Research Universities in Africa
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Preface

As a brief background, the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (Herana) project evolved from a confluence of factors. From the early 2000s, a new discourse emerged, in Africa and the international donor community, that higher education was important for development in Africa. Within this ‘zeitgeist’ of converging interests, a range of agencies agreed that a different, collaborative approach to linking higher education to development was necessary. The US Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Kresge and Mellon) collaborated with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) in a new approach to funding. The Centre for Higher Education Trust (CHET), the network coordinator, changed its focus from the South African preoccupation with equity and access (broadly conceived as transformation) to concentrate on research and advocacy about the possible role and contribution of universities to development in Africa.

This book is the final publication to emerge from the Herana project. Three previous books have been published from the activities and discoveries of Herana: Universities and Economic Development in Africa (2011), Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education (2015) and Castells in Africa: Universities and development (2017). The project has also published more than 100 articles, chapters, reports, manuals and datasets (see Appendix), and many presentations have been delivered to share insights gained from the work done by Herana. Given its prolific dissemination, it seems reasonable to ask whether this fourth and final publication will offer the reader anything new.

This book is certainly different from previous publications in several respects. First, it is the only book to include an analysis of eight African universities based on the full 15 years of empirical data collected by the project. It is true that the data are available in the report ‘An Empirical Overview of Emerging Research Universities in Africa 2001–2015’ and as open data on the web. But this book is the only publication to put the 15-year data to work in an analysis of the participating eight universities’ status as research universities. Second, previous books and reports were published mid-project. This book has benefited from an extended gestation period allowing the authors and contributors to reflect on the project without the distractions associated with managing and participating in a large-scale project. For the first time, some of those
who have been involved in Herana since its inception have had the opportunity to at least make an attempt to see part of the wood for the trees.

Different does not necessarily mean new. An emphasis on the ‘newness’ of the data and perspectives presented in this book is important because it shows that it is more than a historical record of a donor-funded project. Rather, each chapter in this book brings, to a lesser or greater extent, something new to our understanding of universities, research and development in Africa.

To differentiate itself from discussions about higher education in Africa that take place in a vacuum, Chapter 1 combines a qualitative assessment of the state of higher education in Africa with empirical data on the place of research on the continent and in its leading universities. The chapter also introduces the Herana project and charts the evolution of the project from its focus on flagship universities and their national higher education systems toward a more narrow focus on the participating universities' contribution to the production of new knowledge (research) and, consequently, their contribution to development. The systematic classification of the eight universities in terms of their research performance and orientation in Chapter 2 is a new contribution. As a classification rather than a ranking, the approach may prove useful to universities seeking a reality-check against the visions for their universities, or it may prove useful to external stakeholders seeking to support universities in Africa in meaningful ways as they transition to research-led universities. Regardless of its application, the classification provides a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of research universities in Africa.

The chapters in the second part of this book focus more narrowly on how Herana has advanced our understanding of the research university in Africa. Chapter 3 explores the role of the university in its national context. It considers whether national governments that may espouse notions of a knowledge economy do in fact provide the kind of support required by research universities.

In Chapter 4, the discussion on the historical functions of universities is placed in a context of the African university’s response to demands placed on it by society. A consequence of a dominant instrumental development model is the relative neglect of universities’ function as knowledge producer. As universities become more research-orientated, varying interpretations of what constitutes the production of scientific knowledge can be brought to bear in plotting the strategic direction to be followed by the university and, subsequently, in the implementation of that strategy. These interpretations are often shaped by discordant and even competing global, national and institutional expectations. The
chapter provides a new perspective to illustrate the tensions that emerge within the university as it seeks to fulfil its ambition to produce new knowledge and simultaneously remain relevant and responsive to external demands.

Chapter 5 is a reminder of the need to consider social dynamics when attempting to transition to a research university. Without incentives to change entrenched patterns of behaviour, university academics are less likely to adopt practices that will create a corps of productive knowledge producers. The chapter explores a range of possible incentive regimes with reference to work done by the Herana network.

Chapter 6 sets out the value of the consensus indicators and of the data collected by the Herana project for planning and for governing a research university. And for the first time, the previously underappreciated value of developing standards and protocols for the collection of data are brought to the fore.

Chapter 7 brings networks squarely into the discussion. The chapter presents Herana through the lens of networks to introduce a new perspective on the relationship between the university, knowledge and development. It is a perspective that remains underappreciated and, we would suggest, deserves greater attention from those governing and supporting universities. There are always many moving parts in complex social systems such as science, but turning a blind eye to their networked nature is likely to leave future investments in Africa’s research universities hamstrung.

Part 3 of this book presents more detailed profiles of each of the eight participating Herana universities. The profiles are framed by the academic core indicators developed by the Herana project and by salient in-country conditions relevant to the production of knowledge by universities in Africa. These profiles focus on research performance at the university level in a way that has not been done in previous publications.

The book concludes by taking a broader perspective on knowledge as a non-rivalrous and public good. The chapter draws attention to the special role of universities as primary propelling agents in the global knowledge economy.

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