

BOOK REVIEW

Case, J.M., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. (2017). *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans*. Cape Town: African Minds.

Reviewed by Liezel Frick\*

Higher education in South Africa is in a state of turmoil. Student protests, increased state intervention, uncertainty and surprises around government funding of the sector amidst increased massification of universities, pressure on institutions to insource staff, calls to diversify both student and staff bodies, demands for decolonisation of university curricula (or Africanisation, as Msila and Gumbo [2016] choose to position these debates), and substantive changes in national policy directives have created a sector in constant flux.

It is thus no surprise that a variety of authoritative authors within the South African higher education context have taken a rather dim view of the current situation. While Adam Habib (2016) focuses on re-imagining the future of the South African university, he acknowledges the stark current reality that the South African university system is not on par with its counterparts in other developing countries and that it shows limited transformation after more than two decades of democracy in South Africa. Cloete (2016a) similarly points to inefficiencies within the system (particularly at the undergraduate level) that are amplified by under-funding of the system as a whole. However, he argues against the notion of free higher education, as it may lead to even greater inefficiency and inequality (Cloete, 2016b) – a notion also questioned in terms of feasibility by the Heher Report (South Africa, 2017). Yet this is exactly what came to be towards the end of 2017.

Jonathan Jansen's recent book, *As by fire: The end of the South African university* (2017), considers the experiences of vice-chancellors amidst the #FeesMustFall protests, and takes a decidedly negative stance on the future of universities in South Africa. In *As by fire*, it almost seems like the culmination of Jansen's (2005, pp. 3–4, 12) earlier question, "When does a university cease to exist?", where he remarks:

... a university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energizes its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse can flourish without constraint. The university ceases to exist when it imposes on itself narrowing views of the future based on ethnic or linguistic chauvinism, and denies the multiplicity of voices and visions that grant institutions their distinctive character. And the

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university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination. ... The greatest challenge facing the post-apartheid university is that second-generation South Africans fail to find a compelling moral purpose in higher education beyond crass materialism and individual self-enrichment. It will require credible leadership to sustain the idea of the university through a restored idealism among students and teachers, an idealism that places our common humanity at the centre of institutional endeavour in a very dangerous world.

These contributions seem to paint a picture of a system in constant crisis, with little hope of redeeming itself to be(come) both nationally responsive and internationally competitive. A narrow reading of such texts could easily make the South African higher education landscape seem barren, caught in a hopeless situation.

However, in a critique on particularly Jonathan Jansen's (2017) *As by Fire*, Suellen Shay (2017) argues:

What South Africa's universities need from their leaders now is not prophecies of doom, but deeper reflection on the transformative potential of this difficult historical moment.

It is within this space that the recent publication of *Going to University: The influence of Higher Education on the lives of young South Africans* (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2017) provides a much-needed reason for hope and respite amidst the turmoil.

The book reports on narrative interviews with 73 young people who first entered university studies in South Africa some six years beforehand. The interviewees hailed from three different research-intensive South African universities, studied in either Arts or Sciences, and included both completers (n = 60) and non-completers (n = 13). Despite documenting the obvious (and sometimes not so obvious) battles and challenges students face in a nuanced way, this is essentially a book of hope as it firstly provides a much-needed constructive student voice to understanding what university is about, and why it matters. Secondly, as Sue Clegg's foreword to the book highlights, it contributes to broader debates about the significance and importance of higher education across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. As such, the book may have a wide appeal not only to scholars of higher education as a field of study (as the reports of such projects often do), but also academics beyond this field of interest, professional and support staff at universities, university leaders, thought leaders in industry, and policy makers. Though the book is a truly (and proudly) South African contribution, its reach will in all probability extend beyond national boundaries. And although the storied contribution is by its very nature nationally and institutionally embedded, it speaks to much broader issues of race, class and gender in higher education, as well as how student agency manifests in a turbulent and resource-constrained context.

An evident strength of the contribution of *Going to University* lies in the solid theoretical foundation (most evident in the first chapter) and methodological rigour (as explained in the addenda) on which the work is built. Yet, the authors made a pragmatic decision to foreground the voices and stories of the participants, which makes the book much more

accessible and digestible to a wider audience, although the authors' subsequent shorter published essays in media such as *The Conversation* (and hopefully some future podcasts or YouTube clips) may be more widely read than the actual book itself. Scholars in higher education studies will find these aspects of much interest though, and there is enough theoretical and methodological depth to get a grip on the scholarship that forms the backdrop to the stories. One would also hope to see additional future scholarly publications that thrash out these aspects in greater detail for the readership particularly interested in the research behind the stories.

The story of the stories unfold in an interesting way in the book, starting off with a contextualisation of higher education (Chapter 1), before it moves on to how students navigate the undergraduate curriculum (Chapter 2), while the third chapter explores how students deliberate and make decisions on study plans. The fourth chapter considers the broader student experience. The second half of the book gives voice to the student experience beyond the university, firstly looking at non-completion of the first degree choice in the fifth chapter (an invaluable contribution that moves the reader beyond a deficit view of high dropout and low completion rates within the sector). Another valuable contribution in the sixth chapter focuses on doing postgraduate studies. Chapter 7 explores students' experiences of entering the workplace. The book ends off with a careful consideration of the purposes of higher education in Chapter 8.

The build-up to the final chapter moves from the contextualisation in the first chapter through a storied scenery of what it means to go to a (research) university in South Africa today. The complexity of both in-class and out-of-class experiences are told in an interwoven manner, where the weave of the first-person student narratives is securely held by the weft of the authors' interpretations. These chapters show how higher education in South Africa is linked to societal and economic contexts in inseparable and complex ways, as is evident in recent policy developments. The recent draft National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) (DHET, 2017) highlights how national policy has shifted from a focus on social justice and redress (as espoused in the White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education, 1997) to a more outcomes-driven imperative (as is also evident in the White Paper on Post-school Education and Training, 2013) with a focus on skills development for (immediate) employment (with a resultant emphasis on student success and throughput) and knowledge production, application and transfer (with greater involvement of industry and the workplace). The NPPSET (DHET, 2017, p. 10) states that the plan,

... moves away from the current focus on scarce and critical skills and proposes that the focus should be on qualifications and programmes for occupations in high demand, using three dimensions: programmes that are specifically needed for economic growth; programmes that will provide opportunities for employment for large numbers of people; and programmes that support social development priorities.

Student access, success and employment are, of course, important given the current national higher education student success indicators, youth (un)employment figures, and the slow economic growth evident in South Africa. But the unintended consequences of such a policy shift may be that universities are seen as just other knowledge-based institutions focused on the exchange of knowledge and knowledge workers with other organisations. Youtie and Shapira (2008) warn that universities could end up being seen as mere knowledge factories when only the impact that has a direct economic and regional benefit is measured and valued. *Going to University*, to some extent, challenges this policy discourse, when the authors point out:

But university is more than just a self-improvement camp. Participants were able to articulate the specific knowledge and ways of thinking that they had developed while at university, and how these skills put them in a strong position in trying to enter what is now termed the ‘knowledge economy’. Importantly, these are not just instrumentalist technical ‘skills’ but ways of thinking – which means that the impact goes beyond the individual. Many students spoke in some detail about the kind of creative and analytical thinking that they had learnt at university: not taking things at face value, being able to interrogate different ways of conceptualising a phenomenon, how to build up or test a logical argument. (p. 134)

Such a more holistic notion of student development is in line with the so-called skills identified by the World Economic Forum (2017) as essential to succeeding in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, including complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, service orientation, negotiation, and cognitive flexibility. As such, the contribution of *Going to University* forces the reader to (re-)consider the current university sector’s potential to nurture the creative potential of students, which requires time, resources and space for more flexible programme structures, improved student support structures, an investment in developing creative higher education pedagogies, as well as research that may not have an immediate and applied impact. This is in line with the work of Florida, Knudsen and Stolarick (2010, p. 68), who empirically explored the role of universities in the economy. Their findings suggest that the role of universities “goes far beyond the ‘engine of innovation’ perspective”. They indicate that whilst technology generation is important, the role of universities in this aspect of the economy has been overemphasised while the role of universities in generating, attracting and mobilising talent, and establishing a tolerant and diverse social climate is often overlooked and neglected by policy makers and leaders. The idea of being a creative university (as defined by Reichert, 2006) does not exclude being efficient or economically viable, but it takes a longer term view on the benefit it might add to society and the economy, and allows more space for dialogue, experimentation and innovation.

It is within this frame of reference that the final chapter of *Going to University* gives the reader some reason for hope when the authors conclude:

... what kind of young people have we formed in our university graduates? They are independently minded and socially progressive. They are getting traction in their careers and they are acting with thoughtfulness and responsibility. They are thinkers and they mostly engage critically with the world and their place in society. Many are aware of inequalities in society and of their own experiences of privilege. ... They are resilient young people and future leaders; crucially it is their experiences of grappling with knowledge during university studies that has formed them (p. 143).

These findings speak to the higher order and complex skills as envisioned by the World Economic Forum predictions cited above, and should not be disregarded or diluted to a more simplistic notion of skills development.

*Going to University* is available for free downloading through the publisher's website under Creative Commons licensing.

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