

‘Pathways to Personal and Public Good’: Implications of project findings for higher education policies and practices in South Africa

Paul Ashwin and Jennifer Case

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This policy brief is based on the outcomes of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), UK, and National Research Foundation (NRF), South Africa, funded Newton Fund 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 full outcomes of the project are reported in the book *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good*, which has just been published by African Minds and is available open access from: <http://www.africanminds.co.za/dd-product/higher-education-pathways-south-african-undergraduate-education-and-the-public-good/>. The project was a collaboration between the UK-based Centre for Global Higher Education and a cluster of NRF funded South African higher education research projects.

The Pathways to Personal and Public Good project focused on the pathways through South African undergraduate education to the public good. In particular, it sought to understand the ways in which higher education in South Africa can play a transformative role in society by examining the relations between access to, student experiences of, and graduate outcomes from South African undergraduate education. The project, which involved 34 researchers from South Africa, the UK and beyond, did this primarily by reviewing what is currently known about South African undergraduate education.

▪ The South African context

The South African context is characterised by extreme inequality and a history of colonialism and apartheid. Educationally, schooling outcomes are poor compared to other countries and the higher education system is stratified with universities having different levels of prestige and resources. Recent student protests have highlighted dissatisfaction with the level of change in universities since the apartheid era. However, there are also important factors that support the development of a more inclusive higher education system – including the democratic commitment to higher education having a transformative role in society, the openness of South African society and the value assigned to academic freedom.

▪ Emerging understandings

The project highlighted two key tensions in our current understanding of South African undergraduate education in its public university system. The first is that there is a tendency to focus on individual universities rather than understanding how the system works as a whole. We also know far more about students’ access to, experiences of, and outcomes from historically advantaged universities, where higher education researchers tend to be based, than we do about historically disadvantaged institutions. This gap is significant given the crucial role historically disadvantaged institutions can play in transforming who gains access to and benefits from an undergraduate education.

The second tension is between the reproductive and transformative potential of undergraduate education. In South Africa’s transition to a democracy, higher education was expected to play a key role in alleviating the inequalities inherited from the apartheid era. Equally 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, the ‘graduate premiums’ that are generated by this personal transformation are also a clear indicator of inequality because they signal the differences in income between

graduates and non-graduates. 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. Indeed, if higher education was successful in supporting the transformation of society in the way envisaged in policy, it is likely that graduate premiums would fall. For this not to lead to disillusionment with higher education, it would appear to be crucial that the societal transformation is underpinned by personal transformation in students that ensures a commitment to a transformed society.

- **The need to understand the system of undergraduate education**

These two tensions highlight the need to develop a better understanding of how higher education acts as a system of education. We need to better understand how the system functions as a whole and the roles that different institutions play in supporting students to develop transformative relationships to knowledge. We need to better understand the impact that differential prestige and resources have on students studying in institutions across the higher education system. In doing so, rather than focusing solely on how to better support elite universities to compete globally, we need to develop a vision of an inclusive and transformational system of undergraduate education that supports all students to transform themselves and society through the knowledge that is offered by higher education.

- **Implications for policies and practices**

The primary implication of this project for policies and practices related to South African undergraduate education is that we need to have a clearer sense of the educational functions of the higher education system in addition to our current focus on its research and social functions.

This involves supporting the development of institutional arrangements and curricula that are designed around students as they actually are rather than unhelpful notions of the 'ideal student'. Those responsible for degree programmes need to have a clear sense of why the knowledge that they are inviting students to engage with is important, how it will be personally transformative, and how it will prepare students to engage in the transformation of society. There is also a pressing need to develop a better understanding of the kinds of structures in society that can support graduates in engaging in the transformation of society once they have progressed beyond university.

Finally, there is a need for ongoing public debates about how higher education should contribute to the

transformation of society. Given that graduate premiums reflect inequalities between degree holders and those without access to higher education, public discussion is needed about the extent to which undergraduate education is about transforming the life chances of individual students and how much it is about developing graduates who are able to play an active role in the transformation of South African society.

Paul Ashwin is Professor of Higher Education, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, and a researcher at the Centre for Global Higher Education.

Email: p.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

Jennifer Case is an Honorary Professor at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, Department Head and Professor in the Department of Engineering Education at Virginia Tech in the US, and a researcher at the Centre for Global Higher Education.

Email: jencase@vt.edu

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- **Project members**

Stephanie Allais, University of the Witwatersrand; Paul Ashwin, Lancaster University; UK; Talita Calitz, University of Pretoria; Vincent Carpentier, University College, London, UK; Jenni Case, Virginia Tech, USA; Sherran Clarence, Rhodes University; Honjiswa Conana, University of the Western Cape; Rosemary Deem, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK; Samuel Fongwa, Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town; Amanda Hlengwa, Rhodes University; Philippa Kerr, University of the Free State; Janja Komljenovic, Lancaster University, UK; Bruce Kloot, University of Cape Town; Patricio Langa, University of the Western Cape; Yann Lebeau, University of East Anglia, UK; Thierry Luescher, Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town; Delia Marshall, University of the Western Cape; Giulio Marini, University College, London, UK; Langutani Masehela, University of Venda; Mikateko Mathebula, University of the Free State; Tristan McCowan, University College, London, UK; Sioux McKenna, Rhodes University; Monica McLean, University of Nottingham, UK; Thandeka Mkhize, Sur University College, Oman; Rajani Naidoo, University of Bath, UK; Siphelo Ngcwangu, University of Johannesburg; Thando Njovane, Rhodes University; Ibrahim Oanda, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa; Gerald Ouma, University of Pretoria; Renato Pedrosa, University of Campinas, Brazil; Rebecca Schendel, University College, London, UK; Suellen Shay, University of Cape Town; Jussi Välimaa, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; Melanie Walker, University of the Free State.