

AFRICA: Connecting higher education and development

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The Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa, HERANA, has gathered the most comprehensive and systematic data on a group of Sub-Saharan African universities ever compiled. Research over three years in eight countries uncovered urgent needs for a 'pact' on the important role of higher education in development, strengthening the 'academic core' in universities, and greater coordination among higher education actors.

The research, involving literature and document reviews, scores of interviews and data-collection in 11 countries, explored the complex relationships between higher education and development in Africa, with a focus on economic and democratic development - matters of great importance to the continent.

A synthesis report was published last week, highlighting key findings from the numerous studies and reports generated by HERANA, an expertise network aimed at developing higher education studies in Africa through research and its dissemination, and a masters programme. HERANA has been driven by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation in Cape Town, **CHET**, and *University World News* is a partner.

Universities and Economic Development in Africa: Pact, academic core and coordination was authored by Professor Nico Cloete, Director of CHET, HERANA Project Manager and researcher Tracy Bailey, and Peter Maassen, a professor of higher education at the University of Oslo, HERANA's international partner university.

The report focuses on universities and economic development in eight African countries: Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. Finland, South Korea and North Carolina in the United States were also studied, to uncover principles that successfully connect higher education to development.

Funded by the (former) Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, especially by two of the consortium's members the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, HERANA has over the past three years:

- * Produced 17 publications, including case studies of institutions and higher education systems in eight African countries. Numerous masters and PhD publications are in progress.
- * Developed a network of some 50 academics, administrators and postgraduate students in more than 10 countries, and a working relationship with universities and government departments in the eight African countries.
- * Established a research-based masters in higher education studies with 20 students from eight African countries, linked to the Erasmus Mundus higher masters education in Europe.
- * Disseminated the research through 15 seminars involving some 900 participants, and drawn on their responses and ideas.

A 'development triangle' conceptual framework was developed to investigate dynamics between governments, universities and higher education funders. The central concepts of a 'pact', 'academic core' and 'coordination' were operationalised in an African context, although they also have relevance in many other countries and contexts.

The context

The synthesis report points out that higher education is now recognised as key to delivering the knowledge requirements for development. "Research has suggested a strong association between higher education participation rates and levels of development, and that high levels of education are essential for the design and production of new technologies, for a country's innovative capacity and for the development of civil society," it says.

This has persuaded many countries to put knowledge and innovation policies, and higher education, at the core of development strategies. "The ability of developing countries to absorb, use and modify technology developed mainly in high-income countries, will drive more rapid transition to higher levels of development and standards of living."

However, the report points out, the role of higher education in development in Africa has remained unresolved. Following independence from colonial rule, universities were expected to be key contributors to human resource needs.

During the 1970s the idea of 'development universities' emerged. It was argued that governments should steer universities towards a development role. But many governments had no coherent development model. "Steering became interference and universities became sites of contestation".

Higher education "came to be seen as a 'luxury ancillary' - nice to have, but not necessary".

During this period the World Bank, especially, concluded that development in Africa should concentrate on primary education and expenditure on higher education declined dramatically: from US\$6,800 per student in 1980 to \$1,200 in 2002, and later to just \$981 in 33 low-income Sub-Saharan African countries, according to the World Bank. The report continues:

"Lack of investment in higher education delinked universities from development, led to development policies that had negative consequences for African nations, and caused the closure of institutions and areas of higher education that are critical to development."

During the 1990s and early 2000s influential voices, including the World Bank, started calling for the revitalisation of African universities and for linking higher education to development. This movement has steadily gained ground.

The research

The analytical point of departure, the report says, was that the conditions under which universities contribute to economic development are influenced by three related factors:

- * The nature of the 'pact' between universities, political authorities and society.
- * The nature, size and continuity of the university's 'academic core'.
- * The level of coordination, implementation and connectedness of universities, in the larger policy context.

The project began with a review of the international literature on the relationship between higher education and economic development. This was followed by case studies of the three systems that have successfully linked economic development and higher education policy and planning - Finland, South Korea and North Carolina.

The next phase collected data at the national and institutional levels in the eight African countries. The universities involved were Botswana, Ghana, Nairobi (Kenya), Mauritius, Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Makerere (Uganda). In South Africa Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University was regarded as 'comparable' to the other African institutions. The University of Cape Town, Africa's top-rated institution, was included in the analysis of the academic core.

The research team visited the eight African countries and universities in 2009 and conducted interviews with individuals in universities and ministries, higher education commissions and other national stakeholders. National and university policy and strategy documents were analysed.

Quantitative data including national development indicators and statistics were collected, and the concepts of 'pact', 'academic core' and 'coordination' were operationalised by developing and using indicators that allowed comparable empirical evidence to be gathered.

The data and subsequent analysis led Cloete, Bailey and Maassen to reach several conclusions of considerable importance to African countries if they are to harness the resources of universities as engines of development.

First, with the exception of Mauritius, there was little consensus among African governments, universities and other stakeholders on the role of universities in development. "There needs to be a pact about the importance of knowledge in development and the special role of the university," the authors argue.

Second, with the exception of the University of Cape Town, the institutions studied were primarily undergraduate teaching universities without the 'academic core' essential to making a sustainable contribution to development. "The academic core needs to be strengthened, particularly in terms of knowledge production," they conclude.

Third, there must be far greater coordination and connectedness among the growing number of actors and agencies (government departments, business and foreign donors) involved in higher education in Africa. And finally: "University development activities must strengthen rather than weaken academic core capacity."

Implications of the research

The report highlights several implications for African countries and universities arising from the research.

* Dialogue about the role of higher education in development should be stimulated between government, higher education stakeholders and funders. "Serious thought has to be given to stronger forms of policy coordination-alignment among the different stakeholders."

* There needs to be more agreement about the role of higher education in development, "and relevant government officials and key members of higher education governance structures are not part of the discussion and capacity building," says the report.

* In all eight African countries there are tertiary councils or commissions. "It is important to clarify the roles and functions of these bodies, and to consider what role they can play in promoting greater agreement (pact formation) and coordination between key stakeholders around higher education and development," the report urges.

* There needs to be considerably more discussion about and research into what constitutes the academic core and how to strengthen it. "Just producing more postgraduates, or providing incentives for publication, will not solve the problem."

* The reward system for academics needs study "because it seems that academics are not incentivised by institutions, governments and some funders to strengthen the academic core."

* Concepts such as 'community service', 'third mission' and 'engagement' either reflect an instrumentalist service notion or have become clichés. It would be more useful to investigate the relationship between core knowledge activities and connectedness to external stakeholders.

* Some development-related projects or centres at the African universities were world-class in terms of international recognition and cutting-edge research, while also strengthening the academic core. "The challenge is how to increase the number and scale of these types of activities."

* There is a need to improve and strengthen the definition of key performance indicators, as well as the systematic, institution-wide capturing and processing of key indicator data.

* Strengthening the government, university and foreign donor 'triangle' would be key to drafting and implementing strategies to strengthen knowledge production, which would enable universities to make a sustainable contribution to development.

The HERANA report calls for the establishment of an African Research Council, similar to that in Europe, "that could stimulate the funding of research throughout the continent on a basis of quality, and not regional or national interests".