

Investigating university access to South African undergraduate higher education (0251)

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A symposium proposal

In what ways does access to undergraduate education have a transformative impact on people and societies? What conditions are required for this impact to occur? What are the pathways from an undergraduate education to the public good, including inclusive economic development? How is the notion of the 'public good' understood and taken up in the university context? These questions have particular resonance in the South African higher education system and context, which is attempting to tackle the challenges of widening access and improving completion rates in what was historically an elite and racially segregated system ([Naidoo, 2004](#)). Higher education (HE) is recognised in core legislation as having a distinctive and crucial role in building post-apartheid society ([Department of Education, 1997](#)) and is a key driver of economic development but also 'equity, social justice and democracy' in the state's vision for 2030 ([National Planning Commission, 2013](#)). Although the South African schooling system continues to struggle to improve significantly (with severe effects for access and success at university), HE itself is also recognised as needing urgent and immediate attention ([Morrow, 2009](#)) in terms of fair access, quality, and equitable outcomes.

This symposium is based on the interim findings of an ESRC and NRF-funded international research partnership between the Centre for Global Higher Education and leading centres of Higher Education research in South Africa. It will explore our initial findings about what available research tells us about access to, students' experiences of, and outcomes from South African higher education and will consider the implications of this exploration for higher education globally. We also note where there are significant research gaps which that need to be addressed.

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Paper 1:

Investigating university access to South African undergraduate higher education

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Abstract

South African government policy in the post-apartheid period has prioritised expanding access to higher education, and there have been shifts in patterns of access. Nonetheless, the extreme inequality in South African society is reflected in patterns of access to higher education. Overall the system is relatively poorly funded by the state, with limited bursary provision, and this limits access to university even for those students who do obtain the necessary school leaving results. Poorer students, if they do manage to go to university, are less likely to gain access to the higher status universities. This is one of the mechanisms by which societal structures are reproduced. This paper offers a critical overview of the achievements and limitations with regard to university access over this period. At the same time student agency and choice-making is recognised as a key impact on these patterns.

Keywords

Access; student agency; patterns of inequality

Presenter Bios

Melanie Walker is NRF Chair in Higher Education and Human Development at University of the Free State where she leads a research group of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. She is currently working on two ESRC funded projects. She is Vice President of the Human Development and Capability Association and a fellow of ASSAF. Her most recent books, both published in 2016, are *Universities and Global Human Development* co-authored with Alejandra Boni and, *Socially just pedagogies, capabilities and quality in higher education. Global Perspectives*, edited with Merridy Wilson-Strydom.

Mikateko Höppener's is a post-doctoral research fellow in higher education and human development at the University of the Free State. Her doctoral research used Amartya Sen's capability approach in researching how Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education might contribute to poverty reduction through cultivating public-good professionals who seek to advance sustainable human development.

Extended Abstract

South Africa's Gini coefficient ranges from about [0.660 to 0.696](#) (depending on whether welfare payments are included). This makes South Africa one of the most consistently unequal countries in the world. Such pronounced inequality can be attributed to skewed endowments (assets that people and households have) persisting post-1994; higher education constitutes one such intergenerational endowment. For example, in 2014 5.3% of the black population had completed post-school education, compared to 27.5% of the white population. The participation rate in 2013 by black students was 16.5% and for white

students 54.5%. Some universities are historically much better placed to protect their dominance and their predominantly middle class intake, leaving less advantaged universities to provide access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. University status then plays out to reproduce privilege. We know that the minimum qualification of a bachelor's pass will not ensure access to the best universities or the most prestigious programmes such as medicine, the health sciences and law. It is hardly coincidence that the best universities have the lowest number of NSFAS students (as a rough proxy for SES) and the historically disadvantaged universities have the largest numbers. Pitman (2015, p. 289) explains well when he writes that, 'a high-status student with accumulated cultural capital' is 'more valuable to an elite university than a low-status student with subsidised economic capital'. The South African higher education sector is not status homogenous.

When one further considers the World Bank claimed returns on higher education - South Africa has the highest average rate of private returns from higher education of 39.5 (compared to Ghana 28, Brazil 17, Turkey, 14, Argentina 12, USA 14), higher education seems rather essential to economic development and to fair social mobility in South Africa. But higher education also reproduces social privilege. Educational inequality in South Africa is shaped by race and class, shaping how people are placed to perceive and respond to higher education as an opportunity structure. Different people have different resources which they can convert to the human capabilities to access university; all cannot compete fairly as the figures above suggest. Government policy aimed at expanding access thus depends on historical and existing social and political factors, including race-class stratification. International research on university choice shows how choices and aspirations are socially constructed under conditions of inequality so that the reproductive possibilities of higher education begin even before students enter university. This makes the challenge of access particularly pertinent for thinking about the public good contributions of universities.

Moreover, in South Africa with an underfunded higher education system (real term decline over ten years of -1.35%), we must assume that for the foreseeable future that higher education will remain a scarce commodity. We therefore need to consider how accessible the existing places in higher education are, to whom, on what grounds higher education in different kinds of universities is made available to which students, and what criteria prevail, for example social priorities, academic merit, expanding student diversity of socio-economic and race backgrounds, and so on. As McCowan (2016, p.641) points out, the challenge is to develop 'a sustainably funded system of high quality, providing opportunity for all', when numerical expansion may not necessarily increase opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

Work on access in the 'Pathways' project is therefore examining the macro, meso and micro interactions of society and higher education, including: government policy, regulation and funding; institutional policies and practices; and individual student choices. A focus of the study is to capture the changing and contested meanings around who the legitimate subject of admission policies are, and underlying conceptions of fairness (whether of merit-based admissions, or something else), and what research has been done in South Africa.

Our research questions on access therefore are: 1) What are the changing patterns of access to HE by type of institution, field of study, and level of degree? To what extent have historical inequalities in access been addressed and what new ones are emerging, including those

related to wider societal changes such as new patterns of immigration? 2) What are the effects of government policy on access to and participation in higher education? How is this mediated by organisational policies? 3) What are the socio-economic drivers of educational success prior to HE? How do we account for patterns of student choice? 4) What comparative lessons can be drawn for widening participation?

Conceptual framing

Our notions of 'fairness' and 'equality' are informed in the first instance by Therborn's (2013) argument that equality consists in 'equality of capability to function fully as human beings', and that this human capability (Sen, 1999) is influenced by inequality arrangements, in the case of higher education across two intersecting axes of resource inequality understood as unequal resources to act and including money or income, and existential inequality, where the latter refers to inequality of personhood including recognition, association, status and power. McCowan's (2016) notion of equity (fairness) of access distinguishes between three dimensions of access which can be investigated in the South African literature in relation to the public good and the two intersecting dimensions of equality. The dimensions are: sufficient places (availability), conditions to support all to access those places (accessibility), and horizontality which we interpret as stratification and differentiation among universities of different histories and types. We therefore focus on what the available research and data tells us about how diverse students manage to get themselves admitted to a South African university, and the aspirational and agency (choosing and deciding) opportunities and obstacles they face, and also note significant research gaps in establishing the 'state of the art' regarding access research, including navigational pathways and decision-making processes towards choosing, accessing and funding South African higher education study.

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This paper is part of a broader project team looking at access to South African Higher Education. We acknowledge the contributions by Talita Calitz, Vincent Carpentier, Honji Conana, Patricio Langa, Yann Lebeau, Langutani Masehela, Mukovhe Masuta, Phiwe Mathe, Rajani Naidoo, Sanele Nene, Jussi Valimaa, and Gerald Wangenge-Ouma.

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Paper 2

Students' experiences of South African undergraduate higher education

Paul Ashwin, Sherran Clarence, Mandy Hlengwa, Thierry Luescher, Sioux McKenna, Monica McLean, Thandeka Mkhize, and Rebecca Schendel.

Abstract

Pedagogy, curriculum and institutional environment are all crucial dimensions in supporting transformative student experiences in higher education. This paper interrogates three propositions around what is needed to support the experiences of all students in an equitable manner, both within and outside the formal curriculum. We draw on existing empirical evidence to assess the validity of these propositions in the context of South African higher education.

Key words: Student experiences; higher education; personal and social transformation; pedagogy; curriculum; extracurricular activities

Presenter Bios:

Paul Ashwin is Professor of Higher Education and Head of Department at the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK. Paul's research focuses on teaching–learning and knowledge–curriculum practices in higher education and their relations to higher education policies. Paul's books include 'Analysing Teaching-Learning Interactions in Higher Education' (2009, Continuum) and 'Reflective Teaching in Higher Education' (2015, Bloomsbury). Paul is a researcher in the ESRC and HEFCE funded Centre for Global Higher Education, a co coordinating editor for the international journal 'Higher Education,' and a co-editor of the Bloomsbury book series 'Understanding Student Experiences of Higher Education'.

Sioux McKenna is Professor and Coordinator of the PhD in Higher Education programme in the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning at Rhodes University. This programme brings together academics from across the country and the continent more broadly to interrogate a spread of issues pertaining to higher education. Her research interests focus on the role of higher education in society, who gets access to the powerful knowledge in the academy and what constitutes 'powerful knowledge'. She also has a particular interest in doctoral education and postgraduate supervision and is the project manager of a national supervision programme: www.postgraduatesupervision.com.

Extended Abstract

In order to understand the transformative potential of higher education both within and beyond the South African context, 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](#)).

Research from a range of contexts suggests that, although undergraduate students' experiences at university can be individually and socially transformative, such potential is not always fulfilled ([Arum & Roksa, 2011](#); [Bok, 2009](#); [Schendel, 2015](#)). A number of critical dimensions have been identified: the need for students to have a sense of belonging in their institutions; the need for curricula to be designed to support students' personal engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge; the need for students to experience teaching and teachers that are both supportive and set high standards ([McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin, 2015](#); [Shay 2008](#)). However, the means to create teaching and learning environments that support these dimensions is less clear. We also need to develop better understandings of how to provide non-traditional students with more equal access to disciplinary and professional knowledge ([Shay 2015](#)) and the role of students' wider university experiences in these transformative processes ([Ashwin & McVitty, 2015](#)) including co-curricular training offered by student affairs, student participation in student union activities and political activism (Luescher-Mamashela, 2015).

These issues have led us to focus on the following questions about students' experiences of undergraduate higher education in South Africa:

- 1) What pedagogic, curricular, and social elements are needed to construct undergraduate experiences that are personally transformative for all students?
- 2) How might such experiences prepare students to engage in social transformation?

In order to respond to these questions, we have developed three propositions about students' experiences of South African undergraduate higher education that we are interrogating through our work. These are:

1. Students' experiences are systematically unjustly and unequally differentiated, due to the material, structural and cultural conditions within and beyond institutions.
2. Institutional cultures, curricula and pedagogies are central to possibilities of the kind of personal transformation that contributes to the public good.
 - a. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on availability of professionally qualified and committed academics, supported by high quality academic development.
 - b. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on flexible programme provision that takes account of student diversity.
 - c. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on resource allocation that takes account of the differentiated material conditions of students and institutions.
3. Students' experiences beyond the curriculum can play a key role in personal transformation that contributes to the public good.

In this paper, we will explore the team's progress in reviewing these propositions in relation to South African undergraduate higher education and consider the possible implications for other higher education systems of our findings to date.

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Examining the post-graduation trajectories of young South Africans: A critical review of the literature on graduate destinations

Jenni Case, Sam Fongwa, Delia Marshall and Tristan McCowan

Abstract:

Research into graduate destinations has been growing internationally, notably in the context of a policy environment that has prioritized the economic purposes of higher education (the human capital theory position). In South Africa these concerns also pertain, but maybe even more significantly the issues about the racialised inheritances of the past. Thus there has been a growing interest in graduate destination surveys. In this paper we consider four major studies in this area – two earlier conducted by the HSRC, and then two more recent that have focused on particular geographical areas. We identify areas where the findings are similar and we also consider pertinent differences and attempt to produce some interpretations from these. From this analysis we aim to build a position that describes and explains young South Africans' transitions from university into the workplace. The key finding supports the thesis developing elsewhere that higher education has a much smaller effect than is anticipated on graduate's opportunities and experiences, with other factors relating to social background playing significant roles.

Key words: graduate destinations; transitions to the workplace; social background

Presenter Bios:

Jennifer Case is a professor at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her research on the student experience of learning, focusing mainly on science and engineering education, has been published across a range of journal articles in higher education and her recent book, 'Researching student learning in higher education: A social realist approach' published in 2013 by Routledge. She is a coordinating editor for the international journal Higher Education.

Delia Marshall is a professor in the Physics Department at the University of the Western Cape. She researches in physics education, higher education and academic development. She teaches in the undergraduate programme in Physics and has also played a key role in the design and delivery of the foundation programme.

Extended abstract:

What graduates end up doing after they leave university has become an increasing concern and interest over the last few decades, in times of increased participation in higher education, growing economic uncertainties and neoliberal politics. These combined effects mean that there has been an especial focus on graduate employment – whether graduates are employed or not, and if so at what level. The main instrument for determining this has been the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), well established in developed countries, but only more recently being used in developing countries, not least because of the resource and logistical implications to obtain these data.

In South Africa, the first national graduate study was conducted by the HSRC (Moleke, 2004). They traced 2 672 graduates who had obtained their qualifications between 1990 and 1998. The key findings were that the rate of unemployment among university graduates was generally low (about 94% of graduates found employment within a year of graduation). However, the study also noted that black graduates, women, those with degrees in the humanities and graduates from HBUs were all significantly more likely to report having experienced a period of unemployment.

This study was then extended by the subsequent, larger HSRC study conducted in 2005 (Moleke, 2006). This was a tracer survey of the 2003 cohort of tertiary 'leavers' (drop-outs) and graduates at seven selected HEIs (WITS, TUT, SU, CPUT, UWC, UFH, UL). A 16% response rate was received on this postal survey. This study provided more detail on the phenomenon of graduate unemployment, showing again that black African graduates (at both HBUs and HWUs) were more likely to be unemployed. The overall statistics were as follows:

	Black African	Coloured	Indian	White
Graduates	41%	18%	14%	9%
Non-completers	48%	28%	6%	5%

Bhorat et al (Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser, 2012) provided a further analysis of these data, showing that unemployment rates racially skewed within institutions: 42% for black graduates from HWUs vs 10% for whites at HWUs. They also showed that graduating or not completing is not significant in terms of probability of finding employment, but that it does affect earnings, with graduates earning on average 25% more than non-completers. Once employed, this study showed that race and gender did not significantly impact on earnings. Programmes with increased probabilities of finding work were those in Education (although with lower earning possibilities) and in general programmes from the universities of technology.

In 2013, the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) published results from a study of 2010 graduates from all four universities in the Western Cape (UCT, SU, UWC, CPUT); graduates were contacted in 2012 (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013). Using a combination of an online survey supplemented by telephonic interviews, they achieved a response rate of 22.5%. To address the issue of potential skewedness in respondees, they adopted a statistical weighting procedure. Key findings were that 84% of the interviewed cohort were employed at the time of the interview. Unemployment was highest among black African graduates (20%) vs. coloured (7.8%) and white students (4%). There were significant institutional differences between the 4 HEIs were significant – with unemployment rates as follows: 15.8% (CPUT), 13.5% (UWC), 6,4% (UCT), 4,8% (SU). Regarding job search strategies, they note that the use of social networks was more prevalent amongst graduates from UCT and SU. Overall, 28% of white graduates report benefitting from social capital vs 11% of African graduates. Regarding debates on higher

education as a public good, they noted with interest that 47% of all graduates were employed in the public sector – education; health & social work; provincial and municipal government; arts, culture & sport. Here again there were some institutional differences: UWC (64%), SU (56%), UCT (42%), CPUT (41%).

Recently, Rogan et al (2015) conducted a graduate tracer study which approached a stratified random sample of all RU/UFH graduates who completed a three- or four-year bachelor's degree in either 2010 or 2011. As with the CHEC study, telephonic interviews were used to supplement an online survey – very impressive response rates were achieved (39% for the UFH and 47% at RU) were much higher than for past SA tracer studies (cf. 16% HSRC; 22,5% CHEC). Key findings were that there was a significant difference in RU and UFH unemployment rates (7% among Rhodes graduates cf. national average of 7% vs 20% among UFH graduates (3x higher). Contrary to the findings of some previous studies, they found that unemployment for humanities graduates is not significantly higher than for other fields of study. Similarly to other studies they found that graduates in education had the lowest unemployment rates. There were also institutional differences in the sectors in which graduates were employed - 73% of RU graduates are employed in the private sector, while 67% of UFH graduates are employed in government (public sector). Similarly to the CHEC study they also found important differences in job search strategies: for RU graduates, most common strategy was through personal contacts/networks/social media (about 50%); for UFH graduates, mostly through newspaper advertisements (36%).

Thus, looking across all the studies we can see that the problem of graduate employment was initially overstated – it is about 7% for university graduates overall. However, race, gender and type of HEI attended (HWUs vs. HBUs) are still key determinants of labour market outcomes. Unemployment for humanities graduates is not uniformly higher than for other fields of study (education has the best chances of employment). Significant differences were noted across institutions in the sector of employment (private sector vs. public sector). Regarding job search strategies, the key role of social networks was noted.

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This paper is part of a broader project team looking at graduate outcomes in South Africa. We acknowledge the contributions by Stephanie Allais, Rosemary Deem, Bruce Kloot, Siphelo Ngwangcu, Ibrahim Oanda, and Renato Pedrosa.

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Paper 4: Integrating the pathways to personal and public good in South African undergraduate higher education
Paul Ashwin and Jenni Case

Abstract

This final paper in the symposium will integrate the insights from the previous three papers in order to develop a synthesis of the insights about pathways to personal and public good in South African undergraduate higher education. It will also place these insights into the wider context of international higher education and consider what the South African case can tell us about the ways in which undergraduate education contributes to the development of personal and public good globally.

Key words: personal and public goods; global higher education; access; students' experiences; graduate outcomes

Presenter Bios:

Paul Ashwin is Professor of Higher Education and Head of Department at the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK. Paul's research focuses on teaching–learning and knowledge–curriculum practices in higher education and their relations to higher education policies. Paul's books include 'Analysing Teaching-Learning Interactions in Higher Education' (2009, Continuum) and 'Reflective Teaching in Higher Education' (2015, Bloomsbury). Paul is a researcher in the ESRC and HEFCE funded Centre for Global Higher Education, a co coordinating editor for the international journal 'Higher Education,' and a co-editor of the Bloomsbury book series 'Understanding Student Experiences of Higher Education'

Jennifer Case is a professor at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her research on the student experience of learning, focusing mainly on science and engineering education, has been published across a range of journal articles in higher education and her recent book, 'Researching student learning in higher education: A social realist approach' published in 2013 by Routledge. She is a coordinating editor for the international journal Higher Education

Extended Abstract

Whilst the first three papers in the symposium consider access to, students' experiences of and outcomes from South African undergraduate higher education separately, what is original and significant about the work of this international, partnership is the examination of these issues as a collective whole. This involves recognising that they are three dimensions of the same issue: how an undergraduate education contributes to both personal and social transformation ([Watson, 2014](#)). Widening access and transformative undergraduate experiences are important because of the potential they have for contributing to personal and public good, and the distribution of these goods cannot be understood without knowledge of access to and experiences of HE ([Oketch et al., 2014](#)).

During the colonial period, schools and universities were mostly established with the intentions of educating the elite of white colonial society. There was limited access by other members of society to these institutions. There was also some provision of education specifically intended for black South Africans, mostly through the church and through missionaries. By the early twentieth century there was thus a small black middle class who accessed education to high levels. The apartheid system, taking effect from the 1950s, dramatically altered this situation, closing mission schools as well as all possibilities of access by black South Africans to institutions now formally designated white. Bantu education was deliberately intended to educate black South Africans only for limited roles in the economy. The legacy of this intervention has been devastating for the country. Together with the enforced structural inequalities due to all manner of restrictions on individuals, we still live with an educational landscape that bears these scars (Christie, 1985).

This project attempts to provide a synthesis of the contemporary South African higher education landscape, focusing on issues of private and public good. As noted in Walker's, the system has some of the highest average private returns on higher education, confirming the view by many that higher education is the only route out of poverty. But all the way through the trajectory, young people's experiences are structured by inequality in background. In access this determines not only whether you can get to university (state funding for students is limited), but also what status university you can attend (access is based on school results which are strongly linked to quality of school background). In experiences if you are a first generation student you are more likely to experience difficulties in a traditional university. And in seeking work, the research overviewed by Case et al shows that job opportunities are also conditioned by social background (indicated at least partly by race).

But a focus on private good is insufficient, most especially in a societal context such as South Africa. For the healing and development of such a place, graduates have a crucial role to play in contributing to the public good. Higher education participation will need to expand to meet the broad social needs of the country, and thus universities will need to build their capacity to adequately support a much more diverse group of students than they currently do. It is also clear that this will not be possible without adequate and expanded state support, currently not assured (Mbembe, 2015).

The project thus seeks to uncover the transformative potential, especially of the university, in assisting students to overcome these structural difficulties and to exercise their agency as young people. The paper by Ashwin et al. proposes a limited number of core interventions that might be most effective in this regard, and seeks to determine empirically their validity.

The conclusion to this paper will consider the lessons from the South African case in the broader global context where the impact of social inequity on higher education is largely unresolved despite massive growth in participation.

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