

Rosie Alexander & Holly Henderson (Eds.). (2024). *Higher education in small islands: Challenging the geographies of centrality and remoteness*. Bristol Studies in Comparative and International Education. Bristol University Press. pbk. xxv+176pp+index, ISBN: 978-1-5292-2650-8. GBP£80.00.

Higher education in small islands raises important issues for island communities and allows for reflection on the usefulness of universities to the communities they ostensibly serve. Baldacchino's foreword and the editors' introduction set out a range of key issues concerning recruitment practices and the nature of resultant student cohorts, the quality and/or local relevance of courses offered, and issues of international recognition, rankings and recruitment. The latter are significant. The issue of whether it is preferable to choose the best applicants from a global talent pool – or, rather, the range of foreign applicants who are willing to consider positions in universities far from home and somewhat tangential to more conventional career choices – or else lean towards homegrown talents is crucial to the character of island universities. At its worst, recruiting heavily from overseas can lead to a reproduction of former colonial systems or else, a bland internationalism with minimal local address.

One option for islands is to use their location as an advantage and produce courses that address their geo-political situations. Both the University of Prince Edward Island (in Canada) and the University of Malta (in Malta) have done this with their island studies and small states and territories programs; but these are essentially niche offerings and do not deliver the range of vocationally effective knowledge and skills that many islanders may wish to acquire for life in the capitalist mainstream. As the editors stress in their introduction, context is vital (p. 2). As they also acknowledge, small contexts can overburden universities with specific concerns that continental island universities do not have, describing this as “mission overload” (p. 10).

Individual chapters address universities in Malta, Mauritius, Indonesia and Oceania and, also, broader, cross-sectoral issues, such as internationalization, youth migration and retention and glocalization. As with any such volume, different readers will find different points of entry into debates and will have specific interests based on their life experiences and/or disciplines. As someone who worked as an adjunct professor with the University of Ambon (UoA), in eastern Indonesia in the early 2000s, Agustian Sutrisno and Hitendra Pillay's chapter on small island universities in Indonesia was of particular interest. While UoA lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum that the authors posit (between major Javan and Sumatran institutions at one end and small colleges in Flores and Rote at the other), the issues they raise illuminate many of the situations that I have encountered. Problems with connectivity – both digital and physical – abound and often intensify feelings of marginality. Contact with main island or international academics who can offer some degree of fresh input and energy is often minimal and, as the authors identify “there is no specific policy to provide support” for such institutions in Indonesia (p. 53). Similarly, validation of locally orientated courses and/or research projects is often limited.

The chapters on Oceania (4 and 8) are particularly useful for opening up discussions of the appropriateness of the western university model as one exported to (I'm tempted to use a more vernacular phrase – “plonked down in”) developing island locations. The apparatus, offices, ceremonial structures, pedagogies and epistemologies of western universities often do not transfer well to other cultures and locations. One of the best targeted deflations of western academic pretensions and superiority I have ever encountered was directed at me when I was researching on Futuna, a Polynesian outlier island in the predominantly Melanesian nation of Vanuatu. I was introduced to a musician who was involved in the informal training of local

children and teenagers in a small village without electric power or piped water and with instruments that were old, patched up and somewhat difficult to play. The musician was highly knowledgeable and highly motivated as a culture bearer ‘despite’ having minimal formal education. Frustrated at having to translate my somewhat ponderous questions to him, my interpreter-guide pointedly identified to me that in Futuna I was the student and the musician was the professor and that I might best learn by studying *with* him and might best respond to his time with me by making a donation to him to help him maintain his aging instruments (which I duly did).

In their conclusion to the volume, Alexander and Henderson identify one of the anthology’s strengths as its exploration of the “scope for reimagining or reinterpreting Higher Education agendas in ways which are more suitable for small island contexts” (p. 172). This is, indeed, a distinguishing aspect of the volume that makes it as suitable for island studies and small (often island) state scholars and practitioners as it is for Higher Education Studies. Their conclusion also states that they have aimed to “to move beyond understandings of power dynamics which position islands as vulnerable or deficient” (p. 174). While individual chapters do clearly refute the latter in various ways, the circumstances of various universities profiled in the volume do still present evident vulnerabilities (just as continental ones do, in various ways). Recognition of this vulnerability is not so much an amplification of it as a defining flaw but, rather, a recognition of the reality that such institutions have to live with. In this regard, it is the resilience of small island Higher Education institutions as described in various chapters that is most striking.

One of the concepts that lingered with me after reading the volume was the aspiration expressed by Shaheen Motala-Timol in Chapter 7 for small island universities to develop as knowledge hubs that “intentionally connect the global to the local” (p. 128). Her agenda reflects her experience at the University of Mauritius and the existence of ambitious national strategic plans to position Mauritius as a global *centre* of innovation and learning (p. 132). I emphasise “centre” as it is often difficult for small island universities struggling with resource issues and transport distances and costs to conceive of themselves as centres (of anything). Yet, islands such as Mauritius or Malta have historically been entrepôts, at the crossroads of various trade routes; and thus have the potential to become educational crossroads or centres again, if imagined and facilitated as such.

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