Research Universities in Africa

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Part 2

UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA
Chapter 3

The role of the research university

In Chapter 1 we showed that following the failed ‘development university’ discourse of the post-independence period in Africa, the international discourse about the role of higher education in development changed significantly from the early 2000s. Important role-players such as the World Bank (2000), the secretary-general of the UN (2002), the G8 (2005) and UNESCO (2009) created momentum for a new focus on higher education in Africa and the importance of higher education for development – summed up in the words of Kofi Annan ‘the university must become the primary tool for Africa’s development in the new century’ (quoted in Bloom et al. 2006: 2).

However, similar to the post-independence period, this new zeitgeist did not mean that there was clarity or agreement about the model of the university required to fulfil this aspirational role. The establishment of the Herana project was, to some extent, a consequence of this new thinking, particularly the collaboration amongst a number of development aid agencies in establishing a common project that involved eight universities in eight different sub-Saharan countries.

Four university models

At the global, national and institutional levels, there are many different understandings and ideas about the role of the university in society, particularly in relation to development. While the former colonial powers used the university mainly as a site for mid-level professional and administrative training aimed at building local bureaucratic capacity, Africa’s newly independent states saw public universities as both status symbols and providers of training for the new professional class and for the political elite. African governments have also emphasised that higher
education institutions should support the state in promoting national development, contributing to innovation and economic growth. However, the precise nature of the role to be played by universities in this has remained ill-defined, partly because most countries on the continent lack a widely agreed development model both in general as well as with respect to their universities.

During Herana Phase 1 the research team, informed by Johan Olsen’s four visions of university organisation and governance (Olsen 2007) and Manuel Castells’ notion of the university as an ‘engine for development’ (Castells 2017), identified four conceptual notions or models about the role of the university in development, which apply first and foremost to the situation of the university in low-income countries. To get a better understanding of the empirical relevance and applicability of these models, in an early stage of the Herana project a study of bilateral and multilateral development cooperation investments in higher education projects was conducted (Maassen et al. 2007). In addition, surveys were undertaken among leaders and senior academics at the eight Herana universities, and senior officials in education commissions and relevant national government departments, including those overseeing higher education, science and technology, and economic development. The methodology and detailed findings are described in *Universities and Economic Development in Africa* (Cloete et al. 2011).

Four main models of the role of higher education in national societies and economies were adopted to guide Herana. One model, initially promoted by national and international development agencies such as the World Bank, is that higher education has only an ancillary role to play in national development and that the focus for socio-economic development should be placed rather on primary education. A second model is that universities should be regarded as self-governing communities of scholars that should be protected from the exigencies of commercial and national developmental demands. This is a view commonly held by many senior academics and university leaders in Africa. A third model, which is widely held among senior government officials and policy-makers in Africa, is that universities should play an instrumental role in national development, producing skilled professionals and applied knowledge to service economic requirements. A fourth model, which is widely held among the governments of OECD countries, is that universities (and colleges) should be viewed as engines of development for the new knowledge economy that is emerging at national, regional and global levels.

None of these four models can be observed in a pure form in practice. In addition, they are not mutually exclusive. Each is based on assumptions that make it unlikely that the practice of development co-operation can
be represented accurately by any of these models alone. Nevertheless, they crystallise four distinct views on the university and development.

Inconsistency in international development cooperation

An OECD (2008) review showed that, in their own countries, most of the organisation’s members subscribed to some version of the model promoting the university as an engine of development for the knowledge economy. At the same time, and contradicting their domestic positions, practically all of these countries, through their national ministries and agencies responsible for global development cooperation, subscribed to a quite different approach for the role of higher education in low–income countries. Referring to the four models introduced above, a study by Maassen et al. (2007) showed that none of the donor countries involved subscribed to the engine–of–development model for higher education in their development cooperation policies. The donor countries had moved away from traditional–development and institutional–development approaches in their aid policies, increasingly adopting instead the instrumental development model, implying that support for higher education sectors in selected low–income countries had become an element in the political relationship between donor and recipient countries through their foreign affairs ministries and other government agencies, including their education departments (Maassen & Cloete 2009).

An important consequence of adhering to the instrumental model has been the relative neglect of universities’ research functions. In practice this implies that such institutional capacity building as is stimulated and funded by donors tends to be limited to enhancing management and teaching capacity, with little serious effort made to connect the relatively marginal basic research activities in universities in low–income countries to investments in centres of, and programmes for, research excellence in the donor countries. Partly as a result of this approach, the gap between universities in low–income and high–income countries in relation to knowledge production and contributions to innovation continues to grow.

Despite many good intentions, expressed, for example, in the rhetorical support for sustainable development, aid is provided according to a logic in which internal policies in donor countries are disconnected from, and contradict, the imperatives of external development cooperation policies; and systemic gaps in the education systems of recipient countries remain largely unaddressed. Such improvements in higher education as are made as a result of development cooperation investments stem largely from the promotion of particular donor country interests and Santa Claus–type patronage, ensuring in many respects continual dependence on donors (Maassen & Cloete 2009).
Inconsistency in expectations among national and institutional stakeholders

Expectations at the national level

A range of views about the envisaged role of universities in development emerged from interviews with national and university stakeholders conducted as part of the Herana project. National policy-makers generally favoured the instrumental notion of universities, with less emphasis on the engine-of-development role, and the self-governing model. With the exceptions of Botswana and Mauritius, the engine-of-development model tended to feature in science and technology policies and in national vision statements, rather than in plans produced by the ministries of education (and science) in the countries studied. References to the knowledge economy, and the importance ascribed to it in vision statements, often seemed to be borrowed, particularly from the World Bank and OECD sources and websites. Meanwhile, most national government officials felt that universities were not doing enough to fulfil the instrumental role that they considered should be assigned to these institutions, although there were few policies actually articulating or incentivising such a role.

The conception of development was stronger among government stakeholders than within the universities, although this may be attributed to governments perceiving knowledge in a narrow, instrumental way, rather than as an engine of development.

Expectations at the university level

For their part, university leaders generally favoured self-governing and instrumental roles for their institutions. These views reflected the terms of traditional debates about the autonomy of universities versus their responsibilities to engage with local and national communities beyond the campus gates. The old idea of universities seeking to produce human capital for the nation persisted only at the University of Ghana and the University of Dar es Salaam. These two institutions also clung to the idea of universities ‘knowing best what is required of them’. The leaders of neither of these two universities engaged in a knowledge-economy discourse. The University of Mauritius was the only institution at which the engine-of-development idea dominated the discourse, in line with the view of the national government there. At Makerere University, the institution’s leaders also broadly agreed with the government on the university’s instrumental development role, although there was an increasing awareness at the university about the knowledge economy and the engine-of-development notion (ibid.).

The Herana study found the professoriate to be riven between these rival models of the role of universities in development. Some academics
clung to a ‘golden-age vision’ of autonomy and independence, which no longer exists even in the university systems of the former colonial powers from which these education systems were transplanted. Others were burdened by teaching responsibilities and had become cynical about the prospects for positive change in their institutions. Yet others had turned to consultancy projects to supplement their university salaries (Mkandawire 2011; Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015). Such responses by academics can be viewed as constituting survival or advancement strategies that seek to compensate for the systemic quandaries, including a lack of a common purpose, that they face. However, they are often criticised for failing to produce published research by the same foreign donors and state agencies who sponsor the consultancy activities that divert their energies away from academic publication and supervision. Such an academic milieu hinders serious scholarship, often leading highly productive academics to seek greener pastures in other countries, including in the global North.

In terms of ideas held by national policy-makers and university leaders about the role of universities in development, the largest unresolved tension was between the self-governance and instrumental models for these institutions, held respectively by key institutional and government figures. The tension between the leadership’s focus on institutional autonomy, and society’s growing expectations regarding the university’s engagement with society’s needs has been widely documented in the literature on this topic (Bladh 2007; Maassen et al. 2017).

Unresolved disagreements among the various stakeholders in the higher education sector in the eight countries involved in the Herana project – among government officials, university managers and academics, and donors – have contributed to a lack of agreement on the role for the higher education sector in national development. A key consequence of the lack of common ground regarding the role of the university is the persistence of systemic gaps within African higher education. The lack of an agreed-upon model has also undermined efforts to expand the research and knowledge-production capacity of higher education in Africa.

**Research aspirations and their take-up**

**Research aspirations**

As was indicated in Chapter 2, towards the end of Herana Phase 1, the participating universities decided to focus on becoming research-orientated or research-led universities. All eight universities developed new strategic plans with a focus on research during the period of the
Herana project. Makerere University and the University of Ghana are two examples. According to the vice–chancellor of Makerere University, its aim was to become a research–led university. Makerere University’s ‘Strategic Assessment Plan’ explicitly articulates this aim:

- being a research–driven university in which research and teaching/learning are mutually reinforcing;
- establishing innovation incubation centers; and
- enabling knowledge transfer and networking partnerships.

(CHET 2017: 30)

In similar vein, the University of Ghana’s strategic plan commits it to becoming a ‘research intensive university’ in which research is central to the university’s transformation process. The priority is to create a climate that will stimulate research and community engagement. To that effect, it has:

- adopted an integrated enterprise level software system;
- established an Institutional Research and Planning Office; and
- created a research management structure headed by a deputy vice–chancellor for research, innovation and development, with a director of research assisted by research development officers to identify research opportunities, create awareness of the opportunities, help with application and research administration. (CHET 2017: 32)

The commonalities in the aspirations of all eight participating Herana universities are spelled out in Chapter 2.

The research aspirations of these universities formed the basis for the formation of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) at the Dakar Summit in 2015. The 16 universities with relatively strong research and postgraduate training capacities in the African context established the alliance to build research excellence as a vital precondition for the continent’s development and to enable it to exert greater control over its future. The idea was not only to strengthen research among the alliance’s members, but for the universities in the group to form a hub that could support excellence in other institutions across the continent through advocacy for research; joint research projects; postgraduate training; improved access to research facilities; and linkages to research universities globally. Five of the eight Herana universities are part of ARUA.¹⁴

¹⁴ See http://arua.org.za/
National realities

In the section above we alluded to the fact that there are differences between the national stakeholders and university academics in terms of their notions about the role of the universities in development. Keeping in mind one of Herana’s original hypotheses that without national policies and implementation of these policies, it is difficult for universities to develop strong academic cores, the issue arises that while universities in Africa have developed strategic plans for becoming more research-led, the corresponding response from their respective national governments must also come into the reckoning. It is illuminating to mention, briefly, three country case studies from the Herana project.

In Mauritius, there was a very explicit role for higher education in development, as articulated in national policy documents such as the ‘Draft Education and Human Resources Strategy’ and, importantly, the policies formulated in the document Developing Mauritius into a knowledge hub and centre of learning. As a result of the coordinated efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources, and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Empowerment, the country was beginning to translate the policy documents into first steps to move the country towards a fully-fledged knowledge economy. However, as we showed in Chapter 2, the national government had by 2015 not implemented these intentions to support the plans of the University of Mauritius to advance beyond a research-orientated institution.

In Kenya, the major education policy document, ‘Kenya Education Sector Support Programme’, and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology’s plan for 2008–2012, were the key policy documents setting out the government’s vision on the role of higher education and the commitment to the knowledge economy. The development planning document, ‘Kenya Vision 2030’, was supposed to help to translate this vision into policy reality, but as of 2015, this had not happened.

By 2011, when Herana Phase 1 was completed, the South African government had made some references to the knowledge economy in policy documents but did not have a tabled plan. This changed in 2012 with the publication of the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) (NPC 2011). The NDP was presented as a road map (with targets) for all government depart. It made the assumption that the South African economy should shift from a resource-dependency economy, which requires a small highly-skilled elite and a large low-skilled labour force, towards a knowledge economy, which requires a much larger and more diversified, more skilled labour force. The NDP emphasised that ‘higher education is an important driver of the information/knowledge system,
linking it with economic development’. The NDP summarises the role of universities as follows: ‘In today’s knowledge society, higher education underpinned by a strong science and innovation system is increasingly important to open up people’s opportunities.’

Soon after the NDP was launched, at the opening of parliament by then-President Zuma, flags were hoisted at parliament with the slogan ‘SA Knowledge Economy’. While it was expected that the President would elaborate on government’s understanding of the knowledge economy and what it would mean for education and science, he instead launched the biggest infrastructure project in the history of the country and declared that infrastructure would drive growth (SA Commercial Property News 2013). He did not announce improvements in the country’s internet and ICT infrastructure, but instead concentrated on improvements to the rail and road networks to move minerals from the interior of the country to its ports. The following day, the flags were removed. When the Department of Higher Education and Training produced the Draft National Plan for Post-school Education and Training (2017), no reference was made to the NDP, although the substance of the plan signalled a shift to skills, but not to postgraduate study and knowledge production.

Inconsistency between national and institutional policy goals

Policy coordination is a vital factor in the research fortunes of a country. Consistency assumes that each country should have (1) a statutory framework for its higher education system, (2) a national statement of government’s views of the purposes and goals of the national higher education system, and (3) a national strategic plan for higher education. It assumes also that each of the participating Herana universities has (1) an institutional statement of purposes and goals, which should be consistent with national purposes and goals for higher education, and (2) a strategic plan which should flow from each institution’s statement of its purposes and goals, which should be consistent with the national strategic plan for higher education, and which should indicate what specific objectives and targets the institution has set for itself.

The search for information relied on web searches of national documents, including acts of parliament, government white papers, and reports of government departments and of statutory bodies such as higher education councils. The search for information on institutional statements of goals relied on searches of the websites of each of the eight Herana universities.

Table 3.1 offers a picture of the fit, or lack of a fit, between the national and institutional documents found and analysed.
Table 3.1 Assessment of national and institutional documentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Research-activity classification</th>
<th>National level</th>
<th>Institutional level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statutory framework for higher education</td>
<td>National purposes &amp; goals for higher education</td>
<td>National strategic plan for higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>Research-led</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Emerging-research</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makerere</td>
<td>Emerging-research</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>Emerging-research</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dar es Salaam</td>
<td>Research-oriented</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>Research-oriented</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Research-aspirational</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo Mondlane</td>
<td>Research-aspirational</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
A clear and complete national information available
B national documents do not give precise or comprehensive information
n/a information could not be found after searches made of government and institutional websites
C clear institutional information available; consistent with national documents
D clear institutional information available, but not consistent with national documents

The overall picture presented by the table is that there are serious mismatches between national and institutional accounts of the goals and purposes of higher education, and between national planning objectives and the planning objectives of individual universities.

As can be seen, Cape Town, which is the only university classified as research-led, is also the only university which has all three of its cells in the national columns given ‘A’ codes, and both its cells in the institutional columns given ‘C’ codes. This reflects a judgement that both the South African national and the University of Cape Town institutional statements of the purposes and goals of higher education are consistent and clear. This would suggest that a minimum condition for being classified as research-led are consistent national and institutional goals and objectives.

In the cases of Ghana (classified as emerging-research) and Botswana (classified as research-aspirational), the national and institutional statements of goals and purposes are clear and comprehensive but are not consistent. The institutional statements either do not include goals expressly formulated in the national statements or include goals which fall outside the parameters of the national goals.

As far as the other five universities are concerned, the national statements of the goals expected of the higher education system are neither clear nor comprehensive. Furthermore, the available documentation suggests that these national goals and their related institutional goals are probably not consistent.
**Conclusion**

Not only is it important that institutional and national policies are consistent, it is also important that knowledge economy policies between different government departments be coordinated. While the relationship between higher education, science, innovation and development is complex and nonlinear, a crucial component for a productive relationship between them is connectivity and coordination between the policies that govern different government departments, agencies and the market. In his comprehensive review of policy coordination, Braun (2008) introduced the notion of a ‘knowledge space’ consisting of four core areas of innovation policy – higher education, professional education, basic research, and technological research – and used insights from administrative science and a number of science and policy studies to discuss the need for coordination in policy-making in knowledge and innovation systems.

The Herana Phase 1 project investigated this aspect (Cloete et al. 2011) and found that there was a range of coordination activities in most of the African countries. The most common structures for promoting coordination and consensus–building were forums. But interviewees said that these were largely talk shops; follow–up to agreements was weak, and there were few attempts to monitor progress and to implement decisions. There were also attempts at coordination through the creation of ‘super–ministries’ (Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique). In a study of super–ministries in Europe, Braun (2008) found that these departments are often unstable and do not ensure policy coordination. A perpetual problem was the absence of cooperation between departments of education and science and technology. But merging them does not guarantee more effective coordination either.

In South Africa, with one of the most developed science systems in Africa, a review of the science system lamented the lack of policy coordination and the ‘near universal opinion of the principal players within the science and technology system that the system had no clear or consistent goals or direction’ (IDRC 1995). More than 15 years later, the number one recommendation from a report on capacity in the country’s science system was for South Africa to enhance policy and process coordination as well as institutional cooperation to improve the development of human capacity (Stumpf 2011).

This raises several issues. First, none of the countries in which participating Herana universities are located have a knowledge economy; they are still resource–dependent as the much–proclaimed phenomenon of ‘Africa Rising’ (August 2013) was largely driven by a demand for, and a rise in, prices of commodities. Second, as knowledge institutions,
universities are integral to the country moving towards a knowledge economy. But universities can’t steer in the direction of substantive knowledge production unless the national government has a development plan that supports the universities. And third, while a number of the countries (Mauritius, Kenya, South Africa) have knowledge economy policies, these are not part of a comprehensively agreed upon and implemented development plan. Above all, coordination between ‘knowledge spaces’ remains poor.