

## BOOK REVIEW

**Bitzer, E. (Ed.). (2009) *Higher education in South Africa: A scholarly look behind the scenes*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.**

Reviewed by Annissa Nyar

It may be asked why a book on higher education in South Africa, published in 2009, is included for review in a 2016 edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)*. There are a couple of reasons why this book merits a review in 2016. Many of the chapters in the book provide contextualisation of issues covered in this SANRC FYE Special Edition of the *JSAA*. Another reason for reviewing the book is that the book in its entirety allows for some critical thoughts on burning issues animating the field of higher education in South Africa and the extent to which the content of the book, being a text on higher education, does justice to them. This is of particular relevance given the current proliferation of student protest and the turbulent state of South Africa's higher education environment.

This book can be used as a useful resource for all education scholars and practitioners. Any reader, whether a layperson or higher education specialist, is bound to appreciate the 'scholarly behind the scenes' perspective of the field. It is particularly appealing because of its line-up of diverse contributors, some of whom are key figures in South Africa's higher education sector and have the necessary gravitas to 'sell' the book. It is divided into six thematic sections: higher education policy; normative and epistemological issues; teaching, learning and the curriculum; professional development; structures and governance in higher education; and higher education research agendas. The different contributions are well arranged to reflect this structure.

In terms of thematic coverage, it is certainly not expected that a single text on higher education in South Africa can do justice to the multiplicity of debates and issues animating the sector or comprehensively analyse every aspect of higher education. To this end, a study of the state of higher education over the two decades of democracy in South Africa is currently underway under the auspices of the Council on Higher Education (CHE); the CHE report is expected to be published in 2016. However, when a book covers relatively sprawling academic terrain, it is always a curious matter to see how a reasonably balanced coverage of all the diverse issues under its ambit is ultimately achieved. Therefore, it is a

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point of concern that the book robustly embraces some key issues and concerns in the field of higher education in South Africa (policy analysis, the kinds of knowledge being produced, curriculum design, etc.) and underplays others (student access and success, affordable education and concerns about the kinds of graduates exiting the system). For the purposes of the work of the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) in promoting student retention and success, specifically in the first year of study, a focus on the matter of student success would have been a welcome addition to the book. The centrality of the matter of student success to higher education in South Africa is exemplified in educational wastage statistics in terms of dropping out, non-completion and delayed completion of degrees. These statistics represent a tragic loss of human potential that has been lost to South Africa and underline the SANRC's contention that issues of student success should rightly be at the centre of South Africa's higher education agenda. The matter of student success is scarcely addressed in the book.

It is also curious that the concept of transformation, within which the matter of student success is deeply embedded, is not fully critically examined in the book. It is difficult to escape the salience of transformation and its relationship to matters of race and racism in the higher education sector, the realities of which continue to rage and fester to varying intensities in the national higher education environment and manifest in the form of waves of disruptive, and often violent, student protests in South Africa's universities. Some space could have been allotted within the book to matters of student finance and the pressures faced by universities to make university education affordable to students. More broadly, the overall content of the book would have benefited from some conceptual direction as to the current and future path of transformation in higher education in South Africa, as well as key exigencies such as the need to eliminate discrimination, change the demographic make-up of the academy, increase affordability and implement institutional cultures that are not alienating for black students. It is understood that changing demographics, improving pass rates and graduation rates, and pursuing and achieving race, gender and disability equity goals are important aspects of transformation. However, transformation is a much more expansive phenomenon, connecting to every aspect of the higher education environment, and a book on higher education in South Africa cannot hope to escape such complex, fraught and perhaps intractable issues and debates.

There are some chapters in the book that address the issue of transformation, albeit in different ways, such as Jansen's dense and challenging chapter on the curriculum ("The curriculum as an institution in higher education") and Leibowitz's insightful argument about positioning teaching and learning from a social justice perspective ("Towards a pedagogy of possibility: Teaching and learning from a social justice perspective"). However, the matter of transformation, and/or race, is not explicitly drawn out at any point in the book. A positioning for the issue could have been well located in Le Grange's contribution about the space of transformation and "supercomplexity" (Barnett, 2000) in which the contemporary South African university is currently located. Le Grange usefully critiques the kinds of knowledge being produced in South Africa's universities, but limits the analysis

of transformation to that of the processes of research and journal publication. A single chapter that engages with ontological and epistemological issues in all their complexity – and the consequent implications for research, methodology, scholarship, learning and teaching curriculum and pedagogy – would have been a welcome addition to this book.

In summary, the relative absence of important areas of analysis in the collection of contributions divests the book of a contemporary feel in terms of the broader contexts and concerns in which it places itself and perhaps even speaks to some blind spots within the academy itself. Is higher education scholarship perhaps missing the mark in some ways? Key scholarship in the field of higher education in South Africa ought to be grappling with some of the most important challenges of the time, for example making university education affordable for South Africa's students and ensuring that educational success is within the reach of every student. The sense of higher education as a site of contestation and struggle is not fully reflected within the book, detracting in some ways from a balanced treatment of the field of higher education in South Africa.

### **Reference**

- Barnett, R. (2000). *Realising the university in an age of supercomplexity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

