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BOOK REVIEW: Ashcroft, K., & Rayner, P. (2011). Higher Education in Development: Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 286 pp., ISBN: 978-1-61735-541-7.

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Abstract

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Drawing on their experience working in sub-Saharan Africa with governments, universities, and higher education institutions, Kate Ashcroft and Philip Rayner examine why certain approaches are initially adopted for higher education reform, which characteristics make these approaches effective, and why they are rarely "simple" (p. 15). Though 26 public and private universities throughout the region are considered, particular emphasis is placed on Ethiopia, Zambia, and South Africa.

Ashcroft and Rayner's work is a synthesis of both internal and external stakeholder views and research, including that of high-ranking managers, intermediate employees, students, and employers involved with the region's higher education systems. Their book is also a reflection of the perspective they gained personally, working within the region and in other parts of the world. The authors have served in sub-Saharan Africa as advisers to Ministers of Education and Vice Ministers of Higher Education, as well as leaders of sector support units in Ethiopia. In Scotland, England, and Wales, they have worked as higher education quality assurance trainers. Throughout the book, the authors are notably humble as they reflect on their work. In discussing, for example, professional developments they have led, the authors acknowledge that, in some cases, the techniques seemingly grasped so well in class have not always impacted the classroom as intended (p. 198). Unfortunately, they do not draw on their experience to help thoroughly prepare development workers to determine when traditions affecting progress should be questioned, one area omitted from an otherwise broad overview.

Advocating "deep enquiry into the development context" (p. 5), Ashcroft and Rayner encourage reflective practice as a means to grasp the complicated issues of higher education

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[1] *Correspondence*: Lehigh University, College of Education, Iacocca Hall, 111 Research Drive, Bethlehem, PA, 18015, USA; Email: erb314@lehigh.edu.

development. The authors encourage readers to adopt an attitude of *open-mindedness*, *responsibility*, and *whole-heartedness*. *Open-mindedness*, the authors explain, refers to an openness to diverse points of view, whether in considering published works or experiences on the ground (p. 6). *Responsibility* extends reflection into the future, including future effects stemming from approaches employed (p. 7). With *whole-heartedness*, the authors reject the term "expert" and press the reader to approach any work done with a sense of humility so that understanding can be continually recalibrated (p. 8). These attributes must be embraced while simultaneously acknowledging the reader's own lens of personal experience and preconceptions, which influences his or her views.

Reflective practice as a tool aligns with participatory action research and practitioner research approaches, all of which reduce space between researcher and researched subject to precipitate locally contextualized development and community empowerment (Crossley, 2009). These approaches stem from a postmodern framework (Kelly, 2005). Seeing difference as the heart of developing social theories, postmodernity respects points of divergence, valuing the researched subjects' participation and collaboration in the research development process (Welch, 2013). Acknowledgment of difference is at the heart of the openness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness advocated.

This ability to use reflective practice through application of critical enquiry skills to development work in sub-Saharan Africa is the author's advised theory of action (p. 264), referring to the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. This theory encourages personal reflection because it recognizes misalignment between what those involved in an issue actually do (theories-in-use) and what is communicated to others as the justification for their actions (espoused theories) (Argyris, 1976). As Ashcroft and Rayner explain, unchecked, such tendencies can lead those working in development to ignore inconsistencies between the reality of the situation and the approach employed, leading to "inferences about what is the 'right' thing to do that are not valid or useful" (p. 264).

The authors suggest the reader use the critical enquiry approach for reflective practice, outlining eight steps in a cyclical process. Throughout the book, the reader is encouraged to "engage...with dilemmas" (p. 264) that arise during higher education work by considering questions presented in sections called "Reflections." By developing the skill of critical enquiry, the reader gains a useful tool to impart to those with whom he or she works as well, including management, support staff, and faculty.

Ashcroft and Rayner express that experience in Africa should lead to "question[ing] taken-for-granted assumptions that we know what is 'right' and what is 'the right way'" (p. 4). On the other hand, they acknowledge that, "us[ed] and adapt[ed] intelligently" (p. 15), these models can be foundations on which to build and grow. These authors see these imported methods as "road map[s]" (p.138), implying a certain amount of freedom to deviate based on conditions. Incidences of policy-borrowing are pointed out in multiple examples. For instance, the authors point to the advantage of having institutions with more narrow missions, instead of the comprehensive institutional models seen elsewhere (pp. 75-77). Policy-borrowing is also demonstrated in curriculum imported from the United States and Europe without any tailoring to make it optimal for sub-Saharan Africa's people (p. 84). Decentralization is encouraged by "Northern consultants" (p. 102); however, foundations of trust have not yet been established within many sub-Saharan Africa institutions, presenting obstacles to decentralization (p. 102). On the other hand, information and communications systems developed elsewhere are streamlining the transition to

email, online publications, and electronic record-keeping to the benefit of students and employees (p. 255).

Case studies appear periodically throughout the chapters covering topics, including massification, diversification, quality assurance, curriculum development, and research. These are topics that commonly arise in higher education systems globally (pp. 26-27). The authors list eight themes they consider, as applicable in each chapter: HIV/AIDS, access and equality, ethical issues, personnel management and creation of an enabling culture, autonomy and accountability, views of stakeholders, problems that arise from inputs, processes, and outcomes, and sustainability.

In order to contextualize higher education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, the authors begin by setting forth some of the region's challenges. Scarce resources in the face of rising demands, histories of fighting, colonial rule, negotiation obstacles, cultures wary of innovation, infrastructure gaps, authoritarianism, and centralization (p. 4) are just a few. By alerting readers to challenges surrounding sub-Saharan Africa and by beginning many of these chapters with detailed accounts of sub-Saharan Africa's daily life, the authors legitimize very real concerns faced by all connected to these systems. As Rust (1991, pp. 619-620) points out, provisions of legitimacy and sensitivity, especially for those on the periphery, mark postmodern approaches.

Challenges from HIV/AIDS, one of the book's main themes, are given particular attention, as two of the groups most devastated by the disease, young people and teachers (p.131), are heavily involved in higher education. Female students are also especially vulnerable, frequently serving as caregivers for family members inflicted with HIV/AIDS. This theme ties in with multiple areas of higher education including curriculum across the university, as learning can contribute knowledge of preventive practices; research into the disease by universities; and management, in terms of the disease's effects on higher education staff.

The challenge of HIV/AIDS is just one of several points which remind the reader of how the university serves as a microcosm of the broader society. Access and equality in education is another. Higher education must increasingly consider creative ways to broaden its offerings to include those who would benefit from part-time programs and distance learning, as well as those who have not completed secondary education (p. 175). Access also focuses on female students who may be among the few entering higher education, which impacts her experience (p. 201). The university, just as overall society, has the opportunity to encourage equality by integrating all types of students and employees to participate and achieve regardless of their class, rural upbringing, or ethnicity. By addressing concepts like moral standards, ethics, and professionalism from the level of leadership to the level of the student, Ashcroft and Rayner see the opportunity for lessons learned in its higher education to reverberate throughout sub-Saharan Africa's communities and nations, as employees and students apply what they have experienced and seen implemented in places beyond their institution. In terms of ethics, a third theme, the university can be instrumental in its impact on society. By actively engaging through the curriculum with issues like human rights, citizenship, and personal ownership, to name just a few, students can be influenced as they move through the system so that they may leave to become prepared citizens and potential employers (p. 172).

Management and the higher education culture itself, a fourth theme, can also position these institutions as nuclei for change beyond their walls. The authors present this idea concomitantly with the fifth theme, autonomy and accountability. The paradox that emerges from the massification and corporatization of higher education, occurring even beyond sub-Saharan Africa, is highlighted, as centralized systems of monitoring and regulation parallel decentralization of decision-making and accountability. In sub-Saharan Africa both national governments and higher

education employees are struggling with this change. The authors point out that decentralized decision-making is difficult without an "enabling culture" (p. 109) to empower participants who might be reluctant to take risks in a region valuing tradition and obedience to authority.

With an enabling culture, a multitude of improvements are possible. For example, a mismatch is often reported by sub-Saharan Africa employers regarding graduate skills and jobs available. Ashcroft and Rayner suggest openness to innovation in pedagogy as the surest way to combat this (p. 128). Management is also a key ingredient to transitioning focus from higher education's own institutional needs to the needs of staff and learners (pp. 242-245). This change to a mindset where students and staff are now seen as "customers" (p. 243) is a view those involved in higher education in many locations will probably recognize.

The importance of stakeholder involvement is another theme examined throughout this book and demonstrates how the skills of a critical enquiry approach can be extended to those with whom the reader works. In Chapter 6, the role of development workers facilitating enquiry for individuals and groups at the university is highlighted. By doing so, the authors suggest change can be made from short-term, reactionary approaches to long-range, gradual achievement of vision, converting what is often a "blame culture" (p. 123) to the enabled one discussed previously. Reflective enquiry is also encouraged for higher education employees as they consider regional participation (Chapter 4) and quality assurance (Chapter 7). Because of the numerous interpretations surrounding quality, critical enquiry across the institution can be beneficial for coming to agreement (p. 143).

The above are the result of managing the interplay of many inputs, processes, and outcomes, another theme. Chapter 8 addresses the most important input for the success of the higher education system according to Ashcroft and Rayner: curricula (p. 166). Currently in sub-Saharan Africa, much of the curricula is presented using conventional methods to cover traditional content. Again the authors value voices of numerous stakeholders as issues of institutional function, mission, and organization are involved. This discussion is positioned alongside discussion of the social, economic, and political consequences of unemployed college graduates (p. 170).

Ashcroft and Rayner are ultimately concerned with helping the reader gain the understanding to position sub-Saharan Africa higher education institutions for sustainability, the final theme covered. Sustainability is addressed for issues large and small. The authors stress the role of an enabling culture in "ensur[ing] that change and development are internalized and embedded in the system" (p. 109), thereby making it sustainable. This internalization relates to attitudes and notions possessed by those connected to and influenced by the higher education system's handling of gender, equality, and access, to name just a few. Chapter 10 addresses research specifically and relays sub-Saharan Africa's challenge with overextended resources that makes development, transfer and marketing of research integral so those in the region can face their problems effectively and appropriately.

Cultural context is specified as a challenge throughout the book. For example, the authors present four skills seen as especially integral for sub-Saharan Africa graduates to possess (pp. 193-194). First, tools for critical analysis of data are necessary to ascertain exactly when and where research aligns with circumstances on the ground so as to be useful. Second is cultural awareness so that smooth interpersonal communication can occur. Third, graduates in sub-Saharan Africa need entrepreneurial capabilities to overcome frequently insufficient employment opportunities. Finally graduates need to be allowed and encouraged to think creatively and innovatively.

This toolset is challenging to impart because of cultural considerations, including issues of trust, lack of role models, and insufficient resources, not to mention traditions of authoritarianism and wariness for innovation. The authors address the conundrum development workers face in deciding when it is acceptable to accommodate traditions and characteristics impeding progress and when it is acceptable to call them into question; however, this discussion takes place in just two paragraphs (pp. 268-269). Only one case study really considers this type of scenario. This is practical experience that would have greatly benefitted the development worker, as such situations can be quite intimidating. The authors' vast experience in the field could have been hugely informative.

The case studies do, however, offer many close-up looks at various aspects of Ashcroft and Rayner's work experiences on the ground. They do a good job of helping the reader envision why and how these experiences unfolded. As a result, the situations portrayed seem very realistic and, therefore, extremely informative.

This book is recommended for anyone in the field of comparative education interested in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa or other developing countries. Education development workers, especially those focused on finance, professional development, long-range planning, and research infrastructure would also benefit. Even those in the field working outside of the region can gain insight into the role they might play in terms of partnership and support of the region.

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Elizabeth R. Bruce is a student in the Comparative and International Education program at Lehigh University, pursuing a Master of Education degree in Globalization and Educational Change. Her research interests center on sub-Saharan Africa, specifically focusing on the areas of health research partnerships, bioethics education, and academic publishing. She is also part of collaborative work examining the scientization of mass education worldwide.