BOOK REVIEW

Education, learning, training: Critical issues for development

By Gilles Carbonnier, Michel Carton and Kenneth King (eds). Brill-Nijhoff, Boston and The Graduate Institute, Geneva, 2014, 218 pp. International Development Policy, vol. 5. ISBN 978-9004-28114-1 (hbk), ISBN 978-9004-28115-8 (eBook)

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This book is a collection of ten essays, organised into three thematic areas: Part 1 – Education and Development; Part 2 – Shaping Training and Lifelong Learning; and Part 3 – China, Migration and Massive Open Online Courses. Together, the essays address five key and fundamental questions: (1) Should education be provided purely as a human right or strategic tool in support of economic growth? (2) How does commodity-dependence influence education policy and practice in developing countries? (3) What is the role of vocational training vis-à-vis university education in developing countries? (4) How does student migration sit vis-a-vis the globalised knowledge economy? and (5) How could Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Chinese cooperation help higher education in African countries? In an attempt to provide answers to these questions, the authors cover 50 years of international discourse on education and development. Drawing on examples from Africa, Asia and Latin America, the chapters bring to the fore issues largely neglected, yet of pertinent importance to both researchers and policy makers in developing countries. The most valuable contribution of this book is the chronological and systematic documentation of discourse on education and development since the 1970s, hence, a must-have for both researchers and policy makers in their continued search for plausible policy options.

Part 1 deals, in three chapters, with the discourse relating to education policies and development, providing an overview of issues in the debate over the past four decades. Chapter 1 discusses international education and development focusing on histories, parallels and crossroads. The central argument is that addressing the needs of 1.25 billion youths and adults excluded from education requires much more than mere adaptation in education discourse and grand strategies. Chapter 2 bemoans the
“leaderless globalisation” of international institutions currently responsible for education, and the effects of data and evaluation revolutions on education. The value of these two chapters lies in the attempt to summarise and analyse issues relating to learning, training and development for consideration by scholars and policy makers in the post-2015 debate on education and development. Chapter 3 discusses the age-old dilemma of providing education as either a “public good” or a tool for economic growth. The chapter argues that a sound education system is one that is rights-based and seeks to achieve social cohesion, equality of access and equity of opportunity. The author contends that perceiving the role of the state as the ultimate democratic arbiter of rights, equality and equity is the only way, albeit an imperfect one, of guaranteeing education as a public good (p. 37). The challenge for this chapter is its futile attempt to distinguish between human rights-based education and economic investment for growth and development and retain them as separable. Ensuring a comfortable balance between the two competing emphases would have been a better approach, because they are, in fact, complementary.

Using case studies from Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, Chapter 4 (Part 2) seeks to answer the question whether or not “tertiary technical education” has contributed to increasing economic and social opportunities for young people. The analysis shows that tertiary technical education has contributed to a widening of opportunities as graduates’ subsequent upward mobility hits a “ceiling” (p. 71), because a tertiary technical education diploma does not have the same prestige and status as a traditional university education. The authors’ argument that investing in human capital and human development is key to accomplishing the goal of sustainable development (p. 60) is in conflict with Alexandra Draxler’s rights-based education argument in Chapter 3 (Part 1). Such contradictions are inevitable in a book which is a compilation of essays by different authors. The overall aim, though, should be to strike a balance between competing yet complementary approaches as noted above.

Chapter 5 argues that while specific political-economic dynamics let governments increase spending on education, many countries such as Bolivia have failed to build a skilled workforce. The authors conclude that the rise of private education and popular skills-based training programmes cannot be a substitute for developing a functional vocational training system (p. 81), and that matching the projected demand for particular skills with training must be a priority (p. 98), a point which is easily blurred by advocates of rights-based education. This position is a timely reminder to policy makers and academics that provision of education must be driven by skills development, otherwise justification for spending tax payers’ money becomes tenuous. Chapter 6 merely provides a historical perspective on the evolving concepts of lifelong learning and the learning society, making the case for community learning centres as a potential institutional vehicle for the promotion of adult and lifelong learning. Chapter 7, entitled “Exploring the value of the capability approach for vocational education and training evaluation: reflections from South Africa” seems somewhat discordant with the thrust of the book.

Part 3 (Chapters 8–10) discusses China’s higher education engagement with Africa, student migration and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as leverages for Africa’s higher education systems. Chapter 8 examines the Forum on China-
Africa Cooperation, Confucius Institutes and the 20 + 20 Higher Education Collaboration Scheme as Chinese modalities for bilateral aid to Africa driven by mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual understanding and mutual learning. The author contends that Chinese partnership offers better hope for Africa. While the façade for partnership seems innocent, the truth is that co-operation is a form of trade, and “consuming” countries could easily be trapped in exploitative dependency as is the case with donor aid.

Chapter 9 looks at the willingness of West African students (from Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire and Niger) to relocate, their reasons for migrating and their preferred destinations. The authors attempt to illustrate the brain drain–circulation debate by examining “pull” and “push” factors involved in the phenomenon. The conclusion that students’ migration should be viewed as “brain circulation” rather than “brain drain” is not convincing in that the few selected cases of return and reabsorption into the economy do not offset massive absenteeism. The authors fail to take into account the permanent absence of highly educated people who stay away instead of returning to apply their acquired expertise to the elucidation and direction of policy making while at the same time repositioning their country’s production systems to ensure growth and development.

Finally, Chapter 10 presents lessons learned through MOOCs and contends that higher education in its present form is falling short of worldwide demand, and that in many countries brick-and-mortar universities alone are not likely to satisfy this demand. The authors argue that MOOCs represent an opportunity to help local university faculties update their courses, liberate academic staff from ex-cathedra teaching, connect with researchers/instructors from the global North, and enable them to present students with courses which are on a par with those delivered by world-class universities (p. 207). The authors are correct when advising that better access to technology will be necessary before MOOCs can reach underprivileged students (pp. 198–199). Otherwise, they could remain a pipe dream for most technologically backward countries.

Conclusion

This is a very valuable book for both policy makers and researchers in their quest to foster and assert the role of education in the development agenda of emerging countries. Part 2 presents a captivating discussion of the role of technical higher

1 Established by the People’s Republic of China in 2000, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is an official platform for consultation and dialogue with 49 African countries. Summit meetings are held at irregular intervals, with venues alternating between Chinese and African locations. For more information, see http://www.focac.org/eng/ [accessed 18 August 2015].

2 Founded in 2004 to carry Chinese culture and language into universities, colleges and secondary schools all over the world, Confucius Institutes provide funding, teachers and educational materials for this purpose. For more information, see http://www.chinesecio.com/m/cio_wci [accessed 18 August 2015].

3 Initiated in 2009, the 20 + 20 Higher Education Collaboration Scheme refers to a partnership between 20 African and 20 Chinese universities or colleges.
education in the development of emerging economies. The discussion on MOOCs is a reminder to poorly resourced countries of the potential opportunities for enhancing the quality and efficacy of their higher education systems. Accordingly, I recommend this book to anyone involved or interested in the provision and efficacy of education.