Individual paper submission

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Title: Conceptualising higher education and the public good in Africa: a journey of complexity and challenge.

Extended Abstract

Higher education has been the object of significant attention in Africa in recent years, being seen as the key to unlocking the potential of the youth bulge and to transforming commodities-based economies into knowledge societies (Bloom, Canning & Chan 2006; Cloete, Maassen & Bailey 2015; Economist 2015; World Bank 2009). Yet despite significant expansions of enrolment, major barriers to access still exist, reflecting in particular inequalities based on class, gender, geographical location, ethnicity, language and disability (AAI 2015; Morley & Lugg 2009). Similarly, there are challenges of teaching and learning quality and research capacity. The massive student protests in South Africa from 2015 have highlighted problems of access and funding, but also the unresolved colonial legacy in the higher education system. These factors raise questions not only of the *public good* relevance of higher education - beyond the obvious advantages conferred on those who manage to go to the elite institutions – but also of how higher education and its relationship with society may be conceptualised given the distinctive historical trajectories of these countries (Lebeau 2008; Walker, McLean, Dison & Peppin-Vaughan, 2009).

This paper explores the relationship between higher education and the public good in the African context. It is principally concerned with the connections and disconnections that emerge when this relationship is conceptualised and made meaning of. The paper does this by drawing on work completed thus far for a three-year research project on Higher Education and the Public Good in four African countries – Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. This project, funded by the UK's ESRC-Newton Fund and the National Research Foundation in South Africa, is a collaborative project drawing together researchers from each of the four countries. Using a mixed method approach primarily involving key informant interviews and the analysis of relevant data on higher education in the participating countries, the project aims to develop a deepened understanding of how key constituencies – students, staff, governance bodies, employers, government and civil society – understand higher education and the public good within their country contexts and across the region. The project is particularly concerned with examining the links that are made between higher education and development and how notions of higher

education and the public good are formulated in societies marked by high levels of poverty and inequality.

The paper begins by discussing a conceptual framework developed for the project that delineates two distinct but intersecting ways in which higher education and the public good are linked (Unterhalter, Allais, Howell, McCowan, Morley, Oanda & Oketch, 2017). It is argued that on the one hand, higher education is portrayed as *instrumental* in shaping a version of the public good where it is perceived to lead in the future to particular manifestations of the public good, mainly economic, social, political or cultural in nature (McMahon 2009; Stiglitz 1999). The paper discusses some of the key arguments that underpin this conceptual framing and the different levels of the public good they speak to, from the individual and community level to the provision of 'global public goods' (Marginson, 2007; 2013; Menashy 2009). However, on the other hand are those arguments where the relationship between higher education and the public good is seen as an *intrinsic* one, where the intellectual, physical and cultural experiences enabled through higher education express and enact the public good (Calhoun 2006; Leibowitz, 2013; Locatelli 2017; Marginson 2011; Nixon 2012; Singh 2001). Important here are considerations of the particular historical conjuncture that shapes experiences of higher education at a particular time and what these may mean for the society and the public good.

The paper then moves on to a critical consideration of these notions within the African context, recognising in particular that both conceptual arguments rest on a notion of an ideal type of higher education institution operating under conditions in which such relationships are able to exist and thrive. This part of the paper draws primarily from a literature review of higher education in Africa over the last twenty-five years, which provides valuable insights into the conditions of higher education dominant across the continent. The trajectory of higher education in Africa has moved through various phases, from the establishment of flagship national universities in the post-independence period for state bureaucracy formation, to the emergence of developmental universities with a commitment to indigenising knowledge and benefiting marginalised populations, through to more recent tendencies towards marketisation of the public institutions and the growth of the private sector ([Assié-Lumumba & CODESRIA 2006](); ADEA Working Group on Higher Education & AAU 2004; Coleman 1986; Mamdani, 2007; McCowan 2016). South Africa, as in many aspects of the society, has some unique features in higher education, moving through an entirely racially segregated and fragmented sector in the apartheid era, to the emergence of comprehensive universities, though ever challenged by the legacy of racism, inequality and exclusion.

The insights developed from the analysis and juxtaposition of these contexts challenge some of the conceptual assumptions made. In particular, they emphasise how important contextual factors, including historical ones, are in shaping the role and functioning of higher education and thus its relationship to the public good. Similarly, they suggest that mainstream (Western) conceptualisations of higher education and the public good are underpinned by particular understandings of the nature and form of higher education and how knowledge is acquired and developed – orientations that may be very far from the reality of highly unequal and politically

complex societies within which higher education is deeply embedded. In addition to contributing to a reconceptualisation of the *public*, these contexts also challenge conceptualisations of the *private*, given the strong obligations of individuals to extended families, and the sharing of the fruits of higher education amongst their communities of origin. The paper concludes with a consideration of what may be important in conceptualising higher education and the public good in the African context and the value of such thinking for broader debates on the role of higher education at the present time.

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