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Professor Madeleine Arnot, Image provided

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Research focus on Africa 're-influences' North's thinking

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 13 April 2022

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The different ways of forging knowledge and understanding issues which are being produced in response to African realities are increasingly re-influencing academic thinking in the Global North, according to Madeleine Arnot, professor of sociology of education at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom.

The shift is offering a window of opportunity for academics and universities on the continent, she says.

"Globally, academics, scientists and engineers are saying they cannot solve the problems of, for example, climate change or of COVID-19 without understanding their impacts in the African setting," says Arnot.

"So, the knowledge in universities in Africa will increasingly start to re-influence the metropolitan knowledge base in response to the big global challenges – including in relation to technical issues and their social science aspects, such as the kinds of awareness training, behavioural change and political dynamics that may be required."

In addition, the increasing number of African scholarship students at universities in the Global North is reshaping the canon at these institutions so that it includes more texts and authors from their own cultures.

"We are at a stage now where what may be called the 'indigenous' is actually being carried into institutions in the North from other cultural knowledges which have arrived at these places," she says.

Forge more equal relationships

The greater value now being attributed to knowledge derived from the continent could be deployed to facilitate the development of the universities in Africa, says Arnot.

"For academics on the continent, the aim should be to surf the next wave in higher education, which is the crucial contribution that the African knowledge base can make; and to forge more equal, productive and mutually beneficial relationships accordingly," she says.

"In this context, increasing numbers of academics are seeking and establishing bilateral or multi-stakeholder partnerships with universities in different fields all over the place, in Eastern Africa, in West Africa and in Southern Africa."

The process has already led to significant shifts in how research is being conducted, according to Arnot.

"New research methodologies are being established in response to African realities in place of inappropriate Western ones," she says. "Research tasks are being reconceptualised in order to create knowledge in various, different cultural settings."

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Arnot cites a meta-study which interrogated the experience of sociology researchers in West and Eastern Africa and the Indian sub-continent who deployed a British model for interviewing.

At the same time as African research is occupying an increasingly influential place in the global system, there is a need for more democratic and collective forms of academic engagement in order to leverage the impacts of the knowledge being produced in universities on the continent, argues Arnot.

What should be researched?

To this end, she proposes greater consultation on the kinds of research questions being posed by academia and on the way that they are being answered; and the establishment of more collaborative approaches to knowledge production among African scholars returning to the continent from higher education programmes in other parts of the world.

“A key challenge is to produce a more democratic process for identifying the problems that should be researched as well as how they should be studied,” says Arnot. “The definition of the research problem is something that is too weak at present.

“Then there is the issue of the kind of answer that academics tend to produce to problems as a result of their research.

“For example, in most of the social sciences and the humanities, the answers that are produced are too complex and feature too many variables to be converted into practicable strategies that may be implemented by policy-makers,” she says.

“In this regard, there needs to be greater coordination with the practitioners themselves.”

In this context, Arnot emphasises the importance on addressing the issue of “how governments receive or resist research findings”.

“If there is no intermediary structure, the research is lost,” she says.

Academics have to influence policies

“The question in the African setting is: Where is the link between the university and the government?

“The academics have got to influence policies somehow. So, there is an increasing interest in talking about theories of change and how you create change.”

Accordingly, Arnot advocates engaged forms of research and scholarship that address material and socio-cultural realities on the ground, which, she says, are more easily produced by smaller institutions with flexible mandates than the “big, global, top-ranking” ones, such as her present employer, the University of Cambridge.

To this end, she advocates the establishment of regional clusters of returning African scholars as one way of leveraging academic expertise to produce more impactful engaged research.

“For example, I have been encouraging a group of West African returning scholars to come together across their disciplines and collaborate to foster regional change in relation to a key issue, such as climate change, or child poverty or rural poverty,” says Arnot.

“At present, although they are undertaking important research individually, they are not linking regionally in their own geo-political cluster.

“Similar hubs or clusters of returning scholars could also come together to create forums in Eastern Africa and elsewhere on the continent. And, soon, these groups of scholars, who are already networking online on a personal basis, would be published together and would be working together on large regional projects and actually

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leading development.”

Arnot gives warning that, in the absence of “a cooperative, collective model with a common identity” that can connect returning post-graduate students, the success of the present system for scholarships to the north depends on individuals changing their countries on their own, “which is too much to expect or ask”.

The power of student solidarity

In this regard, she is a great believer in the power of student solidarity.

“I think we underplay how much undergraduates and graduates could actually take control of things – and not just student movements and demonstrations – but larger campaigns and processes of change.

“Students can and should produce change.”

At the same time, Arnot acknowledges the pressure that African students face in terms of gaining employment after graduation: “I think there is concern, particularly in the low-resourced, low-income countries. There is a huge worry that you invest in youth and then they cannot actually go forward at all; there are no opportunities, particularly if the economy is not doing well.”

In this regard, Arnot references the challenges faced by those returning to their countries from scholarship programmes abroad, including a lack of laboratories and equipment for scientists and insufficient job opportunities.

In response, she advocates that the funding or nominating bodies and individuals should also be pledging to provide employment to the scholarship students when they graduate.

“On one hand, schemes obliging scholarship students to work for their funders after graduation used to be considered oppressive; on the other, such schemes can entail a longer-term investment and responsibility to the scholarship student on the part of the donor,” she says.

“In the absence of such schemes and the possibility of sequential employment, there is a significant loss of talent,” she says.

What is the ‘right’ university model?

More broadly, Arnot notes that the nature of international funding pushes African universities to adopt the research-intensive model rather than to focus on teaching, “although it is arguable whether this is the right model for various African countries”.


“Massification presents a particular challenge in relation to the adoption of effective pedagogic approaches. For example, personal attention from tutors falls away in mass settings with large numbers of students, and drop-out rates tend to rise.”

This, says Arnot, produces a “survival of the fittest” ethos.

In considering what may be the ideal university in Africa, she notes that, “given the great disparity in conditions and experience between universities in the North and Africa”, she is “in no position to advise on what may be ideal on the continent”.

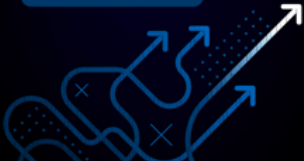
However, she points towards a number of competing visions of the university in general.

“There has always been a tension between the idea that the universities should be for the select few”, as against “the other view [which] favours massification and promotes the idea that the majority of the population should be able to enter higher education because they will benefit in a range of ways from the whole university experience, including in terms of intellectual maturity, access to knowledge and the social experience of mixing with a more diverse group of people than at school.



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"There is also the tension between the vocational and liberal ideas of the university," she says, noting the issue of which professional vocational subjects may be best suited to university education and which ones should be offered in dedicated vocational colleges.

According to Arnot, "a further tension, which is a more contemporary one, is that between being an internationally modelled, research-intensive university and being a community-based university, which works with indigenous cultures and helps the youth in the local town or rural region".

The diversity of visions and tensions also includes that "there are different-sized universities with different missions". However, given that, in the end, "the institution has to offer a degree", she advises that increasingly the bottom line is "the usefulness of the qualifications on offer".

"For example, in Britain, where massification has led to a rising number of students, young people who have had to pay such high fees to attend university that they are burdened with debt for years to come are increasingly questioning the value of the education they are receiving," she notes.

"The idea of apprenticeships and internships has become increasingly popular. So, the degree has to be seen to be as something of value in the labour market.

"Even if it is a theoretically oriented degree, you have still got to think about where you are going to get a job at the end."

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Alude Mahali for the 'The Imprint of Education' project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. The words have been edited for length and focus by Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher. A full transcript of the interview will be downloadable from the HSRC's **website** after publication of this feature.*



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