



Why mere knowledge transfer fails

States and academics must collaborate or risk foreign experts taking over policymaking

COMMENT
Mark Paterson

The apparent reluctance of President Jacob Zuma to reveal the findings of the Heher commission on the feasibility of free higher education has been widely criticised for leaving planning for the sector in disarray at a crucial time, particularly because uncertainty at the top has been exacerbated with the appointment of the new higher education and training minister, Hlengiwe Mkhize.

The president's manoeuvring has also been described as symptomatic of a larger political failure by the government to forge agreement on the role of higher education within South African society and the economy at large.

In the absence of such a pact, the role that universities can play in legitimating the government and supporting its socioeconomic programmes is severely weakened. Indeed, as a new study published by African Minds has revealed, broken, inadequate relationships between national governments and their local academic communities can undermine independent, democratic policymaking, leaving states prey to the agendas of foreign powers.

In worst-case scenarios, foreign donors – despite their proclaimed intentions – can effectively take over national policymaking in young democracies such as South Africa and Tanzania, say German social scientists Susanne Koch and Peter Weingart. In their exploration of how the technocrats who are tied to foreign aid packages can influence government plans, they found that, without sufficient financial clout, administrative capacity and the support of a strong local academic community, governments can be rendered quite helpless in the face of imported policy prescriptions, with disastrous results.

For example, the sudden World Bank-inspired introduction of universal free primary education in Tanzania at the turn of the millennium led to a massive drop in educational standards, because the sector's teaching and structural capacity was ill equipped to manage such massification. Although foreign experts had provided the "facts" that led to the ill-fated decision, it was the government, not the donors, that was left to shoulder the political blame for the failure, say the authors of *The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer: The Impact of Foreign Aid Experts on Policy-making in South Africa and Tanzania*.

The importance of home-grown research in enabling recipient governments to become more than mere consumers of knowledge and implementers of advice is crucial, particularly within the context of a continent in which national science systems have often been deinstitutionalised and are generally operating in subsistence mode, struggling



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

to reproduce themselves.

By contrast with the rest of the continent, including Tanzania, South Africa's domestic scientific community is relatively robust, enabling the knowledge-based aid on offer to be tailored more closely to the host country's definition of its own needs. It scores well in terms of its overall participation in science globally, according to measures including funding, the number of researchers and the number of research papers it produces. It is also only one of the three countries on the continent – with Malawi and Uganda – that have met the African Union's target of spending at least 1% of its GDP on research and development.

However, even in South Africa, local academics are disadvantaged by the inherent prejudice of the international development community, which generally prizes interna-

tional, or Northern, knowledge as more credible and disinterested than local, or Southern knowledge – and adopts procurement practices that marginalise expert communities in aid-receiving countries as a result.

In addition, although South African higher education institutions and parastatals deliver high-level research, they face the same kinds of structural constraints as science systems in developing countries, such as too few human resources and

dependency on external financing. For example, more than 70% of funding for HIV and Aids and tuberculosis research was reported as coming from outside the country in 2013. The result can be a form of academic harlotry, as a senior medical scholar at the University of Cape Town revealed: "We've become scientific prostitutes in the sense that we are giving in to the highest bidders."

A further factor that affects the impact of the science community in strengthening official policymaking capacity is the government's willingness to engage with the local knowledge base. For example, ties between the national health department and the science community broke down under the administration of former president Thabo Mbeki as a result of its policy on antiretroviral treatment for Aids. Subsequently, a professor at the University of the Western Cape

noted the shift from "a kind of vacuum at the centre" to "the re-emergence of a leadership that is willing to engage in a much more explicit way".

Similarly, in the area of education policy research, despite constraints in terms of funding and human resources, a relatively small cadre of educational scholars form a solid knowledge base, which the government regularly exploits to inform its policy-making.

Decades of "technical assistance" from foreign donors have generally failed to help recipient governments worldwide to become independent. Indeed, some foreign experts can refuse to share knowledge for fear of making themselves redundant.

In this context, the authors of *The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer* recommend that donors should rather seek to support the knowledge communities in developing countries to produce a critical mass of local experts to produce and scrutinise expertise. This support could take the form of investment to facilitate co-operation between research centres, within or outside the university system; funding for educational scholarships; and funding for new university programmes aimed at addressing country-specific challenges.

National governments in Africa are increasingly realising the importance of providing adequate funding to their higher education sectors to produce the human capital required for development. They are intensifying their efforts to produce up-to-date, relevant data on domestic science and technology systems in order to strengthen them and foster local knowledge economies. Although the authors of the new study note a lack of longitudinal large-scale studies in the field of educational research, the Centre for Higher Education Trust based in Cape Town and scholars at the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy at Stellenbosch University have produced important data on research capacity at flagship universities in South Africa and across the rest of the continent with this goal in mind.

Against a background of foreign governments seeking to export their policy prescriptions to countries in Southern Africa and the rest of the continent, the failure by governments to attend to and foster the local knowledge base (their higher education systems) leaves untapped an important resource for strengthening sovereignty in young democracies – a resource that is indispensable if national decision-makers want to forge and implement their own policy visions.

The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer is published in open access format by African Minds and is available from the publisher's website.

Mark Paterson is a consultant with the Centre for Higher Education Trust in partnership with the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy at Stellenbosch University, and co-editor of *Africa and the Millennium Development Goals: Progress, Problems and Prospects*

To become more than mere consumers of knowledge and implementers of advice is crucial

