

To what extent does undergraduate education in South Africa support the personal and public good?

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Abstract (152 words)

This chapter aims to describe the ways in which undergraduate education contributes to both the personal and public good in South Africa. It draws from a project which reviewed the literature in three interlinked themes: access to higher education; students' experiences whilst studying; and the economic and social contributions made by graduates. The project grappled with what the concept of public good means in a context like South Africa. A tendency was noted for conceptualizing South African higher education as a single undifferentiated system. It also noted that far more is known about higher education in historically advantaged institutions than about historically disadvantaged institutions. Overall the entwined nature of the reproductive and transformative functions of higher education mean that developing a higher education system so that it can play a deliberate role in transforming society is extremely difficult, even though it is clear that many students are personally transformed by their experiences.

Keywords:

public good, personal good, undergraduate education, reproductive function, transformative function, South African higher education

Examining the contribution that undergraduate education makes to South African society involves engaging in debates about the anticipated and actual relations between higher education and society. These debates often focus on the contribution that higher education makes to the public good. Marginson (2011) helpfully distinguishes between public goods, which are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, and the more normative notion of the (singular) public good which highlights collective endeavours and higher education's role in developing and democratising societies, moving beyond the aggregative impacts on individual personal goods. It is the latter notion of public good that we use in this chapter, with our focus on the impact of undergraduate education on society.

Many writers on this topic note that the concept of 'public' has meanings related to time and place, which means that how higher education relates to the public good will need to be reinvented in new times and new places. Key writers have noted while the concept of the public might seem somewhat diminished in present times, contemporary political and social challenges make it more, not less, important that this idea be resuscitated, especially as it pertains to higher education. Nixon (2011) points to core aspects of the nature of

higher education which signal this role – its focus on the development of individual capability, of collective reasoning, and a broad fostering of a sense of purpose amongst its participants. Mbembe (2015), writing in an African context, calls for the urgent rehabilitation of the public space, especially in universities. He rejects the contemporary fixation with the market and questions of efficiency, and argues for a centring on belonging and participation to advance social inclusion.

In this chapter, we seek to understand how higher education supports both the public and personal good. This dual focus is important because the personal benefits of engaging with higher education should not be overlooked, including the intrinsic personal good of participating in higher education in terms of the impact on the individual in terms of knowledge and personal growth, as well as the material benefits. In order to capture both the public and personal good requires a focus on the relations between higher education, the economy and society. In conceptualising these relations Allais (2018), drawing on Halliday (2016), makes the distinction between the (frequently conflated) *developmental* and *screening* (signalling) roles of education. Whilst educational perspectives tend to focus on higher education's intrinsic, developmental role, in giving individuals access to knowledge and skills, this can lead to the implicit assumption that individuals' chances in the labour market are determined by these acquisitions, i.e. the more skilled individuals in society, the more highly paid jobs there will be. However, this is not typically the case because the labour market does not necessarily grow in proportion to available skills (Brown et al 2010). An expansion in education can increase the competition for limited jobs, and here the screening function of higher education comes into play in terms of sorting individuals in order to support the making of employment decisions.

The focus on the developmental role of higher education also informs the view that higher education can play a role in transforming society and decreasing inequality. However, there is evidence that, while higher education might provide better opportunities for some individuals, overall it can be shown mostly to *reproduce* patterns of inequality in society (Cantwell et al. 2018). Recognising this is important in order to resist the temptation to overstate the impacts of higher education on society and to take seriously Clark's (2008) framing of universities as "multi-purpose organizations" (p. 217). Mamdani (1993), in a speech to South African academics on the eve of the democratic transition, signalled clearly the risks of subverting the role of higher education fully to that of the African state, noting the lessons from universities in newly independent African states some decades earlier. This became framed in South Africa as the tension between equity and development in higher education (cf. Cloete & Moja 2005).

We therefore need to develop better responses to the difficult questions that arise from the tension between the reproductive and transformative potential of higher education. In this chapter, we first introduce the South African higher education context and then outline the project that has shaped our thinking and argument in this chapter. We then present the understandings the project has generated about the relations between higher education and society in South Africa.

The South African higher education context

South Africa is a country defined by extreme inequality, which is seen throughout its society, including higher education. Its history of colonialism and apartheid continues to play a key role in structuring its present. Higher education is situated within a broader socio-economic context which includes significantly high levels of unemployment (most recently recorded as 29.0%), particularly youth unemployment, with 32.3% of young people not in education, employment or training – the NEETs (Statistics South Africa, 2019). For the majority of young people, schooling outcomes are poor, and this is arguably the major impediment for access to higher education. In terms of post-schooling options, the vocational sector is weak, and thus for many young people higher education is considered the only route to social mobility. There has been a dramatic growth of enrolments in higher education since the early 1990s, with the undergraduate population doubling from that point to a total of just over a million students at present. However, concern has been raised over the academic performance outcomes that have been recorded in terms of graduate rates: only 55% of students who register for three year degrees at contact institutions have graduated five years after starting (Council on Higher Education, 2018). Participation rates, in terms of the proportion of 20-24 year olds attending higher education, has increased slightly for black African youth and now approaches 20%, but still is starkly different to the 50% participation rate for white youth (even though this has slightly declined).

The public higher education sector currently comprises 26 public universities, classified by the Department of Higher Education and Training as 12 'traditional' universities, 8 universities of technology, and 6 comprehensive universities. The latter two categories of institution offer both diplomas and degrees.

Recently significant student protests have rocked the South African higher education system. The two core cries of the 2015-16 student protest movement - #RhodesMust Fall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) – exposed a disconnect between the policy based (and widely perceived) core role of higher education in facilitating social mobility and redress, and the realities facing many young people across the country (Mathebula & Calitz 2018). The protests highlighted barriers both at the point of access and within higher education, for those who were successful in gaining a place at university. This raised afresh questions about the ways in which higher education can transform society and the extent to which it has a role in reproducing existing inequalities. Two key challenges highlighted by Walker (2018a) illustrate the importance of this task. First, there is the challenge of the difference between the aspirations of South African school leavers and the current provision of places in undergraduate higher education, the issue of 'availability'. Wangenge-Ouma and Carpentier (2018) place the tuition fee debates in an international context with an increasing shift to cost-sharing, and note that the recent decision by the South African government to in fact reverse aspects of cost-sharing was done in order to alleviate political pressure, and might well have unintended consequences for the sustainability of the overall system. A second challenge is that South Africa has a highly stratified higher education system, which limits its capacity to be an engine for social mobility. There are disparities in who has access to the most prestigious universities, which are seen to offer the highest economic and social returns. As such, even for students who gain an undergraduate degree,

their possibilities for engaging in further higher education and entering the world of work are significantly structured by social background and geographical location.

These challenges have contributed to new patterns of inequality. The black middle class has grown substantially and thus scholars point to the increased salience of class (and socio-economic status) in structuring life opportunities, in addition to the enduring legacy of race (Southall 2016). The debate has thus expanded beyond that of access, by drawing attention to the way in which the experiences and academic success of students in higher education differ by their social and schooling background, as well as questions about the kinds of knowledge that universities offer students access to. At their core, these debates centre on questions around the purpose and focus of the university in a democratic society, as well as perceived uncertainties about employment prospects for graduates. They also raise the difficult question of whether we might be overestimating the power of higher education to change society.

The 'Pathways to personal and public good' project

This chapter is based on the Economic Social Research Council, UK, and National Research Foundation, SA, funded collaborative project 'Pathways to Personal and Public Good: understanding access to, student experiences of, and outcomes from South African undergraduate higher education' (ESRC project reference: ES/N009894/1; NRF project reference: UID 98365). It was a collaboration between the Centre for Global Higher Education and a cluster of NRF projects in South Africa located at the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, and the University of the Free State.

This project examined the pathways from an undergraduate education to personal and public goods in South Africa through three interlinked themes: access to higher education; students' experiences whilst studying; and the economic and social contributions made by university graduates. Although questions of access are crucially important in their own right, any examination of the transformative potential of higher education must also consider the *experiences* of students within higher education. There is a pressing need to understand the forms of curriculum, pedagogy and social experiences that support 'epistemological access' for all students who enter higher education. In terms of *graduate outcomes*; there remain concerns about the availability of graduate employment, particularly for certain groups, as outlined in the reviews by Case et al (2018) and Fongwa et al (2018). Race continues to structure graduate access to the workplace, even though overall the outcomes are strong.

The project outcomes are discussed in depth in the edited book "Higher Education Pathways: South African undergraduate education and the public good" published by open-access publishers African Minds (Ashwin and Case, 2018).

The approach of the project was informed by the need to move beyond any individual research project to consider what the collective body of literature as a whole could tell us about South African undergraduate education and its role in creating pathways to the personal and public good. The tendency for literatures to exist in silos is a major barrier to developing a shared sense of what we know about higher education in South Africa and internationally.

As we worked together as a project team, it became clear that, whilst there was a rich literature on higher education in South Africa, this literature is partial. In particular, it tends to focus on the pathways through access, student experience and graduate outcomes in historically advantaged institutions rather than in other institutions (Ashwin et al. 2018). There was also a tendency to treat the experiences of poor, black and rural students as a single set of experiences rather than exploring the diversity of experiences that are brought together under these descriptors (Masehela, 2018). These challenges were further exacerbated by the lack of publicly available data on higher education in South Africa, especially in relation to the limited statistical data presently available for economic or sociological analyses of South African society. As it stands, the literature is dominated by single institution studies, as there is currently limited access to publicly managed and available data across the system.

The project also highlighted the importance of comparative research in developing a better understanding of higher education systems both in South Africa and internationally. Some of the researchers developed useful illustrative comparisons: Carpentier et al (2018) looked at access across the UK, Finnish, French, Nigerian and Senegalese systems, to form a backdrop for South African debates on the issue; Pedrosa and Kloot (2018) compared the engineering education systems in Brazil and South Africa; and Oanda and Ngcwangu (2018) consider graduate employment across sub-Saharan Africa. Comparisons can operate at different scales (for example, comparing institutions or comparing higher education systems) and comparisons can focus on different dimensions of higher education. The problem with a lack of comparative research is that it tends to limit thinking to a particular context and so makes it more difficult to discern how things might be different than they are. It can also lead to a tendency to compare what is currently happening with an ideal rather than understanding how similar challenges are managed in different settings. It seems possible that the tendency for South African research to see the South African higher education context as unique ('South African exceptionalism') is more a product of this lack of comparative studies rather than the uniqueness of the challenges faced in South African higher education.

Relations between undergraduate education and society in South Africa

In the rest of this chapter, we will focus on what the project illuminated about the relations between undergraduate education and society in South Africa. What was most evident from our collaborative work was the diversity and complexity of students' pathways through higher education. This complexity stemmed from differences in socio-economic background, institutional context, curriculum choice, student aspirations, teaching and learning, and, following graduation, opportunities for employment. We identified multiple barriers experienced by students, but also opportunities for personal and societal transformation. In thinking about what our work highlighted about the relations between undergraduate education and society, we present our findings regarding the meaning of the notion of the public good in South Africa, ways of thinking about the South African higher education system, and the relations between the transformative and reproductive functions of higher education in South Africa.

The meaning of public good in South Africa

Given its centrality in the underlying thinking of the project, it was unsurprising that we spent a considerable amount of time discussing the particular meaning of the notion of 'public good' in relation to South African higher education. The public good was a concept developed in the global North and a question driving the explorations in the project was the extent to which the concept needed to be adapted to fit with contexts in the global South and how much needed to remain the same in order for the concept to be recognisable. Deem and McCowan (2018) show how much of this conceptualisation stems from the work of Habermas in relation to his notion of the public sphere – and the possibilities for universities to be an arena for the discussion of public problems.

Walker (2018b) argues for a capability approach for conceptualizing the public good of higher education in South African universities, based on its humanizing ethic and its focus on whether opportunities are fairly distributed. It foregrounds participation by considering what students are able to do and become through their engagement with higher education.

In thinking about how the notion of the public good applied in the South African context, the project also discussed the importance of recognising the relative openness of South African society and the value that it assigns to academic freedom, compared to many developing country contexts. The importance of these conditions in underpinning a productive notion of the relation between higher education and the public good might be seen to push in the direction of a universal concept of the public good; the project rather aimed to identify underpinning conditions that are required for higher education institutions to play a role in supporting the public good. To develop this further, however, will require comparative research examining how higher education contributes to the public good in a range of national settings, including its international impact.

In addition to the work on interrogating the meaning of the notion of 'public good', the project carried out allied work on related concepts in the higher education literature. Ashwin and Komljenovic (2018) consider how the South African literature conceptualises the transformation of student identity through the experience of higher education, and how this relates to the international literature on the topic. What these researchers find is that while the broad concepts are relevant, in the South African context identity transformation cannot be seen separately from students' broader lives and societies outside of higher education. In similar work, Schendel (2018) looks at the research that has been conducted on the relationship between institutional cultures and pedagogical change in South Africa, and finds that this literature has useful contributions in showing both the inherent sluggishness of change, but also the possibilities for dynamic impacts in contexts of dramatic broader social change. Finally, on this topic, Hlengwa, McKenna and Njovane (2018) analyse the South African literature on student experiences, and find that conceptually this has been rather limited.

Understanding the higher education system

In thinking about the relations between higher education and society, there is a tendency to consider the higher education system as somehow homogenous. As we discussed earlier,

the South African system is highly differentiated, comprising institutions with very different histories and access to material resources. However, in shifting from a system that was differentiated by race, there has been an understandable avoidance of conceptualizing other forms of differentiation in the system because of the fear that it would simply entrench the low status and poor resource levels in many historically black institutions.

However, with the attempt to move past inherited inequalities in South Africa with a homogenized policy, there is the risk of overlooking institutions' distinct institutional histories, cultures and values, and resources and needs. The tendency to think of a single undifferentiated system in South Africa obscures the fact that, as we discussed earlier, we know far more about higher education in historically advantaged institutions than we do about historically disadvantaged institutions.

Whilst there is something inclusive about positioning higher education as a single system, the danger of this is that it underplays the inequalities between institutions, moreover it does not allow for the potential strengths inherent in systems that are differentiated deliberately according to mission. Naidoo and Ranchod (2018) trace the policy trajectory across the full democratic period and note that what is needed for social and economic development, but has not even been properly conceptualised, is a system comprising a range of institutions with high-quality but different academic and vocational choices. Institutions have different identities and material resources which are 'flattened' (and even ignored) by homogenizing discourses of institutional excellence. The work in this project highlighted the need to find a more inclusive 'both/and' way of discussing the higher education system in South Africa so that the common mission of making transformative knowledge accessible to as many people as possible is recognized but so too is the value of distinctive institutional missions, with appropriate allocation of public funding.

The entwined nature of the reproductive and transformative functions of higher education

As we discussed earlier, there is an explicit expectation in government policy that higher education will transform society in South Africa. However, it is also important to be clear that much of the attraction of higher education for students and their families is the 'graduate premium' that they expect to receive from engaging with higher education. Thus the reproductive and educative functions of higher education are deeply entwined. The experience of studying at university and the subsequent access it can provide to a graduate career can clearly be hugely personally transformative for individuals and their families. However, graduate premiums are also a clear indicator of inequality because they signal the differences in income between graduates and non-graduates (Marginson 2016). Thus, much of the popular support for higher education, in South Africa and globally, is related to its role in reproducing existing inequalities in society because the support stems from its role in personal rather than societal transformation. Indeed, if higher education was successful in supporting the transformation of society in the way envisaged in policy, then it is likely that graduate premiums would fall, especially in the context of an economy that is not substantially growing. For this not to lead to a sense of disillusion with higher education, it would appear to be crucial that the societal transformation is underpinned by a personal transformation in students that ensures a commitment to a transformed society.

Therefore, if higher education is expected to play a role in transforming society then this needs to be explicitly considered in the design of university programmes and through additional structures, beyond higher education, that are designed to support this transformation. Here the potentials for transformation are identified at the level of curriculum (Shay & Mkhize 2018), academic staff development (Clarence 2018) and extra-curricular activities (Kerr & Leuscher 2018).

Overall the entwined nature of the reproductive and transformative functions of higher education mean that developing a higher education system so that it can play a deliberate role in transforming society is extremely difficult. There are no straightforward or obvious paths to developing a system in this way. Our explorations of the South African higher education system suggest a situation in which many students are personally transformed by their experiences. However, we lack knowledge about students in the least privileged part of the system and there are currently few signs that higher education has played a central role in systematically transforming South African society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Pathways to Personal and Public Good project suggests that there needs to be more extensive and detailed public debate, within and beyond higher education institutions, about the nature of the public good role that higher education is intended to play in South African society. Such debates need to be predicated on a clear understanding of the current higher education system in South Africa and the institutions that make it up. As part of this, far more needs to be known about students' experiences and institutional practices at historically disadvantaged universities. Finally, there is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the entwined nature of the reproductive and transformative impacts of higher education. However, it should be equally clear that such considerations are important not just to South Africa but to any society that seeks its higher education system to play an active role in supporting the development of a fairer society.

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