

A Comparative Analysis of Higher Education Systems

Issues, Challenges and Dilemmas

Michael Kariwo, Tatiana Gounko and
Musembi Nungu (Eds.)



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DARLENE E. CLOVER

FOREWORD

This edited volume is important and timely. Although there are an increasing number of studies, books and reflections on the challenges of higher education, there is a knowledge gap vis-à-vis the practices and challenges of universities beyond the normative players of Western Europe and the United States. The experiences, debates, problems and positions from Africa, Latin America, Canada, Russia, and Asia raised in this volume bring much colour to the palette of contemporary discourses of university transitioning. Building on this, one could argue universities have been in transition virtually since their inception, but this book illustrates the complex contemporary balancing acts these institutions of higher learning must now play between the forces of neo-colonialism/dominance in the forms of globalization and the market-economy, and the educational dreams and needs of the world's communities.

The issues and dilemmas faced in higher education today are significant and often paradoxical. One of these, explored in a number of ways in this volume, is the increase in demand or what is often referred to as the 'massification' of higher education. On the one hand, universities strapped for funding in the face of diminishing government support and a deeply competitive environment, must admit increasing numbers of students, taxing the professoriate and diluting the teaching and learning environment. Yet on the other hand, increased globalization, technologization, migration, unemployment and insecurity have seen scores of youth and adults fleeing to universities, hoping an education will give them a 'competitive' advantage in the inter-woven knowledge and market economies of today. What arguments do we muster to turn them away, to deny them an access to higher education? Equally problematic, globalization and massification have also lead to other trials of equity and diversity. What value these if they simply perpetuate intolerance and bias in new, more creative forms such as racist systems of 'quotas' (see Cui & Kelly this volume)?

This volume also raises issues of 'quality' and 'privilege' in a variety of complex ways. Global marketization ideology seldom has allegiances to anything save to profit. This has allowed a flourishing of private, for profit, higher education institutions. This has also increased the imperative to become 'entrepreneurial' on all universities if they wish to remain competitive and attract students. As some of the authors in this volume note, this has led to practices and standards of scholarship that are questionable at best. But beyond this do we not need to interrogate the entire notion of 'quality', of what universities are given 'status' and how and by whom this privilege is determined? Are current so-called 'world-class' rankings useful

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or simply social constructions that create an unwinnable, debilitating competitive environment of winners and losers? What I am drawing attention to is the complex and paradoxical ways publicly funded research-intensive universities are both assaulted and exalted in the current climate. In a degree-factory mentality, how do we defend and promote research and the vital contributions it makes to scholarship, knowledge, teaching and society?

Another theme that dots the landscape of this volume is the question of relevance. ‘What are universities for’ is a central question being asked in the flotsam and jetsam of the economics and politics of knowledge. For all their faults universities are still places where the most pressing social, cultural, economic and environmental problems facing communities and the world can be debated, critically examined and explored. How will this fundamental fair in the relentless economic liberalization grasping at universities? Will this stop with their financing or will it (has it?) invade their very curricula? Will, as Escrigas and Loberra (2009) query, the knowledge ‘economy’ one day totally supersede the knowledge(able) society? Will universities simply become handmaidens to techno-scientific applications and discourses of consumption rapidly becoming the “main bases of well-being and prosperity”? (p.7).

And yet “having taken the dim view, now what?” So queried feminist Ursula Franklin, professor emeritus of the University of Toronto, of a particularly querulous faculty member who had attended her public address. This question has stayed with me and prompted me to remember to seek the rays of light, the hope we as members of the university community need to move us out from the paralytic shadows of neoliberalism, critique and despair. And these are to be found in the various chapters of this book. Authors demonstrate the courage to name and challenge colonial pasts and to render visible the menace of neo-colonization in the shape of a current neoliberal ideology. Crucially, they challenge the baggage of elitism carried by universities through calls for a more socially responsible and responsive role that will democratize knowledge, build new partnerships, and enable universities to become both culturally appropriate and forward looking.

REFERENCE

Escrigas, C. & Lobera, J. (2009). New dynamics for social responsibility. *In Higher education at a time of transformation: New dynamics for social responsibility*. Barcelona: GUNI