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HIGHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS

SOUTH AFRICAN
UNDERGRADUATE
EDUCATION AND
THE PUBLIC GOOD

EDITORS PAUL ASHWIN & JENNIFER CASE

Higher Education Pathways

South African Undergraduate Education
and the Public Good

Edited by Paul Ashwin and Jennifer M. Case

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CHAPTER 21

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT PATHWAYS TO THE PUBLIC GOOD FROM SOUTH AFRICAN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION?

Paul Ashwin, Vincent Carpentier, Jennifer Case, Delia Marshall, Tristan McCowan, Sioux McKenna, Rajani Naidoo, Rebecca Schendel and Melanie Walker

In this book, we have explored the contribution of South African undergraduate education to the public good, looking at the pathways to the public good that arise from students' access to higher education, their experiences of higher education and their outcomes from higher education. With the high expectations placed on higher education and its potentially transformative influence on students and societies, in a time of heightened contestation, this issue has some urgency. We recognise that the potential public good purposes of higher education go well beyond its undergraduate function, but it was this aspect of higher education that was the focus of our project.

In this conclusion, we want to examine what is highlighted when the individual chapters of this book are considered as a whole. In doing so, it is important to remember that the project that underpinned this book was not primarily focused on generating new empirical data about South African undergraduate education. Rather, we wanted to bring together and reflect on what is currently known and to consider what implications this has for higher education research, policies and practices in the future. Our work began looking at the distinctive literatures on access, student experiences, and graduate outcomes, but in putting together this book we sought to bring together literatures that are often developed in silos and are seldom connected to each other. Rather than push ahead with new empirical projects, we wanted to take stock on what we can learn from the immense amount of research that has already been conducted across this domain, noting also where there are gaps. As Tight (2018) argues, higher education internationally would benefit from these kinds of conversations that aim for synthesis in the field.

In this chapter, we first examine what we have learned about the difficulties in conceptualising undergraduate education. We then examine what we have learned from the project about researching higher education and finally we explore how we see the implications of the project for policies and practices in higher education. Although the book focuses its attention on the South African context, it also engages with international comparative contexts and literature. In this conclusion, rather than separating these literatures, each section brings together the South African specific and internationally relevant aspects of the outcomes from this project.

Tensions in conceptualising undergraduate education

Across all of the chapters, what is most evident is the diversity and complexity of students' experiences of accessing, engaging in, and graduating from, their undergraduate studies. Such diversity and complexity stems from a wide range of factors including socio-economic background, institutional context, curriculum choice, student aspirations, teaching and learning, and opportunities for employment. We have identified multiple barriers experienced by students, but also opportunities for personal and societal transformation. These are not straightforward paths, and rather than drawing definitive conclusions, we feel it is more helpful to highlight a range of tensions that underpin our understanding of these pathways. There are no simple answers to any of the key questions we have grappled with in this project, and, given this, these tensions are intended to act as provocations to further work, rather than summaries of what has been achieved.

Tension 1: Between individual institutions and (differentiated) higher education systems

Much of the popular debate on higher education internationally tends to be dominated by a focus on individual institutions, particularly universities (Millot, 2015; Williams, de Rassenfosse, Jensen, & Marginson, 2013) at the expense of considering higher education systems. In recent times this has been exacerbated by the rise of global rankings, whereby universities are pitted against each other as competitive organisations. In the South African context, however, this tension between institutions and the system seems to take a particular form. First, as discussed in the introduction, the higher education system is explicitly positioned as having a key role to play in transforming society. Moreover, in the desire to move from a differentiated system based on race, there has been an avoidance of conceptualising other forms of differentiation in the system. There are good reasons for this, particularly because such a move could simply entrench the low status and poor resource levels in historically disadvantaged institutions. Thus, as in other higher education systems, there have been patterns of 'academic drift' in mission across institutional types. However, in this South African attempt to move past inherited inequalities with a homogenised policy, there is also the risk of overlooking institutions' distinct institutional histories, cultures and values, and resources and needs. As we discuss in more detail when looking at research into higher education,

this tendency to think of a single undifferentiated system in South Africa obscures the fact that we know far more about higher education in historically advantaged institutions than we do about historically disadvantaged institutions. There is a distinct gap in the literature regarding these historically disadvantaged institutions, despite the crucial role they can play in transforming who gains access to and benefits from an undergraduate education.

Tension 2: Between transformation and reproduction

The second tension has similarities to the first as it is embedded in the clear expectations that were placed on higher education in South Africa in the transition to a democracy. Higher education was explicitly expected to play a key role in alleviating the inequalities inherited from the apartheid era. 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. 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, even if some individuals hope to experience social mobility. In this way much of its popularity, comes from its role in personal rather than societal transformation (for example, see Southall, 2016 on the emerging black middle class in South Africa). 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. For this not to lead to a sense of disillusion with higher education, it would appear to be crucial that societal transformation is underpinned by a personal transformation in students that ensures a commitment to a transformed society.

A focus on this tension highlights that, rather than seeing reproduction and transformation in opposition to each other, the important question is about what aspects of existing systems are to be transformed and what elements are to be reproduced. For example, how would we view a higher education system that helps to transform racial inequalities in South Africa but reproduces the overall levels of economic and gender inequality? This awkward question is helpful because it also highlights the importance of thinking intersectionally when considering the relationship between transformation and reproduction.

Tension 3: Between homogenisation and differentiation

At the heart of the first two tensions, is a conceptual tension between homogenisation and differentiation. 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. Institutions have different (actual or aspirational) identities and material resources (and staff, etc.) which are 'flattened' (and even ignored) by homogenising discourses of institutional excellence. 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 recognised, but so too is the value of distinctive institutional missions, providing there are the resources available to make each of these different missions achievable.

Tension 4: Between local and universal concepts of the public good

As Deem and McCowan recognise in Chapter 5, the public good was a concept developed in the Global North. A question driving the explorations in this book is the extent to which this concept needs to change to fit with contexts in the Global South and how much needs to remain the same in order for the concept to be recognisably focused on what has originally been termed the public good. For example, Walker (2018) argues for a capability approach for conceptualising the public good of higher education in South African universities because it has an ethic that is humanising, focuses on whether opportunities are fairly distributed and foregrounds participation by considering what students are able to do and become through their engagement with higher education. Such an approach can be seen to highlight a version of the public good that is focused on creating a democratic public good.

In thinking about how the notion of the public good applies in the South African context, it is also important to recognise the relative openness of South African society and the value that is assigned to academic freedom. The importance of these conditions in underpinning a productive notion of the relation between higher education and the public good suggests that perhaps it is more helpful to focus on the conditions required for universities to support the public good, rather than seeking a universal notion of the public good. To develop this further requires further comparative research examining how higher education contributes to the public good in a range of national settings. It also raises the question of whether there is a way of understanding higher education's relationship to the public good internationally, rather than simply at a national level.

Tension 5: Between complex research ideas and simple dominant discourses

We began this section by discussing the tension between engaging with the complexity of higher education and the need to provide accessible ways of understanding that complexity. In our reviews of the existing bodies of knowledge, the importance of finding better ways of engaging with these tensions became even more urgent. This is because we found many conceptually rich studies, but we also found many studies that were based on simplified conceptualisations of higher education practices that served to reinforce problematic ways of understanding students and higher education. We need to engage directly with the attractiveness

and appeal of these discourses so that we can move discussions in a more productive direction. This final tension brings us to the next section of this chapter, in which we examine what we have learned in this project about higher education research in South Africa and beyond.

Implications for researching higher education

A rich but partial literature

The chapters in this book have shown that there is a rich literature on higher education in South Africa but that it is in some ways a partial literature. The rather homogenised conceptualisation of the higher education system plays a role in this partiality. We noted that we know far more about access, student experiences and graduate outcomes in historically advantaged institutions than we do in other institutions, dramatically skewing this overall picture. It is also worth noting that there is a particularly limited literature on access, regardless of institutions. There is 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 different descriptors.

Limits on publicly available system-wide data

It is clear from the reviews of existing research presented in this book that higher education research in South Africa would benefit from access to more publicly available data on higher education, especially in relation to the limited statistical data presently available for economic or sociological analyses of South African society. As it stands, the higher education literature is dominated by single institution studies. As we have already discussed, one concern is the very limited information on historically disadvantaged institutions. These data are needed in order to develop a clearer picture about processes and inequalities across the whole system.

However, we also need to be careful to avoid suggesting that having access to such data will necessarily provide the insights needed to better understand the full complexity of this system. All such data are by their nature proxies for the complex practices and processes they are intended to measure. As such, they can only provide a broad outline of what is occurring across the sector. This means that such data need to represent the beginning of a conversation within and beyond the higher education sector about the relationships between the picture portrayed by analysis of these data and the potential of higher education to contribute to the personal and public good.

The importance of comparative research

Some of the chapters in this book have also highlighted the importance of comparative research in developing a better understanding of higher education systems, both in South Africa and

internationally. Here we note that comparison can operate at different scales (for example, comparing institutions or comparing higher education systems) and that comparisons can focus on different dimensions of higher education. As already mentioned, what was striking about the South African research that we examined was that it was nearly always – with notable exceptions – conducted in a single institution.

The problem with this lack of comparative research is that it tends to limit our 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.

The value of comparative research is that it allows us to develop a more nuanced account of what is happening in different contexts. Thus, for example, comparative research into the under-researched historically disadvantaged sector would allow us to gain a richer sense of the diversity of experiences in these institutions, rather than positioning them as a homogenous group.

Collective networks and bodies of literature

In arguing for more comparative studies of higher education both within South Africa and internationally, it is important to be clear that the value of individual projects comes from their relationship to collective bodies of literature. That is to say, it is not the outcomes of any single project that are important but the ways in which this further develops our collective knowledge.

For this to happen, we need spaces in which to bring bodies of knowledge together, and this book is an attempt in that direction. 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. Bringing these bodies of knowledge together requires stronger research networks because they do not exist simply in research texts, but also in the partnerships between researchers that lead to the development of collective practices. In the work undertaken in producing this book, the collective discussions that were had in face-to-face settings played a key role in developing shared collective understandings that moved beyond any individual perspective over the course of our meetings. The space to develop such collective thinking is important if higher education research is to do more than critique existing arrangements and instead move to offering alternative arrangements that can help to address the challenges facing higher education in South Africa and globally.

Talking back to the Global North?

One of the challenges within this project was to examine the extent to which ideas originating in the Global North could do useful work in the context of South African higher education.

This is linked to the previous point about the importance of comparative work because the power of internationally comparative work is that it alerts us to the similarities and differences between contexts. It highlights the ways in which any ideas need to be transformed in order to be relevant in new contexts. One of the problems with the notions of ‘best practice’ or ‘teaching excellence’ is that they imply that the same practices are effective regardless of the context in which they are operating. What this book makes clear is that international higher education has as much to learn from the South African case, as South Africa might learn from the international collective body of knowledge about higher education. It also highlights the ways in which the differences between international and local knowledge are misleading because all knowledge is in some way local. The issue is whether that knowledge is positioned in relation to a collective body of knowledge that is international or local in its scope. In focusing on South African research talking back to the Global North, the intention is to highlight that South African research has an important contribution to make to international bodies of knowledge about higher education.

What are the implications for policies and practices in South Africa and internationally?

In exploring the implications for policies and practices in South Africa, we focus on three areas of higher education: research practices, educational practices and policies.

In terms of research practices, it is clear that for higher education research in South Africa to develop further, there is a need for spaces for researchers to come together and reflect on how South African research into higher education relates to research conducted in other contexts. Here we gratefully acknowledge the support from the ESRC and NRF which made this project possible. Such spaces for reflection need to be based on a common commitment to developing collective and high-quality bodies of knowledge about South African higher education that tell us about the whole system and the diversity of student experiences and are in conversation with international bodies of knowledge.

In terms of educational practices, this project highlighted the ways in which institutional cultures, admission practices, curricula and pedagogies are central to possibilities of the kind of personal transformation that contributes to the public good. A key element of this is for institutions and curricula to recognise students as they are, rather than by some notions of what they ought to be. For example, enhanced curricula and pedagogies need to start from students’ current knowledge and understanding and be designed intentionally to help students to critically engage with collective bodies of knowledge that change their understanding of the world and themselves. Such enhancement work requires a diverse body of professional, qualified and committed academics, supported by scholarly academic development and student involvement in university governance, curricula and pedagogies. It also requires research that helps us to better understand whether and how different forms of student experience contribute directly (positively or negatively) to the public good.

In terms of educational policies, higher educational practices need to be supported by policies and assessment regimes that value and prioritise the creation of a more equal society. The transformative potential of the South African higher education sector depends on contextualised governance and funding measures, rather than the kind of superficial engagement that is valued and promoted by the rhetoric of global competition, rankings and metrics.

Concluding remarks

This project set itself the challenging task of drawing together the extensive literature on undergraduate education in South Africa, to examine how it contributes to the public good. We were particularly interested in grappling with *how* this works systemically, to describe how positive transformations work, but maybe even more importantly, to identify the barriers that currently limit the public good outcomes of South African higher education. The literature that we have allows us to fill in part of this picture; for example, we know quite a lot about the experiences of a diverse group of students at historically advantaged institutions. But we have a relatively limited sense of the sector overall, and this is a concern at a time when higher education policy is in flux. If South African undergraduate education is to play a key role in transforming society, as envisaged in policy, then this will involve significant changes to current practices that support access to, student experiences of, and outcomes from undergraduate education. To make these changes will not only require more evidence about how the whole of the system operates, but will also require intense public debate about the ways in which higher education should contribute to the transformation of society.

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