

African Higher Education: Researching Absences, Equalities and Aspirations

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INTRODUCTION

African Higher Education: researching absences, equalities and aspirations

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The Sounds of Silence

This special issue on researching absences, equalities and aspirations in African higher education (HE) addresses a significant lack of scholarship on HE in low-income countries at a time when HE is gaining prominence on international policy agendas (UNESCO, 2009; World Bank, 2009). Whereas, in the past, HE was positioned by the World Bank as a luxury product in low-income countries (Robertson, 2009; Yusuf et al, 2009), from 1994, it became a policy priority and part of the new global economic imaginary (World Bank, 1994). The World Bank (2011) is currently completing a global study on equity and access to tertiary education with funding from the Bank Netherlands Partnership Program.

The distribution of HE has become a policy priority for reasons of social justice and economic development. Planned scarcity of higher educational opportunities has traditionally contributed to the formation of a global elite. More recently, HE has been rearticulated as a resource for the wider economy – that is, as productive, as income-generating and as a commodity (Ball, 2007). It has a use and an exchange value in global economies. HE has become a demand-led and claimed form of citizenship, linked to redistribution strategies in democratic societies (Magalhães & Stoer, 2009). The citizen is now constructed as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interests and aspirations for nation-building and wealth creation. It is now almost a civic duty to aspire to HE (Biesta, 2006).

Structured interventions to raise aspirations and widen participation have been part of the global HE policy architecture (Morley, 2011). Aspirations – particularly of new constituencies of women and socio-economically disadvantaged students – have been raised in many cases, with HE perceived as a new site of potential, promising graduates the good life in the form of material and social benefits. As Marginson (2011) argues, HE produces and allocates social positions and positional goods. Widening participation in higher education (WPHE) could be seen as a happiness formula (Ahmed, 2010). WPHE is represented as an ideology of progress and a form of liberation from abjection – a compensation for past loss and discrimination, and a way of indemnifying against future hardship.

Aspirations are often linked to what we value, or believe has value. Aspiration in WPHE is understood as the desire to better oneself, and has been conceptualised as a means of escape from intergenerational poverty (Walkerline, 2011). However, aspirations and inequalities frequently collide, and intergenerational poverty, particularly in low-income countries, can impede participation. It is often claimed that those with social capital are able to decode and access new educational opportunities, and that those without it can remain untouched by the privileges that

entry to HE can offer (Reay et al, 2005; Crozier et al, 2008; Heath et al, 2008). Poverty and the uneven distribution of material, social and cultural capital can determine who has the capacity to aspire to enter HE (Appadurai, 2004; David et al, 2009).

There is still a toxic correlation between poverty and access, and in the resource-intensive environment of HE, social equality is frequently represented in terms of access. Access to HE offers personal and public gains. It promises the potential for transformative knowledge for social justice, but can also represent the face of privilege. The selectivity of university entry offers opportunities for status gains and the accumulation of private capital. However, new constituencies of students often find that their subordinated social identities are amplified when they come in contact with powerful organisations such as universities. If their applications are rejected, this can reinforce a lifetime's educational marginalisation. If they are accepted, they are frequently reminded, on a quotidian basis, of their second-class citizenship in relation to other, more privileged students. In many cases, the anticipatory logic of aspirations has been followed by ambivalence and the disappointment of poor-quality student experiences once entered (Morley et al, 2010). Paradoxically, the massification, or increased productivity, of HE has transformed the value of the product. Expanding student numbers and enrolling new student constituencies with limited institutional capacity raises substantial quality questions. Whilst there is momentum in global discourses that stresses the importance of HE to sustained economic and human development, there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that widening participation and underfunded expansion in African HE is not just a question of 'a flood of students into increasingly dysfunctional institutions' (Yusuf et al, 2009, p. 110).

The focus of this special issue is on the interplay between research knowledge, policy impact, organisational change and the lived experiences of students and staff in HE in two sub-Saharan African countries – Ghana and Tanzania. The articles contribute to new knowledge on the region in at least two ways. First, they report original empirical findings from research conducted with students, staff and policy makers in HE in sub-Saharan Africa, and, second, they situate this emerging field of research in the context of a development policy agenda for the revitalisation of African HE. Key themes that are explored include: (1) the aspirations and assumptions of international development policy in relation to widening participation; (2) the institutional and national policy arenas within which research into HE takes place; and (3) the micropolitics of HE learning and teaching – that is, how policies and power are experienced in the daily lives of students and staff (Morley, 2008).

The contributors to this special issue are drawn together by their involvement and interest in the project 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: developing an Equity Scorecard' (WPHEGT) [1], funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) & Department for International Development's (DFID's) Poverty Alleviation Research Programme, and an ESRC-funded knowledge exchange phase of the project, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: impact, influence and innovation'. WPHEGT was a three-year mixed-methods study of a public and private case study university in each of Ghana and Tanzania. It conducted 200 life history interviews with students, 200 interviews with key staff and policy makers, and produced statistical data that it presented in the form of 100 Equity Scorecards. The research questions related directly to current policy concerns for making African HE more inclusive: which social groups are currently and traditionally under-represented as students in the case study institutions, and whether these correlate with wider national and international patterns of social exclusion; how the case study institutions are interpreting and responding to the Millennium Development Goals; and whether a relationship exists between learners' prior experiences of education, their socio-economic status (SES), and their experiences and achievement in HE. Questions were posed about what mechanisms for support have been put in place for 'non-traditional' students to facilitate retention and achievement, and how 'non-traditional' students might experience these interventions. Diverse stakeholders were asked about their perceptions of the main barriers to participation for under-represented groups, and what strategies the case study institutions can develop to improve the recruitment, retention and achievement of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Morley et al, 2008, 2010; Morley & Lugg, 2009; Morley & Lussier, 2009). The main findings were as follows.

The narratives of growing up, entering and experiencing HE suggested the need to develop:

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- student-centred services and practices – for example, transparency in assessment;
- quality learning environments – for example, resources, effective pedagogy; and
- lecturer professionalism and accountability.

Students saw the impact of HE in terms of:

- identity transformation – for example, ‘becoming a somebody’;
- an escape route from poverty;
- enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem; and
- national economic and social development.

The staff and policy maker interviews indicated the need to address:

- monitoring, evaluation and management;
- the impact of poverty on participation;
- the importance of loans systems;
- the effectiveness of affirmative action;
- capacity challenges;
- the integration of Education for All policies and Millennium Development Goals into HE; and
- the fact that widening participation should mean more than increasing the number of women in science.

The Equity Scorecards revealed that:

- most programmes enrolled very few (or no) low SES students;
- low SES students tended to be on programmes with low exchange rates in the labour market;
- fewer low SES students withdrew and they performed as well as, and sometimes better than, other groups;
- mature students were most at risk of withdrawal;
- women, especially low SES and mature women, were under-represented on science programmes; and
- more women were entering private than public universities.

This special issue allows an international group of researchers and writers to explore the passage of the WPHEGT research findings through rapidly developing policy and social contexts, and to examine the potential of research for challenging or perpetuating the assumptions that seem to underlie inequalities in HE participation. The WPHEGT research findings suggest that while widening participation in HE can be a force for democratisation and economic growth, it can also valorise and perpetuate elite practices, and thereby contribute to further stratification of social groups. Students from under-represented social groups can soon find that the construction of WPHE as a charitable intervention for socio-economically disadvantaged groups sustains dominant power relations, and that HE can escalate, rather than disrupt, social divisions.

Theorising Inequalities

The articles draw on concepts and policies from international and comparative education and development studies, particularly relating to sub-Saharan Africa, HE and equity research. The broad range of types of contribution necessitates different kinds of engagement with theory. Intersectionality theory has been a particularly potent theoretical tool for the WPHEGT study (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008). It offers an analytic framework that goes beyond ‘giving voice’ to marginalised groups in two ways. First, it focuses on how structures of inequality come into being, interact with each other and are negotiated in complex ways. For instance, transgressing norms surrounding age can often disrupt conformity to traditional gendered expectations of women’s domestic and reproductive roles (see the contribution by Adu-Yeboah & Forde in this issue). Equally, interventions aimed at one social group – such as affirmative action programmes for women – can also be captured by socio-economically privileged groups, hence demonstrating a need to consider multiple identities in equalities work. Second, intersectionality draws attention to the significance of institutional dynamics and demands a system-level analysis that addresses different structures of inequality. For example, gender-disaggregated statistics are becoming increasingly common in sub-Saharan African universities, but there is less information about SES,

ethnicity and disability (see the contributions by David, Mwaipopo et al, Morley & Croft and Singh in this issue).

The editor's rationale in inviting contributions from this mix of authors is to develop capacity and mutual transnational learning, and to create the conditions for exploring how research findings are transferred into knowledge, policy and transformed practices. Some articles in this issue draw directly on data from the WPHEGT project (for example, Adu-Yeboah & Forde, Mwaipopo et al, and Morley & Croft). Some engage with the local policy and professional impact and implications of the research findings (for example, Effah and Mkude). Others situate the findings in a wider international policy terrain (for example, Singh and David). These polysemic theorised accounts of widening participation in international HE aim to develop our understanding of the expansion, purpose, quality and equality of HE in Africa.

Overview of the Articles

Mala Singh's article, 'Equity and Quality in the Revitalisation of African Higher Education: trends and challenges', addresses the policy context of quality, equality and the revitalisation of African HE. She examines how sub-Saharan Africa interacts with the knowledge economy, and discusses the 'triangle of exclusion' – access, equity and quality. Singh discusses how accelerating the contribution of HE to social and economic development in Africa is firmly on the agenda of continental organisations like the African Union and the Association of African Universities, and multilateral bodies like UNESCO. However, subverting the 'triangle of exclusion' still remains as a crucial political and policy task within the revitalisation agenda.

Paul Effah and Daniel Mkude, as prominent policy analysts of African HE, were both invited to prepare position papers that engaged with the WPHEGT research findings. These were delivered at in-country knowledge exchange seminars and generated considerable debate and discussion among policy makers, academics, university leaders, student organisations and non-governmental organisations in Ghana and Tanzania. Paul Effah's article, 'A Ghanaian Response to the Study on "Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: developing an Equity Scorecard"', situates the WPHEGT research findings in the context of policy initiatives in Ghana and identifies future areas for policy attention. He emphasises that some geopolitical areas seem to be outside the knowledge society and how some students in rural areas continue to be excluded from educational opportunities. He concludes with specific recommendations and areas for future policy development, including the need for a systematic collection and analysis of data as a basis for policy and decision making. Daniel Mkude's article, 'Higher Education as an Instrument of Social Integration in Tanzania: challenges and prospects', discusses the WPHEGT project in relation to HE policy as an instrument of social integration, change and inclusion in Tanzania. He offers practical advice on change interventions, arguing that strong and visionary HE leadership is required to effect equity changes. He concludes that four types of intervention are crucial: (1) the admission and selection policies; (2) the use of pre-entry programmes; (3) the establishment of special support funds for disadvantaged students; and (4) the diversification of modes of HE delivery to cater for different categories of students.

Louise Morley & Alison Croft's article, 'Agency and Advocacy: disabled students in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania', examines the international policy architecture and literature on disability as an under-researched structure of inequality in HE in low-income countries. They also provide an overview of disabled students' agency and advocacy, despite considerable adversities in public and private universities in Ghana and Tanzania. They argue that there is a toxic correlation between disability and poverty, especially in the global South. However, while disability was associated with constraints, misrecognition, frustration, exclusion and even danger, students' agency, advocacy and achievement in HE offered opportunities for transforming spoiled identities.

Christine Adu-Yeboah & Linda Dzama Forde's article, 'Returning to Study in Higher Education in Ghana: experiences of mature undergraduate women', examines the micropolitics of mature women students' experiences of returning to study in a culture that positions older women in relation to domestic and maternal responsibilities, rather than intellectual pursuits. Gendered divisions of labour can often mean a double shift for mature women students, and a split focusing of their energy and attention. They describe how these mature women have a constant material,

emotional and social struggle to liberate time and space for their studies. The study explores mature women's experiences with a view to identifying implications for institutional development and learning.

Rosemarie Nyigulila Mwaipopo, Amandina Lihamba & Delphine Cosmas Njewe's article, 'Equity and Equality in Access to Higher Education: the experiences of students with disabilities in Tanzania', interrogates policy development and the challenges for disabled students in Tanzania. They analyse the relationship between policy aspirations for inclusion, lived experiences and barriers for full participation of disabled students in practice at an institutional level. They highlight how social development policies in Tanzania are exemplary in terms of their recognition of the rights of access to HE by specific demographic groups, yet still more work has to be done on the issue of disability.

The special issue concludes with Miriam David's article, 'Learning from Innovative International Research on Higher Education: how to conceptualise equity for policy, practice and pedagogies in higher education', in which she compares the research findings from the WPHEGT study with research evidence from the studies in the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme on fair access and widening participation in HE (David et al, 2009). She particularly considers the utility of the WPHEGT's Equity Scorecards as a systematic means of addressing the three Rs – *recruitment, retention and results* – in the context of very diverse national and international cultures and contexts.

All the articles in this special issue suggest that there are still unequal geographies of knowledge, and some archaic patterns of participation and uneven quality assurance processes in sub-Saharan HE. Globally, participation rates are rising, but not from a range of social groups. The qualitative experiences of students once entered also suggest that there are major implementation gaps between the aspirations of international, national and organisational equality and quality policies and the lived inequalities in the region. There are policy silences, absences and issues of cognitive justice (Sousa Santos, 2007), with vast communities living beyond the reach of the knowledge society. In a putative globalised knowledge economy, quality and equality need to be intersected, and questions need to be posed about the value of HE in terms of wealth distribution and poverty alleviation, as well as wealth creation.

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Note

[1] <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer/wphegt>

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Introduction

Yusuf, S., Saint, W. & Nabeshima, K. (2009) *Accelerating Catch-up: tertiary education for growth in sub-Saharan Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

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