Higher Education Pathways

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PART A

SETTING THE SCENE
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Paul Ashwin and Jennifer M. Case

In what ways does higher education have a transformative impact on people and societies? What conditions are required for this impact to occur? What is the relationship between pathways through undergraduate education and the public good?

These questions, which are the focus of this book, have urgency across the globe and particular resonance in the South African higher education context, which is attempting to tackle the challenges of widening access and improving completion rates in an historically elite and racially segregated system. In this chapter, we first introduce the project that was designed to engage with these questions and then give a brief introduction to the South African higher education context. We then provide an outline of the remaining chapters in the book and show the different ways in which they engage with the relationship between undergraduate education and the public good.

The project

The chapters in this book are based on the Economic Social Research Council, UK, and National Research Foundation, South Africa, 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). The project emerged from 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, University of the Free State and Rhodes University.

This partnership examined the relationship between undergraduate education and 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. Understanding that these themes describe undergraduate pathways through higher education, for this project we also conceptualised the relationship to the public good in terms of a pathway. In South Africa the issue of access to higher education is crucial, given the transformation imperative to redress the historical legacy of an unequal and segregated system resting on the systematic exclusion and political disempowerment of the majority of the
population (Department of Education, 1997). The South African higher education system has expanded considerably, doubling overall enrolment since democracy, with just under a million students now in the system. However, some groups of students remain under-represented. For example, while about half of the white and Indian youth cohort participate in higher education, for black and coloured young people this is under a fifth of the cohort (Council on Higher Education, 2018).

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 (Morrow, 2009). There is also a need to understand the ways in which transformative university experiences can lead to social change through the development of graduate professionals who are orientated to and contribute to the public good (Walker & McLean, 2013). In terms of graduate outcomes, there remain concerns about the availability of graduate employment, particularly for certain groups (Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser, 2012). This has also led to renewed interest in traditional arguments around the public good value of higher education. This perspective brings to the forefront the values, understandings and commitments that might be shaped by the university experience, in addition to ‘skills’, in order to build the essential elements for an engaged citizenry who can participate and contribute in a democratic community (Coetzee, Botha, & Holtzhausen, 2012).

The project brought together internationally leading higher education researchers from the UK, South Africa and further afield in order to explore the relations between these themes (access, student experience and graduate outcomes). The partnership also sought to contribute to higher education research capacity building through the development of an internationally networked cadre of South African post-doctoral researchers, who had the opportunity to work with these internationally leading researchers in the field of higher education over a sustained period of time.

The project created a group of researchers to focus on each theme, and each group held meetings over a three-year period to discuss what we could glean from existing research into South African higher education. There were also meetings in which the work of the three theme groups was brought together and the overall project team discussed how integrating the work from these themes extended our understanding of South African higher education. The distinctive contribution of this work at its conclusion is thus to bring together empirical evidence and conceptual debates across these three domains of the higher education trajectory that are often considered in isolation.

South Africa has an active education research community with strong public funding, and a significant amount of higher education research has been conducted over the years. However, as is common in many other contexts, there is less critical review or synthesis of this work. As mentioned, this project had an objective to properly take stock on what is already known, and what is not known.
With an unusually late transition to democracy and a racially offensive prior regime with notoriety on the world stage, it is easy to adopt a position of ‘South African exceptionalism’; that is the view that this context is so unique that it does not permit comparison or even serious analysis. We do not align ourselves with this popular (and attractive, for some) view, but neither do we fall into universalism, especially of a Western inflected version. Thus, this project also worked closely with the potential for bringing South African research findings into conversation with an international literature, not only to bring new light to bear on South African challenges, but also to allow for potential impact of South African-derived insights into other contexts. In case study terminology, South Africa, while not unique as noted above, could potentially be termed a ‘crucial case’ – one which exhibits some unique characteristics but also shares a number of common characteristics with other higher education systems. This makes understandings of South African undergraduate education potentially valuable when thinking about other systems of higher education.

The South African higher education context

South Africa is a country defined by extreme inequality and this plays out in many ways across its social landscape, including higher education. Its history in colonialism and apartheid continues to structure the present. The university is situated within this broader socio-economic context which includes significantly high levels of unemployment (most recently recorded as 26.7%), particularly youth unemployment, with 32.4% of young people not in education, employment or training – the NEETs (Statistics South Africa, 2018). For the majority of young people, schooling outcomes are poor, even taking into account regional comparisons. 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, and the academic performance outcomes that have been recorded in terms of graduate rates are not strong: only 55% of students who register for three-year degrees at contact institutions have graduated five years after starting (Council on Higher Education, 2018).

Following a process around the turn of the century of institutional mergers, the public higher education sector currently comprises 26 public universities, currently 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 offer both diplomas and degrees. Within the ‘traditional’ category there is considerable variation in how ‘research-intensive’ the institution is, with the racial inheritance of ‘historically advantaged/white’ and ‘historically disadvantaged/black’ tending to line up with resources and capacity to do research.

The book is located in the period when significant student protest rocked the South African higher education system. The two core cries of the student protest movement – #RhodesMustFall (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. 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.

A key tension is between the aspirations of South African school leavers and the current arrangements for provision of undergraduate higher education. Public funding has not grown in accordance with growing enrolments in South Africa and thus an increasing share of the cost has been shifted to students and their families. A second tension relates to stratification of the higher education system: massification of higher education is typically, but not inevitably, accompanied by increased stratification. Stratification limits higher education’s capacity to be an engine for social mobility because 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. The many students who do not complete their degrees, regardless of which institution they attend, are left with substantial debts but little return from their engagement in higher education, and these students are more likely to be from poorer backgrounds. These tensions, crucially, have contributed to new patterns of inequality. The debate has thus expanded beyond that of access, by drawing attention to the ways in which the experiences and academic success of students in higher education differ in terms of 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.

This book tackles these complex issues by examining one key question underpinning all of these debates: to what extent does undergraduate education in South Africa support the public good? In engaging with this question, the chapters in this book draw on a wide range of theoretical resources and literature and data from both inside and outside of South Africa. The rationale behind this approach is that a variety of perspectives can offer us a number of different ways of understanding these pathways, rather than only examining them from a single viewpoint.

The structure of the book

The overall structure of the book first sets the scene for examining undergraduate education in South Africa, then looks at different ways of understanding the pathways to the public good that undergraduate education offers, and finally examines empirical evidence about particular aspects of these pathways.
Part A of the book sets the scene, locating higher education within the broader context of relations to the state and to society. In Chapter 2, Naidoo and Ranchod focus on the relationship between higher education and the state, noting how in the democratic period in South Africa there have been distinctly different policy periods in terms of the stated commitment to a ‘developmental state’, and that this has worked through into the political economy of public higher education. In Chapter 3, Wangenge-Ouma and Carpentier review the system for the funding of higher education in South Africa, and how these arrangements link into ongoing concerns around accessibility, as well as international debates on cost-sharing. Allais, in Chapter 4, continues the exploration of relations between higher education, the state and society, showing the complexity especially of the relationship between higher education and the labour market. In Chapter 5, Deem and McCowan explore the concept of the ‘public good’ in reference to undergraduate education but also in relation to debates about the wider purposes of universities and the contribution made by university graduates.

In Part B of the book we gather a series of chapters that look further at ways of understanding key aspects of the relationship between higher education and the public good. In Chapter 6, Walker shows how access to higher education is shaped by the complexity of the relationship between social inequalities, poverty, academic achievement, educational ‘choices’ and life chances. Walker notes that, compared to international findings, South African students from poor backgrounds are less put off by immediate costs of higher education because of the anticipated future returns. In Chapter 7, Carpentier, Lebeau and Välimaa take a comparative look at issues of accessibility, availability and attainability of higher education, looking at higher education systems in Finland, France, Senegal and Nigeria. McLean provides an overview of the Capability Approach in Chapter 8. This approach offers a normative framework for thinking about what kind of educational experiences support human well-being and fulfilment, focusing especially on firstly, those students who have accessed university against the odds because they are black and come from poor rural and township areas, and secondly, on how educational experiences might shape graduates oriented towards contributing to social transformation. In Chapter 9, Ashwin and Komljenovic present a review of literature examining the ways in which students’ senses of identity are changed through their engagement with South African undergraduate education, with a focus on how this relationship between students and universities is conceptualised. Schendel, in Chapter 10, examines the assumed links between ‘institutional culture’ and processes of pedagogical change within universities, looking especially to see whether the theoretical assumptions present in the international literature are applicable to the South African context. Finally in this section, in Chapter 11, Hlengwa, McKenna and Njovane examine the ways that student experiences in South Africa are conceptualised in research by analysing postgraduate theses on this topic.

Part C moves in further to look at what the empirical evidence tells us about access to, students’ experiences of, and graduate outcomes from South African higher education. Chapters 12 and 13 examine issues of access. In Chapter 12, Masehela explores how students from low-income families without any form of financial assistance manage to register and
commence their academic studies. In Chapter 13, Mathebula and Calitz explore what student voices in the #FeesMustFall protest reveal about questions of access to South African higher education, and universities in particular.

Chapters 14, 15 and 16 examine evidence about different aspects of students’ experiences of undergraduate education in South Africa. Shay and Mkhize focus on issues of the curriculum in Chapter 14. They consider how curriculum structures and content might enable parity of participation, looking specifically at the extended degree which was introduced with this in mind, and exploring the features of a ‘transforming curriculum’ for the future. In Chapter 15, Clarence looks at academic staff development in South Africa, to identify how the student experience of higher education is represented in this field of practice. Kerr and Luescher, in Chapter 16, review the literature on South African student experiences of university life beyond the curriculum. They show a rather bleak picture of the student experience in which the university appears mainly as a place of personal struggle and campus life a source of anxiety for students. However, there are also some indications that the experience is positively transformative.

Chapters 17 to 20 offer different perspectives on the experiences of graduates. In Chapter 17, Case, Marshall and Fongwa review the literature on the post-graduation trajectories of young South Africans, using both labour force surveys and graduate destinations studies, showing that while graduate unemployment on average is not a cause for concern, race continues to play a significant role in graduate employment. In Chapter 18, the same author team offer a more fine grained approach by looking in depth at two narrative studies of student experiences to interrogate what lies behind these differentiated outcomes, showing how students’ experiences before and during university shape what graduates can aspire to and how they navigate, or not, through institutional structures to achieve diverse outcomes. In Chapter 19, Oanda and Ngcwangu take our understanding further by offering a comparative dimension and examining the graduate employment trends in a number of sub-Saharan African countries. In Chapter 20, Pedrosa and Kloot examine how focusing on the graduate outcomes from a single discipline in different countries (engineering in South Africa and Brazil) can further our understanding of how undergraduate education contributes to the public, or common, good.

The concluding section of the book, Part D, consists of a single chapter in which those who led the access, student experience and graduate themes of the project, consider what the book as a whole tells us about pathways to the public good from South African undergraduate education. They identify a number of tensions in our ways of thinking about these pathways and discuss the implications of the project for researching higher education and policies and practices in South African undergraduate education.

The chapters in the book thus provide a fresh engagement with the question of how undergraduate education contributes to the public good in the South African context. They also make a contribution to broader discussions about how universities are situated in society. These discussions are vital if we are going to develop richer understandings of the ways in which higher education can contribute to the transformation of society that is key to the future of a more inclusive and equitable South Africa.
References


