PART FOUR

CONCLUSION

The general intention of this book is to contribute to an improved understanding and empirical basis concerning the development of a specific set of African universities, that is, eight national flagship universities, towards becoming research-led universities. This book assumed a general interest in how these African universities function and perform, especially with respect to their research activities. For that purpose, university case studies were undertaken with the aim of producing valid and relevant data on university productivity.

The Herana project’s intention to improve our understanding of the research productivity of African universities was affected by a number of challenges.

First was the challenge of mapping the actual performance of African flagship universities: How is research interpreted and operationalised by key actors in these universities? What data are available for identifying the kinds of research outputs that these universities are producing? How has the research productivity of these universities developed since the early 2000s? To what extent have the ways in which African flagship universities manage their research activities changed? Are there dominant trends across African flagship universities when it comes to research productivity, or are there substantial differences among the case universities covered in this book?

Second was the challenge of examining the national political and socio-economic contexts of African flagship universities and their hitherto limited impacts on university research performance: What have been the most relevant deliberate attempts by national political actors, that is, governments and their ministries and agencies, to influence the research activities of flagship universities? What other agencies and organisations, including public and private donors, without direct
political mandates with respect to universities, have attempted to influence university research performance in Africa?

Third was the challenge of exploring the possible relationships between performance and the endogenous and exogenous pressures on the university. Overall there is insufficient knowledge on the effectiveness of modes of public governance in Africa in the areas of national research policy, as well as research administration and the research activities taking place in universities.

Traditionally there have been major knowledge gaps in the global interpretation and understanding of the functioning and performance of African universities, and weak and ambiguous statistics and data are often used to legitimise strong conclusions concerning the need for specific kinds of development programmes and projects in African higher education. For example, in public and private donor organisations’ programmes, these data and statistics are often used to legitimise donors’ emphasis on the need to build capacity in African universities. But this capacity is not to be used for academic purposes, but rather for contributing to poverty reduction and community development, combatting tropical diseases, and stimulating agricultural exports.

In various parts of the book we have referred to the lack of a relevant analytical framework in the academic literature on African higher education, and a sound data-basis for interpreting and explaining the dynamics of the African universities, and it can be argued that university studies in Africa have to a large extent been disconnected from more general studies and knowledge on continental development processes. In addition, African higher education is nearly always treated as an isolated phenomenon in academic studies, that is, isolated from the change dynamics of its national and regional political and socio-economic contexts, and isolated from the change dynamics in science and higher education policies and practices in the rest of the world.

Given the above, the question might justifiably be asked: Why did Herana focus so single-mindedly on operationalising knowledge as the central object of the academic core? Surely the role of universities in development is broader than just the production of new knowledge and new knowledge producers? The key lies in the singular, special characteristic of knowledge as ‘a global public good’ (Stiglitz 1999; UNESCO 2018). Among the global public goods that UNESCO (2018) particularly recognises is internationally comparative data and statistics of the sort that Herana sought to develop. These are ‘in short supply, poorly funded and rarely coordinated’ (UNESCO 2018: 16, 17) as Herana was also to find.

There are fine distinctions to be made between ‘public’ goods, ‘common’ goods and ‘collective’ goods (see Marginson, 2018). Here we
will use the term ‘global public good’. First, knowledge is the product of collective endeavour, and is very rarely the sole product of the codifying agent. We have discussed above how the collective character of global scholarship has expanded dramatically over the past decades, which has built the global science network into a vast open resource for scholars, both emerging and established. We have also seen that for budding scholars, early interactions with eminent peers in their field has a significant influence on their later career (Reyes-Gonzalez 2018). The global science network is thus a source of collaboration, of resource-sharing and functions as an extensive and extended mentoring facility, all of which are non-private benefits that are more or less by-products of the global production of new knowledge. This aside, knowledge is public and common in a further special sense that is intrinsic to it.

There is a fundamental distinction in economics between rival goods and non-rival goods (Samuelson 1954; Romer 1990). Rival goods are made up of matter and energy. They are ‘stuff’, and when ‘stuff’ circulates in the marketplace, what one person possesses, the other person cannot possess, and vice versa. Ideas or knowledge, on the other hand, are made up of combinations of information, and when these are codified, they can in principle be shared countless times: they can be replicated at negligible cost – think of the recipe for bread; the blueprint for a building; a technique for growing rice; a scientific formula; a formula for a new drug; computer code; novels and music. All these can circulate without taking anything away from the giver. Non-rival goods are, in the language of economics, non-excludable.

Markets, set up as they are to produce value, are not well-disposed to non-rival goods. They will continually try to leash this magical property to the rival economy; and of course, the originator of the non-rival idea (the author, the composer, the scientist) may depend for her livelihood on some recompense for the product, whether it is rival or non-rival. There are a range of legal formulae to make the goods excludable and hence value-producing – patents, copyright, intellectual property provisions, exclusive use licences and so on. But the magic of ideas and knowledge being what it is, will continually contrive to remain non-rivalrous. As Marginson (2018: 11) says, ‘once knowledge is revealed (that is, made public), its non-rivalrous and non-excludable qualities become dominant’. They will perpetually try to slip the leash of the market, by fair means or foul – by illicit copying and distribution, pirating, or circumventing the barriers to access in other ways. The most fecund way to elude market barriers is to come up with a newer, better idea that builds upon the original idea but extends or improves it, marginally or by means of a large innovative leap. This exploits another magical property of ideas as knowledge, namely their cumulative nature.
This is a self-propelling process in the knowledge economy, and is the principal motor of endogenous development.

Universities, potentially at least, can be considered as major ideas factories that produce not only new ideas for very little – the pittance of professors’ salaries and other running costs – but also produce the new producers of new ideas – those newly minted PhDs that universities also produce. Seen in this light, universities are potential knowledge and development engines if they are allowed to pursue their principal mission under propitious conditions. For the proponents of endogenous growth, feeding this knowledge producing engine properly is the route to developmental success. But as we have also seen throughout the Herana process, this penny has yet to drop for most of the research-aspirant universities and their custodial ministries in the Herana network.

There are then two things taking place in universities which pull the production of new ideas this way or that. The first is that a self-interested marketplace is continually trying to second-guess where the next new idea will come from. We see this in the perennial calls for ‘relevance’, which, when they come from market actors, means the production of new non-rival goods that can be made excludable, and hence can provide new sources of value and profit. Think of funding by large concerns like the pharmaceutical companies eager to be first in the queue to rivalrise the next non-rival new biochemical idea. This does not mean that all private funding is self-interested, and much of the world’s rich store of knowledge has been produced on the basis of generous funding by private philanthropies. Indeed, without the far-sighted funding of Ford and Carnegie, Herana might never have happened.

Universities have always partly resisted the siren call of the market in its unvarnished form at least. But there is something else to be considered too. The very best new ideas are often unexpected ones. Such again is the magic of cumulative knowledge: because it is cumulative does not mean that it is predictable. When a genuinely new idea does enter the scene, it initially goes into circulation non-rivalrously, like Tim Berners-Lee’s world wide web did (Brooker 2018). Some manage to survive, like Whatsapp, for example, or adapt to market conditions for a fraction of earlier user fees, like Netflix for example. The market will keep trying to rivalrise it comprehensively, but by the time it does, something else may have been thought up and produced to replace it.

We are, then, in the era, as Castells (2009, 2011) has persuasively shown, of the propulsive and productive force of new ideas. The bedrock of this propulsion is codification and communication. All sorts of networks and agents are now also in the business of producing good ideas, but the universities retain – and will retain – pride of place, for a few key reasons. First, if they are research-active at all, they will, to a
greater or lesser extent, be plugged into the very rich resources of the
global science network. Universities and researchers, especially those in
the developing world, have yet to maximise the benefits that are to be
reaped by active participation in this global network. Second, universities
are the only institutions that are also reproducing the producers of new
knowledge at the cutting edge of current knowledge, and they can only
do this this if they themselves are producing knowledge at this edge
themselves. Universities thus are primary propelling agents in the global
knowledge economy, if only they are afforded the chance to do so, and if
only they take up the challenge. Finally, universities might convey
private benefits on qualification holders, but, as we have sought to show
here, they fundamentally also serve the common good. In Marginson’s
words, ‘the common good is inherent in the globalised higher education and
knowledge system’ (Marginson 2018: 8, emphasis in the original).

In the Afterword of the book Castells in Africa: Universities and development
(Muller et al. 2017), Castells asserts that higher education institutions
are essential for both economic growth and social justice, that is, for
development. This is the assumption from which the Herana project
departed in 2007 – the links between universities and development.
What Herana also confirmed is that the links are neither linear nor
simple. The network consequently focused on strengthening a group of
universities who understood that the university itself must have certain
characteristics to be able to produce new knowledge that could directly
and, more likely, indirectly contribute to development.

The Herana project can be regarded as a step forward in producing a
better knowledge basis in relation to the multiple challenges faced by
universities in Africa aspiring to become research-led. The case studies
and data in this book provide new insights into the research performance
of African universities that are relevant to the issue of how the
development of African societies can be strengthened and become more
sustainable through focused and effective investments in universities.
References


popular_version


