’, as Malinowski once put it, that accompanied colonial rule. Three-quarters of a century later, it is fitting that the Rockefeller Foundation is now funding institutional and research capacity-building on the continent itself. Four major American philanthropic institutions — the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller, Ford and MacArthur Foundations — have together invested more than \$60 million in higher education reform in six countries — Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The books under review are the first three case studies to be published — on Makerere University, Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) University, and the Mozambique higher education sector.

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The financial and political vicissitudes that foreshadowed these reforms are all too familiar; the state of Africa's universities has come to symbolize the 'African crisis' more generally. These volumes give a flavour of the pragmatic, technocratic and market-led approaches that these universities have adopted over the last decade. Necessity can be creative, and there is much to be praised about the reforms, which were already under way before the US foundations offered their support. The US involvement, through their 'Partnership for Higher Education', is based on the principle that 'an independent scholarly community supported by strong universities goes hand-in-hand with a healthy stable democracy' (series preface: xiii). But such 'partnerships' inevitably come with strings attached; the foundations also espouse a vision of 'African universities as vital instruments for development' (*ibid.*). Herein lies the paradox inherent in the arrival of 'new public management' within these universities. A neo-liberal model of the corporate university is now being vigorously proselytized within many higher education sectors across the globe. But can one reconcile massive student expansion and market-led administrative rationalization with earlier visions of academic autonomy? The question is no different in Africa, but in a context of the impoverished state and competing economic priorities (such as basic education) the stakes are high. In this review I want to begin to untangle the contradictions that surround both the idea and the reality of the contemporary African university.

The first task for the reader is to make peace with the language of strategic planning that permeates these volumes. Each seems to have been written as a project report, awash with acronym-soup, SWOT analyses and strategic plans, with lots of attention to administrative structures and committee responsibilities. In the audit society, it seems, power grows out of the bullet-point rather than the barrel of the gun. The books adopt a brisk, utilitarian prose, and a huge mass of statistical 'facts' are blow-dried together with liberal use of the subjunctive — 'this study should be managed', 'the results would provide', 'the university would benefit from'. At times the genre seems to reduce the universities to yet another development problem. Yet despite their extensive lists of recommendations, the authors exude optimism about the future.

These are less scholarly texts than administrative manifestos and, as such, sit oddly within the catalogue of a scholarly publisher. The counter-argument might be that academics are always also administrators, and need to be conversant with institutional practices and rationales, and not feign ignorance of such worldly matters. Once one gets beyond the developmental and 'problem-solving' trope, the volumes provide an invaluable source of comparative financial and institutional data for what one hopes will be a growing field of African higher education studies. In this regard, these volumes elaborate on the country snapshots offered in the

comprehensive handbook *African Higher Education*. This recent reference volume offers benchmark analyses of higher education provision in all 54 African countries, together with a set of useful thematic chapters and extensive bibliographies.¹

What should an African university look like? As administrative manifestos, the books shy away from the more abstract question of what African universities should be for. Ever since Newman wrote his famous tract on the *Idea of the University*, debates about higher education have often been couched in an idealistic, and sometimes moralistic, tone. Academic identities are forged in the process of disciplinary socialization, leading individuals to extrapolate their own experience on to the university more broadly. Funding and governance reforms in the UK since the 1970s have led academics to decry the threat to scholarly autonomy and basic research. Yet universities are highly resilient institutions, palimpsests that reflect the agendas of different eras, and there is no reason why disciplinary purity and market entrepreneurialism cannot co-exist. The role of the university in offering a place of intellectual debate and detached scholarship needs to be complemented by one of community engagement and service, scientific application and vocational training. The debate turns on which of these roles should be prioritized, and whether the latter is possible without the former.

Whilst the Al-Azhar university in Cairo was the world's first university, most African higher education institutions developed in the very last years of colonial rule. Before that, the colonial rationale had been to offer education supposedly appropriate to the social and economic conditions at hand; in practice this meant, at most, a limited vocational training. The two notable exceptions were missionary-founded institutions — Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, established in 1827 and affiliated in 1876 to Durham University, and the South African Native College (later the University of Fort Hare) that from 1916 to the 1950s trained many of southern Africa's black political leaders. Makerere had no such missionary patronage, instead starting life as a government technical school in 1920. The 1924 Phelps-Stokes commission on education in British Africa had concluded that 'all education must be of a character to draw out the powers of the Native African and to fit him to meet the specific problems and needs of his individual and community life'.² In British Africa, the *de facto* policy of offering only technical or vocational education to Africans changed after the Second World War, with university colleges being formed in Ibadan and Legon in 1949, and Makerere being granted independent university status

1. Damtew Teferra and Philip Altbach (eds), *African Higher Education: An international reference handbook* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2003).

2. Jesse Jones, *Education in East Africa: A study of East, Central and Southern Africa under the auspices of the Phelps-Stokes Fund* (Phelps-Stokes Fund, London, 1924).

in 1960. In those parts of West Africa under French colonial influence, similar developments came much later.

Ashby describes how the Asquith commission on higher education in 1951 became 'Britain's blueprint for the export of universities to her people overseas'.³ Whilst an impressive amount of time, effort and funding went into these new universities, Ashby also suggests that the policy was 'a vivid expression of British cultural parochialism'. Its basic assumption was that a university system 'appropriate for Europeans brought up in London and Manchester and Hull was also appropriate for Africans brought up in Lagos and Kumasi and Kampala'.⁴ As with new provincial universities in the UK, these universities initially had to teach to London University curricula and maintain the same entrance standards — a policy supported as a matter of principle by the new African leaderships. This meant that recruitment quotas were regularly not met; there were 100 vacant student places at University College Ghana in 1955. The principle of academic autonomy is an important one, but in 1950s Africa this usually meant a senate of primarily expatriate scholars defining university policy. These universities were sometimes lavishly funded, sometimes located on campuses away from urban centres. As the independence honeymoon faded, African leaders recognized that their universities could not and should not emulate their cognate institutions in the post-colonial metropole. Conflicts over the 'Africanization' of the curriculum and academic staff were particularly marked during these years. There was also a growing backlash amongst African publics against racialized 'ivory towers', and a strong pressure on universities to become more publicly accountable. The initial focus on standards was gradually replaced by a call for relevance and usefulness.

Glimpses of this conflictual history emerge in the volumes, each of which provides short backgrounds to the present reforms. The compulsory Development Studies course for all first- and second-year students at Dar-es-Salaam during the early 1970s offers a fascinating insight into the way that, during this period, African universities were used to promote the state's ideological agenda. All students were obliged to do a 'field attachment' in order to gain work-experience and to link theory and practice, an unprecedented example of curriculum reform. But protests at compulsory national service and political control over academic appointments led to an increasingly tense relationship between students and the university, in turn exaggerated by the economic crises of the 1980s.

The Makerere volume dwells primarily on the decades of instability and unrest in Uganda, and unfortunately there is no mention of the earlier vibrant pre- and post-independence intellectual atmosphere on the 'hill'

3. Eric Ashby, *African Universities and Western Tradition* (Oxford University Press, London, 1964), p. 19.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

(the nickname for both Makerere and UDSM), characterized by Rajat Neogy's launch of the avant-garde literary journal *Transition* in 1961, and evoked by Paul Theroux in his fictional writing (Theroux taught English at Makerere for four years). Nor is any mention made of the applied research contributions made by the Makerere Institute for Social Research. There is perhaps too much history here to unpack, but these institutional histories offer important legacies to build upon. The history of Lourenço Marques University is rather different, as it initially catered for the children of Portugese colonists, and by independence in 1975 black Mozambicans made up less than 2 percent of the student body. After independence, student numbers at the renamed Eduardo Mondlane University fell drastically, and the institution became an instrument of the socialist economy, acquiring its own Faculty of Marxism-Leninism. One encounters almost by accident graphic details of the economic crisis of the late 1980s and its effects on these institutions. Academics at UDSM were forced to resort to the aptly-titled PESA (Personal Economic Survival Activities), whilst toilets and washrooms were converted into bedrooms at Makerere to cater for increasing numbers of students.

The primary focus of all the books is on the reforms initiated during the 1990s. The initiatives come from different sources. At UDSM an enterprising dean in the Faculty of Engineering sought to make the faculty as financially self-sufficient as possible, creating a consultancy arm and a sandwich PhD programme. This later led the Scandinavian and German development agencies to begin funding an institution-wide reform programme. The authors of the Tanzania volume cite a press report of violence in 2000 between engineering and law students, but go no further in exploring the tensions surrounding the reform programme or the differential status and entitlement of students across the university. On the other hand, the authors of the Mozambique volume suggest that a student strike of 1990 was 'crucial . . . in drawing the attention of government' to the problems faced by universities (p. 11). Given the key role student politics has played in the postcolonial history of the African state, one would like to know more about this new phase of student activism. Some have suggested that, with the diversification and privatization of higher education, student activism will fragment and become less influential, as students no longer see themselves as a chosen elite but rather as striving to secure a place in a fragile post-university job market. There is recent evidence to the contrary: in early 2004 Makerere students and lecturers went on strike over teaching conditions, whilst the University of Dar-es-Salaam was closed after clashes with police over the introduction of a student-loan scheme.

Beyond the repeated emphasis in the volumes on strategic planning, the reform agendas can be grouped together in three broad areas — governance, funding and student learning. Each country has sought to limit

political interference by enshrining university autonomy in government legislation. Higher Education Acts were passed in Mozambique in 1993 and in Uganda in 2002. Income from student fees has also strengthened the university's hand. Internally, the governance reforms have sought to clarify administrative and financial responsibilities within each institution. For example, UDSM now regulates academics' consultancy work to create an income for the university, and Makerere has sought to improve staff salaries to prevent 'moonlighting'. But the most striking changes brought about by cost recovery are the increases in student numbers and the demands they place on academic staff, teaching space and library provision. In Tanzania, student numbers doubled during the late 1990s, whilst at Makerere student numbers increased fivefold in the space of seven years. In 1992, all had government scholarships, but by 1999 80 percent of the 10,000 students were fee-paying, many attending as evening or part-time students. Makerere now has 22,000 students, whilst UDSM has more than 5,000.

Each institution faces its own growing pains, and the already difficult financial situations facing institutions have been affected by the expansions. One survey cited in the Makerere volume suggested that half the students in some courses fail to attend lectures because of a lack of seats in the lecture halls (p. 43), whilst in Tanzania students struggle with English, having been taught primarily in Swahili at school. The need for curriculum reform is mentioned regularly, but rather less is said about the best ways of supporting student learning for these new times. Should applied skills be prioritized through sandwich courses and placements? How might existing teaching resources be put to better use? All three studies highlight the role that ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) might play in mitigating these pressures, both for student and financial record-keeping and also for research and teaching. Yet the institutional disparities are revealing. More than half the students at the Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) regularly use the internet, compared with only 4 percent at the Catholic University in Beira. At Dar-es-Salaam there are severe shortages of computers for students, whilst Makerere does not yet have even a computerized library information system. University network provision will inevitably lag behind the services offered by entrepreneurial internet cafés, and this is perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the ambitious African Virtual University initiative.

One consequence of student expansion is a growing pool of unemployed graduates, an issue relatively unexamined in these volumes. The authors of the Tanzanian volume cite one tracer study looking at the graduate employment of engineers, showing that employment within the private sector had doubled in the 15 years to 1994, but the government still employed 64 percent of graduates. The authors rightly call for further

research into the employment of graduates, the views of employers and graduates' perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses. The sketchy generalizations of these volumes reflect the paucity of social science research into African higher education.

Of the three, the Mozambique volume stands out for its use of detailed quantitative and qualitative research to inform its analyses, and its comparative consideration of the tertiary education sector as a whole. The authors administered a questionnaire to more than 1,000 students across Mozambique to explore students' social backgrounds and satisfaction with their courses. They reveal the over-representation of Maputo residents within universities, and the strong correlation between familial privilege and students on the most prestigious degree courses, suggesting that the sector serves 'to reproduce existing social inequalities, particularly socio-economic ones' (p. 31). The finding that 80 percent of students at UEM have Portuguese as their first language reveals the continuing dominance of a hereditary elite within both Mozambican higher education and society, and offers another reason for charging fees.

Access and equity (for both students and staff) are issues for all three sets of authors, and are well covered. Back in 1989 Makerere was the first university to introduce an affirmative action scheme to promote gender equality in undergraduate student admissions, a move recently copied at UDSM. Makerere now plans to take this further, with 'gender-mainstreaming' seen as the main goal of the next strategic plan, reflecting the influence of the gender debate within Ugandan public culture. The different academic cultures of higher education in post-colonial Anglophone and Lusophone Africa offer revealing contrasts. For example, the Eduardo Mondlane University has a graduation rate of less than 10 percent, a reflection of high drop-out rates and repeated re-takes. The Cuban lecturers who came to Mozambique during the 1970s challenged the domestic assumption that high levels of failure reflected high educational standards. Their response — 'we came to Mozambique to train graduates, not to fail them' (*ibid.*, 50) — is a novel reworking of the developmental imperative.

A key tenet of liberalization is consumer choice. The volumes on Tanzanian higher education and Makerere University largely skirt around the recent growth of private universities, and their implications for the flagship institutions, especially when they offer higher salaries and better working conditions for academics. In Tanzania, there are now three public universities (including Sokoine University of Agriculture and the Open University of Tanzania), and a number of other private colleges and universities are in the process of being registered. In Uganda, the private religious universities (including the Islamic University and the Uganda Martyrs' University) are already carving out successful niches, offering innovative curricula with degree placements and extensive ICT training. A whole

swathe of further private universities are in the process of being registered in Uganda — Bugema University, Busoga University, Ndejje University, Kigezi International School of Medicine and the Aga Khan University. Whilst not all will last, they reflect the huge public demand for, and symbolism surrounding, university education.

The Mozambique volume covers the whole higher education sector, of which five out of the nine institutions are state-owned. The authors describe how the establishment of a Catholic University in Beira was a key factor in the peace negotiations in 1992 in order to address the popular sense of marginalization that had sustained support for RENAMO. It now has more than 1,000 students, and is the second major university after UEM (with almost 7,000 students). The authors of this volume recognize the contributions of private universities with their responsiveness and applied, relevant courses, and emphasize the importance of building on the 'specific energy' of each institution to nurture 'a diverse and vital' field (p. 108). Indeed, all three studies are agreed on the value of having universities with diverse missions and constituencies. Yet the further deregulation of the sector envisaged by some of the parties to the GATS (General Agreement on Tariffs and Services) negotiations could pose problems. How will these universities react to competition from global higher education providers, given that many students might desire the cachet of an internationally recognized degree? One of the first is Australia's Monash University, which has recently set up a campus in Johannesburg, offering degrees in arts, business and computer science, despite bitter opposition from South African universities. One possible scenario is an increasing number of international partnerships, with 'global' universities involved, once more, in accrediting 'local' degrees. The future is far from certain.

The volumes do not discuss the biggest challenge facing the African academy — the inequalities of a global knowledge economy. How can African academics contribute to an international network of scholarship when they cannot afford to subscribe to journals or attend conferences, let alone influence editorial or funding decisions, or the Euro-American intellectual agendas that tend to dominate most academic disciplines? Intriguingly, the philanthropic institutions have funded a programme of research capacity-building in these universities, but this is not mentioned. Whilst each volume concludes with the importance of strengthening institutions' research profile, practical measures are thin on the ground. This raises the question of the types of academic research most likely to thrive in sub-Saharan Africa. The world of consultancy research tends to be regarded as a degenerative form of academic knowledge. Yet one could twist the equation, and regard the multi-disciplinary, 'mode-two' knowledge that comes out of short-term and applied research as a valuable contribution to policy-making in many African countries. It is a question

of balance, most likely to come from interweaving and linking different genres of knowledge production.

One of the limitations of the institutional focus of these books is that disciplinary innovations are not highlighted. In the social sciences, CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) and OSSREA (Organization for Social Science Research in East Africa) have played a vital role in supporting, funding and publishing academic work across the continent. In African Studies, the James Currey publishing house needs no introduction, whilst in medicine, the new journal *African Health Sciences*, edited by James Tumwine at Makerere, has created a high-profile forum for publishing African research, establishing strong links with international medical journals. The place of journals and publishers within African networks of scholarship deserves more sustained attention.

What, according to the authors, does the future hold for these universities? They are becoming increasingly corporate in their outlook, seeking to engage closely with their communities and to develop relevant and applied degrees. They face a huge demand from potential students, and are attempting to meet it in ways that are equitable and appropriate, aided by the decentralization of resource allocation. A globalized and increasingly deregulated higher education sector makes long-term institutional planning a tricky business. Yet, in meeting these challenges, the relative lack of attachment to the idea of the university as a detached, ivory-tower repository for scholarship may, paradoxically, allow diverse new visions of African universities to flourish.

One final thought: that African universities, like all universities, are too precious to be left to their managers. If histories of ideas ignore institutional factors, the administrators' narratives underplay the role that communities of scholarship and learning play in creating a critical and truth-seeking intellectual atmosphere. Nurturing these traditions of debate within universities and national public cultures is vital. In these books, one loses count of the different European and American donors involved in funding reforms in these universities. Each has its own interests, timetables and concerns, and together these can conspire against a more autonomous approach to institution-building. African universities may be becoming 'multiversities', as Clark Kerr called the University of California in 1963,⁵ but they need to remain distinctively African.

5. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1963).