
Review: Book Review

Reviewed Work(s): African Higher Education: International Reference Handbook by Damtew Teferra and Philip G. Altbach

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African Higher Education: International Reference Handbook edited by Damtew Teferra and Philip G. Altbach. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 864 pp. \$89.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-253-34186-8.

This book can't be categorized easily. Is it an encyclopedia or a group of essays? In any case, within it lies a marvelous wealth of information. Thirteen of the 65 articles cover trends—governance, relations with the state, foreign aid, student activism, language of instruction. The remaining articles describe higher education in each of the 52 countries in Africa north and south of the Sahara. The volume is potentially useful for anyone planning to visit or work on education issues in Africa, but it also would serve as an excellent reader for comparative and higher education classes at the graduate or undergraduate level.

Country analyses.—Unlike those in similar volumes, individual country analyses are interesting on their own. George Subotzky's article on South Africa acknowledges the horrible problems of the racial inheritance but then marches right into the current (and equally controversial) efforts to rationalize the systems (including the burden produced by closing the historically black institutions). Paul Effah's article on Ghana is particularly comprehensive, covering governance, finance, research, efficiency, curricular quality, access, historical development, and labor market outcomes. Habtamu Wondimu's article on Ethiopia acknowledges the problems and dilemmas of higher education in an environment of totalitarianism, including the natural dilemma of having some "distance" between the political system and the university community.

The reader might be excused if she gets the impression that higher education in Africa consists of a long series of crises, shortages, and inadequacies. Some articles can be rather candid about this. Julieta Mendes says that in Guinea-Bissau "curriculum is normally borrowed or copied from parent institutions in Portugal and Cuba with no major changes . . . one cannot talk about student political activism . . . [and] scientific research has not been a major activity" (356–57).

The country-specific articles are not uniform. Some authors use the opportunity to publish to advance their private agenda. Vincent Mintsa mi-Eya's article on Gabon begins with the statement that the university is "conceived in the image of an absolute monarch" in contrast with "a traditional African university [that] should be . . . conceived as an organized means toward achieving a specific goal, led by a determined community" (326). Charles Ngome attributes the cause of all student activism to the "government's mismanagement of public affairs" (366). Without citing any evidence, Kabba E. Colley argues that training Gambians overseas is faulty because foreign trained doctors "were never allowed to practice on the citizens of their host country. When they returned and started practicing medicine, their lack of hands-on experience proved fatal in many cases" (335). There are instances of simple economic ignorance. One author argues that sending students for overseas training is a problem because of the loss of foreign exchange, ignoring the fact that domestic alternatives also require foreign exchange (336). Another author makes the highly unlikely statement that Kenya has "experienced economic decline since independence" (366).

Some articles demonstrate rather useful wisdom. In a description of dilemmas in Morocco, Mohamed Ouakrime mentions that "representatives of the [higher

education] profession tend to ignore the dependency of governance on financing, taking for granted the responsibility of the government but at the same time claiming autonomy for university institutions" (458). He also points out what would seem to be situations that are totally unacceptable. Students are evaluated in Morocco and are asked to repeat classes as a result of these evaluations. But none are told why they had failed or what they need to do to improve their performance (458). The language of instruction can affect the prestige of the disciplines. In one instance, Arabic is used in the social sciences and humanities, French in the sciences and technology, and both languages for law and economics (459). Brain drain is widely acknowledged to be a problem, but the "push factors" (abuse of human rights, corruption, physical insecurity, and lack of scientific opportunity) are also acknowledged to be causes. Colonialism and the (European) slave trade are sometimes used to explain current problems but less so than 20 years ago. The approximately half century of independence has had its effect on the way African scholars look at their societies and themselves. There is more acceptance of African responsibility for African problems, more acknowledgment of universal standards of excellence, and fewer tendencies to hide poor quality behind the skirts of local culture.

Thematic analyses.—The 13 essays attempt to summarize the trends of the continent but suffer from three problems. They concentrate on the standard issues—most higher education's origins in colonial authority, scientific and technological poverty, the out-migration of university-level talent. Newer issues—corruption, strategic partnerships on particular issues such as public health, pedagogy, and student life—remain unexplored. Quality varies. Some essays are frank. In one, it is pointed out that there is no way Africa could simply drop Western languages as media of instruction and embrace its vernacular languages overnight without losing access to important educational resources produced elsewhere (115). In another, an African member of a scientific society notes that "in all honesty, the quality of education journals in Africa is substantially inferior to those in other regions" (226). But others have problems. In his essay on distance education, William Saint continues the long-standing tradition among World Bank (and other UN-agency) staff to confuse scholarship with advocacy and ignore contradictory evidence.¹ Lynn Ilon continues a long-standing academic tradition of blaming donors for being either miserly or intrusive. Perhaps the most insightful of the essays are Kilemi Mwira's on university governance and relations with the state and the one by Beth Thaver on private higher education. Both break new ground and balance conventional views with new pragmatism. Last is the problem of geographical imbalance. The summary essays seem to ignore Africa north of the Sahara. This is a pity because North Africa often provides exceptions to the generalizations being made about the continent more generally.

Few topics could be more depressing than higher education in a continent in economic and political crisis. But then few areas are more important for Africa than its higher education systems. It is axiomatic to note that there are serious problems, but it is also incontestable that higher education investment and policy

¹ Moses O. Oketch, "The African Virtual University: Developments and a Critique," *International Higher Education* 34 (2004): 18–19.

analysis is needed now in Africa more than ever, and this book is an excellent beginning.

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Kas haridusse tasus investeerida? Hariduse selekteerivast ja stratifitseerivast rollist kahe põlvkonna kogemuse alusel [Returns to education] by Jelena Helemäe, Ellu Saar, and Rein Võormann. Tallinn: Academy of Sciences, 2000. 276 pp. \$8.32 (paper). ISBN 9985-50-295-7.

Returns to Education, written by Jelena Helemäe, Ellu Saar, and Rein Võormann, explores the impact of educational attainment on the life chances of two different generations in Estonia—one born in the late 1940s and the other in the mid-1960s. These generations were brought up and educated under very different circumstances owing to the sociopolitical changes that took place in the country at the time. The book is based mainly on the findings of two longitudinal research projects: the Estonian Longitudinal Survey and Paths to a Generation. In addition to these projects, data from other surveys carried out in Estonia are also used.

In this book, the authors focus mainly on secondary education. They observe that while only a minority of individuals in the first generation were able to obtain secondary education, it had become the norm for the second generation. However, as more people gained access to secondary education, it no longer automatically guaranteed a good future careerwise. Furthermore, secondary education became increasingly differentiated; vocational schools and to a lesser extent specialized secondary schools emerged that catered to young people from lower socioeconomic origins, while general secondary schools aimed at the preparation of specialists.

This book will be of considerable interest to those involved in education, sociology, and international studies. The easily accessible, yet scholarly volume presents a comprehensive discussion of the role of secondary education in the life chances of young people during the transition from state socialism to a market economy. It focuses on the returns to secondary education by exploring, in particular, the kind of career-related starting positions secondary education provided in Estonia during the 1960s and 1980s. While considerable literature exists in the developed Western countries on returns to education, less is known in this respect about the new European Union member states. Hence *Returns to Education* is a timely publication addressing this gap in knowledge.

The authors argue that the structural and institutional framework within which a generation acts has a very strong impact on its life course. In other words, every generation in every period faces a particular mixture of constraints and opportunities for action. Thus, schooling opportunities are determined by the number of available places in educational institutions, among other factors. In terms of the labor market, the opportunities for employment are associated with available va-