

BOOK REVIEW

***Widening university access and participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian context to inform other developing countries* by E. Mboyonga (2025). London/New York: Routledge Publishers.**

Reviewed by Sibeso Lisulo¹

The increasing enrolment of students in higher education institutions in the Global South signifies advancement towards equitable access; however, significant disparities persist, impeding fair educational opportunities in higher education and society. Unterhalter (2023) asserts that widespread access to education does not inherently rectify existing disparities. Instead, existing inequalities among different groups worsen due to factors like climate, gender, ethnicity, disability, location, and the rural-urban divide. The current situation, especially in Africa, requires immediate intervention, consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, to overcome the limitations of current frameworks. The book, *Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian Context to Inform Other Developing Countries*, speaks directly to these issues and provides essential evaluation tools and insights to assess current practices while developing practical alternatives for expanding university access in developing countries. These countries are grappling with the public funding of higher education, specifically concerning limited government funding, inadequate infrastructure limiting the capacities of public universities in accommodating growing demand, and the total costs of higher education being substantially higher than the available financing resources.

As a keen observer of higher education's evolving landscape and its critical role in promoting social justice, I found the book to be very insightful and timely. Mboyonga comprehensively analyses challenges and opportunities that arise when developing countries turn to private universities to expand higher education access.

Its strength lies in its practical approach, which employs the capability framework to highlight the experiences of students and stakeholders in the Global South. Much of the work on access to higher education in Africa has focused on the public sector, without highlighting the pivotal role of non-state actors. The book provides novel perspectives about African private higher education institutions and their role in advancing national development. Its focus on the Zambian context, where private universities have more student enrolment than public universities, highlights that the private higher education sector is altering the university landscape in some African countries, with novel and impressive outcomes. The book moves beyond human capital theory by using an alternative

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framework which acknowledges both the economic benefits of higher education and its social and societal value by fostering aspirations and expanding opportunities through increased access. Furthermore, the book provides a valuable lens through which to understand the challenges of access beyond mere enrolment numbers by delving into the critical factors that influence student participation and transformative educational outcomes.

The book comprises several key thematic sections, which include the capability approach as the main analytical framework, the significance of epistemological access (access to knowledge), the foregrounding of student and lecturer voices, and the expansion of access in private universities. These sections are underpinned by the central theme of higher education's role in human development across the Global South. The well-organised structure enables readers to understand intricate university access issues and their specific relevance to the Global South. The book's chapter sequence guides readers to explore interconnected topics, demonstrating their collective importance within the broader framework of higher education access. Striking a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical illustrations, the book maintains focus on how these elements affect and shape access. Notably, the capability approach emerges as a fundamental theme to address global inequality because it aligns with contemporary educational initiatives that work to establish equitable access opportunities (Alkire, 2005).

The author Edward Mboyonga persuasively contends that private universities contribute significantly to human development in low-income countries. The book's analytical strength lies in its application of the capability approach, which provides a robust framework to analyse the diverse impacts of expanded access to higher education. Instead of focusing solely on employability, Mboyonga demonstrates how developing specific capabilities like critical thinking enhances both graduate prospects and broader societal benefits. Furthermore, he argues that private universities serve as essential access providers because they offer educational alternatives when public institutions reach their capacity limits.

By featuring the voices of students and lecturers, the author offers profound insights into the challenges of access, agency, and participation in higher education. The use of first-hand accounts is an indispensable methodological asset, as it transcends abstract theoretical frameworks that frequently disregard lived experiences. His analysis is predicated on compelling personal narratives. The voices offer readers first-hand accounts of student challenges, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension than theoretical frameworks alone can offer.

While the book's focus on the Zambian context provides a valuable case study, its findings resonate across and are significant for many developing nations, offering important lessons for other countries grappling with the challenges of widening university access and participation. Mboyonga presents a new understanding of higher education accessibility which goes beyond traditional university admission statistics and student enrolment growth. He demonstrates how this approach can mask the persistent inequalities in obtaining quality educational opportunities. He argues that the growing number of higher education institutions obscures the reality that disadvantaged students encounter multiple obstacles to success because of insufficient preparation, financial constraints and hostile

campus environments, which limit their effective access to and participation in higher education.

Additionally, *Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South's* analysis demonstrates the necessity of understanding the diverse student population in higher education institutions. The book argues that policies and practices aimed at widening access must be tailored to meet the unique requirements of marginalized communities, women, and disadvantaged students. Higher education policy needs to move on from uniform approaches to inclusive frameworks that address structural inequalities. The book demonstrates how different factors constrain student well-being and educational prospects, which subsequently impacts their ability to access and succeed in higher education. The findings suggest that policymakers should extend government-funded student loan programmes to private institution students because this support would help them pay for tuition fees, accommodation and food expenses. Such policies would represent a critical step towards equitable access for deserving students.

The book further delves into the concept of *ubuntu*, a central tenet of African philosophy, and its profound relevance for promoting more inclusive and equitable approaches to university access and participation. He convincingly argues that incorporating *ubuntu*, which emphasises interconnectedness and social solidarity, can create a more supportive and enriching learning environment. Mboyonga argues that universities can create an inclusive educational environment for students from different backgrounds by transforming their teaching methods to emphasise empathy, care and respect. The book stipulates that *ubuntu* can foster more inclusive, equitable university access and participation through the development of empathy, care and interconnectedness values. Through this approach, classroom dynamics and university culture would change to create an accessible educational environment for students from diverse backgrounds.

The book also examines the challenges related to the quality of education when universities widen access. Mboyonga asserts that expanding access to higher education should not compromise quality, emphasising the need for institutional investment in resources, infrastructure, and faculty development to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, receive a high-quality education that equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in a globalised world. He connects the concept of 'epistemic contribution' to not only a student's ability to create new knowledge, but also to the quality of the learning environment and the resources available to them, arguing that under-resourced institutions may struggle to provide the kind of intellectually stimulating environment that fosters genuine epistemic contribution, thus limiting effective access to high-quality education. However, the analysis extends beyond merely identifying deficiencies in material resources. He also proposes solutions aimed at addressing epistemological inadequacies within these institutions, focusing on how to cultivate environments that nurture critical thinking, knowledge creation, and meaningful intellectual engagement.

Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South is a valuable and timely contribution to the field of higher education studies. The book employs the capability approach, foregrounds marginalized voices and offers nuanced insights into the role of

private universities, thereby establishing a comprehensive framework for rethinking and widening university access while fostering equity in the Global South. The astute, relevant and significant insights presented in the book provide actionable strategies for policymakers and institutions aiming to enhance inclusivity and transformation within higher education systems.

References

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