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# UNDERSTANDING HIGHER EDUCATION: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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## A book review by Dr Felicity Coughlan and Daniel Coughlan

The authors of this book, Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna, enjoy a hard-earned reputation for their contribution to higher education and for the lucidity with which they make that contribution. This book however is a frustrating read. Perhaps that is because their reputation raises expectations as do the dust jacket reviews of the book.

The book argues for respect of context and thus I chose a partner for this review who is at a different point in their own academic career from mine to test the value of the book from at least two contexts. My fellow reviewer has a perspective on higher education recently informed by his own postgraduate studies and his perspective as a new lecturer, while mine, it must be declared, is probably more accurately currently described as managerial. Our debate about the book was rich and that is precisely where the book will contribute to understanding higher education in South Africa.

One expects to develop greater understanding of higher education (in South Africa at least) from reading the book. For someone not familiar with the extensive literature on what the problems are in higher education and where they came from, the book does not disappoint as it deals with all the standard concerns from massification to managerialism. This book has reflexive value for postgraduate students who want a sense of the field/lay of the land and how to use theory in research and it has the same value for academics in fields other than higher education that wish to enter the debate on where we are and where we need to go without only drawing on their untested assumptions. For these reasons alone it is an important contribution.

What it does not necessarily achieve is furthering an understanding of why the problems, articulated so well for so long now in this book and in other spaces, are not being solved. If higher education cannot heal itself what social



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system can? Is it possible to understand higher education if systemic solutions cannot be imagined or described?

In Chapter 7 the book offers a short insight into why we have made so little progress. It posits that changes in the management of teaching and learning and attempts to drive new behaviours that would foreground the contextual needs of students did not alter the domain of culture in institutions and we assume, the sector. Those placed in positions that were intended to make the changes that we needed to create an inclusive system were drawn from the very personal and theoretical positions that precluded it.

Perhaps the most powerful contribution of the book is in this last chapter where the authors are explicit that a deeply respectful acknowledgement of the experience of students is needed so that, as they say, “the call for epistemological access must be held alongside the call of epistemological justice” (p.139). This is however, where the frustration is as there is little offered in terms of how this is to be achieved and only room for inference that what is in place is not working as evidenced by graduation rate patterns. An understanding of higher education would offer solutions for consideration or at least some calls to action. On the other hand, perhaps that is exactly the problem we face and the frustration in reading it comes from a sense of powerlessness about access to any of the levers that would result in real change – at the level of each lecturer, each committee and each management, let alone the state. Here the authors’ use of the empirical, actual and real is useful to describe the resistance to change and the inertia.

Higher Education in South Africa is still bedevilled by too many of the problems that were baked into it by the Apartheid government. That makes it infinitely more complex and multi-layered than many other systems in the world. The book does call out these structural inequities but does not suggest ways of dismantling them other than reference to culture. It suggests, but does not say so explicitly, that attempts to date have failed.

As a description of most of the themes of concern the book does the expected work but as a roadmap to understanding what needs to happen next or how the parts of the system are holding each other up, back or down, the reader is left with too many questions for the book to claim to have resulted in understanding. The authors hint towards but do not address what they take the ultimate purpose of higher education to be and as one reads the book one keeps wondering what they think a “better” higher education would be.

It does a good job of looking at some of the issues such as decontextualising students and it speaks about identity and the disjuncture between education systems in our country. None of this is new and while we have understood this to be true for so long now, we do not seem able to do much about this.

The book ascribes some of this failure to the rise of managerialism and the disconnection of the professoriate from power in institutions but does not account for the lack of agency of academics in this scenario. It touches on the inability of some academics and even some disciplines and fields to really honour and respond to the context of students, but it goes no further.

What does the book achieve? As a reminder of the core teaching and learning challenges in institutions it provides, as these authors always do, a clear and coherent synopsis of why we are not seeing sufficiently improved graduation rates and positive student outcomes as we widen access to achieve some form of justice.

We accept that the book touches on what contributes to the challenges in teaching and learning (and thus student success) and that it attempts to place these in a context beyond each institution. Unfortunately, the book does not address what can and must change beyond its calls for institutional shifts.

Its focus on teaching and learning is to be expected, given the authors, but it does feel like a missed opportunity given the title of the book. There are references to the tension between private and public good, the private sector and the social and economic pressures on students but these are tangential to the overall contribution of the book (and in the case of the private higher education sector generalised, superficial and barely accurate). By such a light touch on these topics, the authors miss an opportunity to leverage ideas that exist for deepening understanding. For instance, if it is true that the private sector has grown to about 15% of student enrolments because of a pursuit of private over public good is there an understanding of how successful this sector is in delivering on this expressed need? In a positioning of private good as “lesser” does the public higher education sector not continue to decontextualise students and their needs and aspirations? Why did managerialism emerge? What is meant by this term that is used so loosely? Is there a possibility that it emerged as an attempt to protect the university as much or even more than trying to control it? If that is even possible, how has it become so separated from the academy? These are questions that the book does not cover and perhaps should not be expected to, but if the objective is to understand then they cannot be glossed over and simplified the way they are.

Higher education is an interesting microcosm of the challenges we face as a country. The Apartheid regime deliberately manipulated the notion of higher education as an intellectual agent capable of driving social change and development to try instead to achieve training spaces for reinforcing their lack of ethics and legitimacy. Restructuring of the landscape as the authors point out did not remove this inherently corrupt history and it is thus not that surprising that the outputs continue to mirror too closely the history of each institution and perhaps even, institutional type.

Placed within a context of international social inequity such as outlined in Chapter 3 of the book, the problems in SA Higher Education make sense but are no less depressing because other systems in the world also do not graduate the rich and the not rich at the same rate. The book spends time considering how the international higher education system has been moulded by globalisation, the new economy, reduction in meaningful state support, new public management models and high skill production alongside the pressure for access. It sees all these as moving the university (or higher education) away from its public good mandate towards a focus on the private good. It nods in the direction of student agency in the pursuit of private benefit but does so in a manner that could be read as slightly critical or the pursuit of economic success. While there is probably a general agreement that higher education should do more than enable the achievement of private ambitions it is also true that for most South Africans, achieving certification that enables employment is the primary reason for studying. Whether or not one considers that problematic does not make it less real and thus it is disappointing that the book, which uses a social realism framework, does not explore the ways in which higher education enables that ambition to be achieved. It does not matter whether higher education sees that as a core purpose if it is what students, particularly in South Africa, are pursuing and that must be understood as part of their context.

The “correct” purpose of higher education is not directly addressed by the authors although there is frequent reference to what has changed and a suggestion that some of what has been lost or replaced is regrettable or damaging. If they are correct that higher education has been instrumentalised and commodified and that this has been at the expense of the “lost” elements and that this in turn is something that should be reversed or reclaimed, then this is the reality from which we need to work to regain that which we take to be missing. It would have assisted the readers had the authors spent more time explicating their understanding of what has been lost and needs restoring, what the ultimate purpose of higher education in our world now is, and once clear on this, how we can work with the social reality (that is aptly described by them) so that higher education can be understood and move toward its purpose.

That being said, there are many important contributions that one does not always find foregrounded in the literature. For instance the reminder to academics and other higher education leaders alike of the need to recognise the contextual realities of students is important. The chapter that begins to touch on how academics are caught between their disciplines or fields (Chapter 6) and the imperative to be able to teach in a way that grants genuine epistemological access to that discipline or field serves its purpose to highlight the complexity of being an academic in a modern university. Read together with the failure of achieving genuine change in the way that academics teach and the way that decontextualisation can be addressed, but is not, there is insufficient responsibility placed at the door of academics to change their practice. The critique of traditional development and training is well made but no alternative is provided to address the disconnect between academics and students. There is some attention (again) to managerialism and institutional decision-making being dislocated from the professoriate and it can be inferred that this is seen as part of the problem. What is not addressed though is whether, under the pressure of numbers and research targets, the academics generally can or want to be involved in the pragmatism of decision making about institutional functioning. If one views the agency of academics, one must ask why there has not been an assertion of this agency with good effect in any institution in SA?

It is therefore a book that should be read and then spoken about. It is not a book that provides answers perhaps as there simply are not any. Thus if understanding is to be defined as knowing more about what questions to ask perhaps the book succeeds, and learning, then unfortunately does not.

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