

Samuel Fongwa, Thierry Luescher, Ntimi Mtawa, and Jesmael Mataga. (Ed.). 2015. *Universities, Society and Development: African Perspectives of University Community Engagement in Secondary Cities*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) took the inspired decision to launch a collaborative research project on how a new university can “relate to its local context to support social, economic, and cultural development while striving for national and international excellence and recognition” (Sol Plaatje University 2022). The result is the recently published Sun Press edited collection *Universities, Society and Development: African Perspectives of University Community Engagement in Secondary Cities* by Samuel Fongwa and his collaborators.

SPU deputy vice-chancellor, Jean Baxen, frames the context of the book well. She writes that the book “is about intentionality”, about a decision in 1994 to establish two new higher education institutions in the Northern Cape and in Mpumalanga predicated “on social justice ideals” related “to access and inclusion imperatives, with a focus on rural, poor and economically marginalized communities” (Fongwa et al. 2022, ix). In her view, SPU “was pregnant with promise and the potential to not only create opportunities for transformation and redress but also offer possibilities for social renewal and economic growth and development” (Fongwa et al. 2022, ix).

Indeed, the possibility exists for SPU to create itself a university that is distinct from other universities in South Africa, to pursue a different trajectory and to innovate in ways that the long-established universities can only dream about. This, though, is easier said than done. It will take creative, wise, and courageous leadership that is prepared to buck the trend. There is much that SPU *can* do, and it may already be doing much. Whether it *will* do so or continue to do so and whether it will be supported in its endeavours are important questions. By all accounts, SPU has made great progress, helped by committed and capable leadership. Beginning in 2014 with 124 students, SPU now enrolls over 3 000 students. I will observe that if there is “promise” there may also be perils, a point to which I will return later.

Scholarly books play an important role in the intellectual and the cultural life of a society. They enhance our knowledge, seek to explain, and help us to better understand processes and dynamics related to our natural and social worlds and their interface. Good books break new ground theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. They extend scholarship into new

realms and along fertile new path. They introduce us to new ideas, places, and scholars, fire our imagination and provide thought for action. Anyone who reads and especially slow reads with an ethic of curiosity, openness and care knows the joys of a meticulously researched, imaginatively and impeccably argued, and well-written book. *Universities, Society and Development* admirably ticks all the boxes in terms of what you seek in a book.

Between two covers, are some 260 pages that share the thinking of 15 Africa-based and two UK-based African authors and four editors. Those 260 pages encompass

1. An introductory framing conceptual chapter that delineates key concepts such as engagement, community engagement and secondary cities, and locates engagement in the South African institutional and higher education policy contexts.
2. Three further conceptual chapters that explore “some of the historical discourses and dominant models of university engagement” (Fongwa et al. 2022, 13), the role of a university in development and the question of social compacts.
3. Six chapters that introduce empirical institutional case studies and particular engagement interventions in different countries and regions in Africa, including two involving SPU in the Northern Cape.
4. A final concluding chapter that analyses (i) the general African and specific South African “policy and regulatory frameworks for higher education’s contribution to development in general, and community engagement, at the continental, national and institutional levels,” (Fongwa et al. 2022, 16) and (ii) how community engagement is undertaken at universities in South Africa.

The book delivers on most of what it promises. One goal that it, however, does not deliver on adequately is interrogating “how universities are actively and consciously leveraging their resources towards secondary cities” (Fongwa et al. 2022, 10). This may make for an interesting new research project and book.

Conceptual issues, as the book’s editors recognize, loom large. They are not just theoretical and conceptual indulgences or niceties but have an important bearing on practice. I will comment on some of these conceptual issues but thereafter concentrate on matters that are especially pertinent to SPU and its aspirations. First, is engagement or community engagement a core and central purpose, function, or role of universities? Or is it one that depends on context, making engagement an optional purpose, function, or role? Or is it an activity that is shaped by both place and purpose? Second, in considering engagement, community engagement and anchor institutions, the book insufficiently links them to *transformation* in and of higher

education and important questions are not posed about transformation – in universities, of universities, in society and of society. Are we to take on good faith that an anchor university or engaged university is necessarily a transformative or transforming institution, one committed to the public common good? One can envisage many ways in which an anchor university or engaged university may not be a progressive institution. Similarly, when it comes to the concept of “development” the discussion is somewhat one-sided. We are told that “development” “became a guiding principle for the postapartheid transformation of higher education” “to contribute to the common good of society” and what was envisaged (Fongwa et al. 2022, 220; the reference is to the Department of Education (1997) *Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, Education White Paper 3 section 1.20. But “development” is not the only “guiding principle”. There are also other guiding principles, and when you factor those, the tensions, paradoxes, and the like in universities pursuing principles simultaneously become more evident. It is important to be aware of that.

In his foreword to the book, McCowan writes that “universities cannot solve all the challenges of the 21st century alone, but without them lasting solutions are unlikely to be found” and indicates why (Fongwa et al. 2022, vii). I concur but would add to this thinking that issues of external macro-economic and political environment and especially the state – national, provincial, and local – are also critical issues. Universities, indeed, cannot solve the wicked problems of our age alone. They need committed, capable and effective partners in civil society, business and especially the state, given that our universities are all public universities. And of course, the university itself needs to be effective with respect to related to its core purposes of teaching and learning and research. I will return to the question of partners and especially the state.

Third, while there is reference to “place” in the book, the idea of place is not developed much. This is a pity, since “place” has great bearing on the idea of the “anchor” university.

The roles that African universities must play in society must generally take as their point of departure their fundamental *purposes* and give concrete expression to those purposes. Those roles will, however, also be shaped by the structural and conjunctural conditions within which African universities exist and must intersect and engage effectively if also critically with the economic and social challenges of their local, national, regional, continental, and global contexts. Louise Vincent (2016) rightly argues that issues “related ultimately to the purpose of the university entails a deep engagement, both literally and theoretically, with the notion of ‘place’”, with the idea “of the university as situated in ‘place’ – geography, history, social relations, economics and politics – all the forces that combine to make an empty space a ‘place’”. “Place” is where people “form relationships and social networks, develop a sense of

community and learn to live with others". Place and space are dynamic, "never finished, never closed" and enmeshed with "heterogeneity, relationality, liveliness" (Massey 2005, 9; cited in Desai and Vahed 2023, 11). Moreover, "fundamental to the idea of place is the idea of an open yet bounded realm within which the things of the world can appear and events take place". Place possesses "enough breadth and space" and "room enough to allow an engagement with the world" (Malpas 2018, 33; cited in Desai and Vahed 2023, 13). It offers a helpful way of answering the persistent problem that plagues a "public good framing of higher education: which public and what 'good'?" (Vincent 2016). Far from "objective or neutral", "place" is "inscribed with relations of power" and how "power works in and through places has to be confronted" (Vincent 2016).

Drawing on Freire's idea of "reading the world" to "read the word", "place" "speaks to knowledge as context sensitive rather than decontextualized and the need for a close relationship between theory and practice, as at least part of the measure of the significance and validity of the knowledge produced and disseminated. Rather than seeking to immunise themselves from their surrounding communities universities, understood in this frame, actively seek exposure and collaboration – because that is what they are 'for'. Such an approach has wider implications not just for pedagogy alone, but also student recruitment, the content of curricula, and for research practices and priorities." Moreover, to "engage with place is to reflect on people in a place and to ask how they might inhabit that place. The ability to inhabit, as opposed to just be resident, requires detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness" (Vincent 2016).

A "critical pedagogy of place" offers two potentially fertile possibilities. It permits imagining "what forms of connection and action might emerge" from an engagement with "place" "and sees the cultivation of these possibilities as central to education, and to what the university is 'for'" Inherent in this approach is the opportunity to root and knit the university within the fabric of its society and to pursue its social purposes in close connection with its diverse economic, social, and political challenges. Moreover, it offers the possibility of a "transformed epistemological practice" that is "both embodied and contextualized" as opposed to current epistemologies that are "disembodied (they assume that their standpoint is universal when in fact it is gendered, 'raced', classed, sexed, etc.) and decontextualized (rooted in the dominance of Western paradigms, histories, and priorities)" (Vincent 2016). The point on epistemology draws attention to the connection between biography, geography, epistemic location, and social location, and to ideas on what knowledge is, the making of knowledge, and which knowledge is to be valued and shared with others.

Fourth, there is good recognition of power and power differentials between universities and many communities. At the same time, there is insufficient teasing out of the implications of power differentials among and within communities. Nor is there much consideration of social class. Will the SPU way be commitment to solidarity with the impoverished, the downtrodden, the wretched of the earth, to transforming the unequal social relations of our society? Or will the SPU way principally reproduce the unequal social relations that structure South African society. If styling one's institution as a particular type of university – engaged, anchor, development, research, Afropolitan – is not to be marketing gimmicks, what are the implications of being, say an “anchor university”? What does being an “anchor university” mean for the core purposes of the dissemination and creation of knowledge and the functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Would you teach and learn at an anchor university in a different manner from that at a research university? How about with research? Or community engagement? What does aspiring to be an anchor or engaged university mean for a university's institutional planning? What does it mean for

- Academic planning – provision of degrees and diplomas, their design, content, academic development, the assurance and promotion of quality, etc.
- Enrolment planning – the size and shape of the University, student recruitment, etc.
- Staff planning – the recruitment of academic and other staff, their qualifications and expertise, teacher-student ratios, etc.
- Physical planning – of the campus, academic facilities, student residences and the like and
- Financial planning – mobilising resources, budget allocations, balancing the budget, etc. Budgets are never just rows and columns but also express the values, goals and priorities of a university.

What does it mean too for governance and such activities? No doubt, SPU is probably already grappling with such questions, and will continue to do so.

Engaged research could comprise many different purposes and goals. What place will there be specifically for activist research, research that connects with social movements that seek to radically reorder society. I do not mean symbolic gestures and genuflections to activist research but substantive institutional and material support. Identities, of course, are seldom pristine and singular but complex and fluid. You could be an engaged, anchor, research university, that creatively hold those multiple identities together. Or is suffused with myriad paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions.

We are told that “Global South and Global North are problematic discourses” but not illuminated on what are the precise problems. It is right to be cautious about concepts, such as “anchor university”, that have their genesis in experiences in the Global North and especially in the United States. The conditions and experiences that give rise to the idea of the anchor university may be different to ours. But equally, we should not close our minds to ideas only because of from where they arise. Global North and Global South are not geographical descriptors but geopolitical concepts. In parts of the Global North, economic and social conditions and experiences are akin to the underdevelopment that is pervasive in the Global South; similarly, parts of the Global South reflect highly “developed” Global North conditions. So, we need to investigate and understand what specific conditions in the Global North gave rise to the notion of anchor institutions, how, in what ways and to what extent they are similar to ours, and whether there is value in deploying an anchor university approach. In short, we must be catholic about learning.

The authors speak about “South African universities”. I prefer to speak about “universities in South Africa”. In my view, what we have in South Africa are, first, colonial implants that are largely imitations of the European university, not genuinely South African universities. As Achille Mbembe notes that “part of what is wrong with our institutions of higher learning is that they are ‘Westernized’” – they “are local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon ... that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production” and “disregards other epistemic traditions” (Mbembe 2016, 32). The call for transformation and decolonisation, especially in the epistemological realm, and the challenges that remain mean that we are only in the process of becoming South Africa and African universities.

On the matter of partners and the state, what happens to a university’s desire to be an engaged university or an anchor university when the state is ineffectual, non-developmental despite many development plans, mired in corruption and nepotism. Universities are fundamentally places of knowledge and scholarship, learning and cultivation of intellects, encounter and engagement between scholars and students and between those communities and the wider society. What are the perils when the university may begin to take on functions that are those of the state? Equally, what are the prospects of realizing the idea of the “anchor” or “engaged” university when the University itself leaves a lot to be desired with respect to the effectiveness and the quality of its core functions?

We are told that SPU is “an anchor institution that engages directly with the city” and seeks to “be integrated into the economic, political, cultural and intellectual life of Kimberley,” that it “was conceived to be a knowledge partner to the development of the city and the

province”, that it can become “a catalyst of change through stimulating significant community improvement and propelling the local economy of the region” and that “there is an anticipation by the various stakeholders that the university ... will play a significant role in the development of the province” (Fongwa et al. 2022, 204). This is an exciting trajectory that could hold great promise. Equally, it also holds perils and risks, but SPU is to be commended for striking out in a brave new direction.

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