This book on ‘access and expansion: challenges for higher education improvement in developing countries’ is based on the experiences and reflections of experts from the North and the South in a variety of capacity development projects. Most of these projects have been awarded by the Netherlands Organisation for Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) to the Centre for International Cooperation (CIS) at VU University Amsterdam.

CIS is the University’s focal point for international cooperation with partners in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. The Centre makes VU University’s knowledge, experience and expertise accessible to institutions and individuals in developing countries and countries in transition, so contributing to national development processes. Besides drawing on the wide range of knowledge available in faculties and institutes at the VU University, CIS employs staff of its own with specialised expertise in organisational management, education and training, and natural resources management. The majority of contributions in this book have been written by CIS experts in education development, some in collaboration with colleagues from southern universities.

Many developing countries are grappling with the problems of widening access to higher education in a more equitable way and of expansion in terms of students, staff, facilities and resources. Both have implications for the quality of higher education. Widening access, including affirmative admission policies for girls, may lead to a more heterogeneous student population. This means that some students may be less well prepared for the rigours of degree studies. In terms of size – ever increasing student numbers, staff shortages and overcrowded classrooms often lead to erosion of ‘academic standards’. The quantitative and qualitative upgrading of facilities does not keep pace with the increasing student numbers and resources are often lagging behind.

The donor community has been quick to respond to calls for help. Assistance is offered through loans for infrastructural improvements (buildings, laboratory equipment, etc.) or through capacity development. The Dutch government, through NUFFIC, is assisting capacity development in higher education in a number of developing countries. Its most recent capacity development initiative has been the Netherlands Programme for the Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT), a programme of
South-North cooperation which helps developing countries strengthen their institutional capacity for providing post-secondary education and training. Its successor, the Netherlands Initiative for Capacity building in Higher Education (NICHE) started in 2010. In both programmes, assistance is provided through projects.

This introduction is an overview of the various chapters that together give a kaleidoscopic picture of various aspects of designing, developing and implementing projects, as well as reflections on their impact. Although examples are drawn from several developing countries, Ethiopia takes centre-stage in view of several initiatives there to reform higher education. The editors have arranged the twelve chapters in five themes: access to higher education, staff development, curriculum development, quality assurance and the research agenda for education expansion. The contributions are an eclectic collection of conference presentations, published articles and unpublished work. Accepting these varied origins, the editors have used a light touch and have largely restricted themselves to revision of format and clarity.

Before looking at specific sections, some generalisations are appropriate at this stage:

- A number of contributions document successes and failures of projects, with reflections on lessons learnt. These are often based on practical wisdom and tacit knowledge, rather than theoretical considerations.
- The reality on the ground is often more resistant to change than foreseen in project plans. Several contributions point to severe time constraints and the need for deeper involvement of external assistance, particularly in the critical start-up ‘inception’ period.
- Several articles emphasise the need for more research into the effectiveness of interventions as well as the process of design, development and implementation.
- Sustainability is rarely foremost in project design. Projects often focus on solving immediate problems and lack strategies for sustainability.

The first two chapters consider access to higher education. Ashcroft, provides various possible scenarios for the expansion of higher education in Ethiopia by first reviewing lessons from the massification of higher education in the United Kingdom. Faced with numerous challenges, she suggest that Ethiopia should look to issues of efficiency, indicating for instance that student-centred approaches lead to less instructor input and thus to lower costs. She also emphasises the importance of quality, as well as universities working...
collectively to lobby for sufficient government funding and alternative sources of income.

The following chapter by Cantrell gives an account of efforts in countries in southern Africa to increase access to higher education with a view to boosting economic development. Several projects were designed to increase access for students into mathematics and the sciences. The long-term involvement of VU University with the universities in former frontline states (the states that surrounded South Africa in its apartheid era) has led to the development of various interventions to increase the access of disadvantaged, but capable secondary school leavers to higher education. Research has focused on the selection of potentially good students using innovative tests, as well as on the effectiveness of such add-on programmes. An interesting model is presented in which the quality of maths and science education is enhanced through such interventions by preparing students for degree studies. The model highlights how the cycle of poor education can also be broken through better teacher education with the longer-term aim of classroom improvement.

Human capacity development has long been the focus of donor support in higher education as shown by CIS’s involvement in university staff development. Four chapters deal with different aspects of this recurrent theme. Chapter 3 by Kool and Cherinda shows that while staff development often takes the form of further study to Masters or PhD degrees, another form of professional development is linked to the design and development of new curricula and particularly learning materials. Their study in Mozambique highlights a diminishing input from foreign experts and emphasis on the adaptation of local materials, rather than the wholesale importation of western curricula and texts. Their contention is that it is essential to give more responsibility and ownership to the local staff.

Van den Berg describes research into effective methods of professional development for teacher educators in the Philippines with a focus on strengthening pedagogical content knowledge. The joint development of courses by northern and southern partners and coaching during implementation significantly improve the teaching-learning process in the short-term. However, in general he is more pessimistic about the sustainable impact of the project’s interventions “...particularly in developing countries where workloads are high and educational systems may be de-motivating rather than encouraging.” Berg once again demonstrates how hard-won gains are so easily eroded by extraneous factors which resist sustained change.
A good example of staff development through the design, development and implementation of ‘educational products’ is given by Ottevanger, van de Grint and Ana’am in chapter 5. The product in this case is a new teacher education curriculum in Yemen. They use the model of Guskey (2000) to analyse various aspects of professional development. Starting with problem and context analysis, an interesting feature of the project is the development of ‘standards’ for secondary school mathematics and science teachers as a basis for teacher curriculum reform. These equate to key competencies as they appear in the development of a competence-based Masters programme in Ghana (see Kouwenhoven chapter 7). The importance of locally developing standards is illustrated by examples about knowledge and understanding of the contributions by early Islamic scientists. Despite this contextualized approach, the project found much resistance to implementing the new curriculum and concluded “…an externally funded project….without adequate grounding in a faculty, has very little leverage to influence the policies of a faculty.”

Institutionalised support for staff development in higher education is described by Cantrell in chapter 6. He delves deeper into the issue of sustainability by analysing resisting and driving forces in the institutionalisation and sustainability of staff centres called Academic Development and Resource Centres (ADRCs) in nine Ethiopian universities. Forced field analysis shows than many ‘driving forces’ are project related and not displayed by the institutions themselves. Sustainability is therefore threatened when the project ends. The establishment of the staff development centres, which include a quality care unit coincided with the formation of a national quality agency (see Teshome and Kebede, chapter 11). In the absence of quality assurance systems, the ADRCs were assigned audit tasks by university management who saw the ADRCs as quality assurance units rather than professional development centres to improve teaching and learning.

Curriculum reform has an important role in capacity development in higher education. Competence-based education has grown in popularity with demands for theory being linked to practice and education being geared to the labour market. In chapter 7, Kouwenhoven reviews the theory and practice of competence-based curriculum development. Cases studies illustrate a step-by-step approach, starting with the formulation of professional and graduate profiles (similar to the formulation of standards in chapter 5).

Linking staff development with curriculum development is a recurring theme in various chapters. Rewarding in terms of ownership and sustainability, it is nevertheless very time consuming. Time could be saved if a curriculum expert
was present throughout the development process, but the trend is to use only short-term consultants. What is clear is that there is no quick fix: training in new teaching and learning methods, feedback and (peer) coaching, although time-consuming, contribute significantly to sustainability. Project duration is usually too short to have a lasting impact.

Besides providing its own technical assistance, CIS-VU often coordinates academic exchange between VU departments and southern partners. Chapter 8 by Smit, Tegegne and van Vliet describes a project where academic cooperation was in the forefront in the development of curricula for new computer science and information technology departments in two Ethiopian universities. A joint development process is described with Ethiopian staff visiting the Netherlands to develop modules with Dutch academics, while the latter travelled to Ethiopia to help with course delivery.

A similar approach is described in Ghana in chapter 9 by Stoffelsma and Monney. Joint design and development activities of curriculum support materials took place in a setting of curriculum renovation and staff professional development. A problem and context analysis was first carried out by a local (Ghanaian) and a foreign (Dutch) team. One aspect of the ‘solution’ concerned the role of course manuals in supporting student independent learning. Ongoing evaluation of the development process looked at validity, practicality and effectiveness. This study again illustrates that innovation requires changes that are not always appreciated by all stakeholders. Some staff and students resisted a more student-centred approach. “Changing their (students’) learning behaviour and mindset is likely to take time and forms a big challenge”. In addition, short project duration prevents implementers from measuring the sustainability and impact of interventions.

Quality issues increasingly occupy the agenda of capacity development in higher education. Chapter 10 by Zerihun, van Os and Beishuizen provides an overview of approaches to the evaluation of teaching quality. One important message from the literature is that the purpose of evaluation should be clear: evaluation for formative purposes (feedback to teachers) is more likely to improve the professional and instructional qualities of staff than summative evaluation. Zerihun et al. apply these findings to the design of teaching evaluation forms for Ethiopian university staff.

Chapter 11 by Teshome and Kebede documents the emergence of quality assurance in Ethiopia through the creation of a Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). Capacity development is available through
project support. The chapter contains data on the first round of quality audits in public and private higher education institutions. Although the importance of quality assurance is acknowledged, most institutions of higher education still lack mechanisms to collect and analyse data systematically that informs decisions on quality (as cited in chapter 6). The audits also drew attention to a paucity of research output which hampers symmetrical cooperation with foreign universities.

The final chapter shows how university researchers can make valuable contributions to understanding the dynamics of ‘Education for All’. Macfarlane and Ottevanger argue that while tertiary research rarely focuses on basic education, research is essential to assess progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. They demonstrate that all levels of education are partners in reaching the goals set by the world community and provide examples where research can be focused. Their thesis is that research capacity development in higher education will eventually benefit basic schooling as well.

In conclusion, VU University Amsterdam has been assisting developing countries to address, amongst other things, the challenges that come with increased access and expansion of higher education. This book is a collection of experiences, activities, successes, frustrations and reflections: it bears testimony to a motivated and committed group of educationalists – colleagues in North and South, all of whom are associated with the University’s Centre for International Cooperation.