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Debate on the purposes of higher education has intensified in recent times with accelerated globalisation, expanding participation across much of the globe, and public funding constraints. In neoliberal contexts, the purposes of higher education are seen to reside in their economic consequences at both an individual and a group level. High participation contexts such as in many western countries have however shown that economies do not necessarily respond to this increasingly educated population and that in fact many graduates work at levels below their capacity ([Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010](#)). An alternative view sees the credentialing purposes of higher education as significant, signalling employability in a highly competitive labour market. Marginson ([2011](#)), conceptualising these as two prominent 'imaginaries' in contemporary discourse and public policy on, notes that the first rests on a conceptualisation of higher education first and foremost as a market, while the second has older roots in ideas about education signalling status and performing a ranking function. Universities are traditionally more about status than about money; reproducing status tends to reproduce the social order. Thus neither of these imaginaries can be considered adequate to a serious consideration of contemporary times and social challenges. Marginson offers a third imaginary centred on a global networked open system of collaboration and exchange. Although very contemporary in its form, this imaginary points to an older set of arguments around the public good purposes of higher education. Marginson outlines a conceptualisation of 'public good' that is associated with 'democratic forms, openness, transparency, popular sovereignty and grass-roots agency' (p. 418).

Other scholars have drawn on positions associated with philosophy of education to offer a recontextualised notion of public good purposes for present times. Nixon ([2011](#)) draws on an enlightenment perspective which views human existence as constituted through the three inter-related but distinct spheres of the social, the civic and the cosmopolitan. In the social we have the core of human flourishing, being recognised by others for your distinct achievements. The civic is the space where we need to work out how we can live together in this difference; this will always involve an ongoing pushing outwards of civic boundaries. The cosmopolitan is the arena that in recent times has become dominated by an economic concept of globalisation, but here Nixon, like Marginson in his third imaginary, urges us to consider the democratic alternative of a global conversation around social justice, which gains increasing urgency as environmental constraints are felt globally.

The work described in this article locates itself within these philosophical debates but notes the limited extent of empirical work that engages with these issues. Graduate destination data and labour market surveys offer macro data speaking predominantly to economic purposes ([for example, Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser, 2012](#)). Little is known at a detailed level of how young people are making use of their higher education experiences in crafting their life courses, especially in developing countries of the South. There is research which demonstrates that in these systems of relative low participation and general skills shortages there is still a graduate 'premium' – with graduates manifesting lower levels of unemployment ([Carnoy, Froumin, Loyalka, & Tilak, 2014](#)). There is, however, limited work which interrogates these macro findings more closely, especially towards building an understanding of how the individual outcomes of university study feed into society and thus support an argument towards the public good purposes of higher education. There is also little work to date which characterises the experiences of students who leave a programme before graduating.

The present research thus sought to investigate in detail how the knowledge and dispositions acquired in higher education relate to young people's experiences of opportunities and constraints and how they make choices on their life course. Higher education is a potentially transformative experience in a person's life and the engagement with knowledge is core to this experience. The social realist theory of Margaret Archer offers a sophisticated and layered conception of the individual and describes how identity and agency develop in concert with the social environment ([Archer, 2003, 2007](#)). *Personal identity* represents what the individual grows to care about – holding emotional responses in the context of an internal conversation, and formulating plans of action to prioritise that which matters. *Social identity* relates to the roles that one holds in society, for example, being a student. Ideally both personal identity

and social identity should grow in tandem, such that the social roles that one inhabits to some extent reflect the things you care about. *Reflexivity* characterises the way in which the individual comes to exercise their internal conversation: communicative reflexivity is a typical starting point where important choices tend to be made in concert with others, while autonomous reflexivity, which often develops in response to some kind of break with the context of one's birth, is the capacity to hold internally one's deliberations and formulate one's own decision regardless of the views of your social context. The shift from communicative to autonomous reflexivity is very similar to the shift from an external to internal voice that is central to the notion of self-authorship. Meta-reflexivity characterises the individual whose choices are informed significantly by a concern for others and for society in general.

The research question guiding this study can be summarised as follows:

How does having participated in higher education influence young people's crafting of their life courses?

The study focuses inter alia on:

- Knowledge and dispositions acquired in higher education
- Opportunities & constraints experienced
- Choices & deliberations made
- Emerging agency and reflexivity

The research project draws on in-depth interviews conducted with young adults drawn from across three South African universities who commenced bachelor's studies in science or humanities in 2009. In this paper we present preliminary findings from the first phase of data collection in this study. Detailed narrative analysis gives context to the development of personal and social identity, in conjunction with emergent forms of reflexivity. Working across the narratives allows for a perspective on the purposes of higher education that goes well beyond the economic and offers a contextual and contemporary account of the public good purposes of higher education.

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