

Integrating the pathways to personal and public good in South African undergraduate higher education (0261)

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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.

References

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