Theorising the Relationship Between Higher Education and the Public Good in Africa

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Abstract

This article explores conceptualisations of the public good role of higher education and considers their application to higher education in African countries. The article starts by delineating a number of different ways in which higher education and the public good are linked, grouping these together as instrumental and intrinsic versions of the relationship between higher education and the public good. In considering the connections and disjunctures between these two formulations and the way studies on higher education in contemporary Africa have engaged with this debate, we argue for discussing the importance of processes that link or have the potential to connect instrumental and intrinsic visions of higher education and the public good. We discuss these, drawing on a set of framing ideas associated with conditions of possibility and forms of social contract, which, we argue, express a less abstract form of this discussion, more responsive to the complexities of context associated with actual higher education institutions and the systems they work in.

Keywords: Africa, higher education, universities, public good

Résumé

Cet article explore les conceptualisations du rôle de bien public de l'enseignement supérieur et examine leur application à l'enseignement supérieur dans les pays d'Afrique. L'article commence par décrire un certain nombre de différentes façons dont l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public sont liés, en les regroupant en versions instrumentales et intrinsèques de la relation entre l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public. En examinant les liens et les disjonctions entre ces deux formulations et la manière dont

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les études sur l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique contemporaine se sont
engagées dans ce débat, nous plaidons pour discuter de l'importance des
processus qui relient ou ont le potentiel de relier les visions instrumentales et
intrinsèques de l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public. Nous en discutons,
en nous appuyant sur un ensemble d'idées de cadrage associées aux conditions
de possibilité et aux formes de contrat social, qui, selon nous, expriment une
forme moins abstraite de cette discussion plus sensible aux complexités du
contexte associé aux établissements d'enseignement supérieur réels et aux
systèmes dans lesquels ils fonctionnent.

Mots-clés : Afrique, enseignement supérieur, universités, bien public

Introduction

This article explores conceptualisations of the public good role of higher
education and considers their application to higher education in African
countries. The article starts by delineating a number of different ways in
which higher education and the public good are linked. We selected a
range of ways in which the definition of public good is argued for and pose
questions about the form of higher education this presupposes. As many
arguments about the public good emerge from the disciplines of Economics
and Politics, these analyses tend to assume particular ideal types of higher
education. One of our questions concerns whether existing higher education
institutions and systems of higher education are able to fulfil this role and, if
so, under what conditions.

Instrumental or Intrinsic Relationships Between
Higher Education and the Public Good

Two distinct approaches frame how higher education and the public
good have been linked. One approach may be termed instrumental, in
that it looks at relationships established by higher education that may or
may or not in the future cause public good, associated with, for example,
expanded healthcare, education, social protection and wellbeing. The
second approach may be termed intrinsic, as arguments are made that the
experience of a particular form of higher education, associated with critical
discussion, debate and particular forms of association, is in itself a public
good (Unterhalter and Howell 2021).

Higher education has been portrayed as *instrumental* in shaping a
version of the public good in which qualifications, knowledge production,
innovation, development of the professional classes and expertise are
perceived to lead to particular manifestations of the public good, delineated

as economic, social, political or cultural (McMahon 2009; Stiglitz 1999). The questions that economists have asked about the public good, particularly about availability and allocation (Gazier and Touffut 2006), intermingle in this analysis with ideas about the benefits that flow from higher education, which are taken to be universal. There is an assumption here that higher education is associated in some direct way with shaping necessary research and learning, contributing to what works to ensure development, national cohesion or economic growth.

The openness and dynamism of the instrumental form of the relationship between higher education and the public good is linked with mobility. One problem with this approach is that it is susceptible to misapplication, as situations and the people in them change. Additionally, the approach may be insensitive to the relationships between work and learning in higher education. Another problem is that short-term achievements that appear to allow forms of learning associated with higher education to be repeated may not end up contributing to long-term goals with regard to public good. For example, a training package for medical students geared to expensive treatments, with little attention to social determinants of health, may not adequately contribute to a knowledge base that secures health for all.

A contrasting set of arguments portray the relationship between higher education and the public good as an *intrinsic* one, where the intellectual, physical and cultural experiences enabled through higher education express and enact the public good. This is associated, for example, with democratisation, critical thinking, active citizenship and reductions in prejudice – that is, these experiences may prefigure forms of universalisation and connection across existing boundaries of inequalities (Singh 2001; Calhoun 2006; Leibowitz 2013, 2011; Locatelli 2017). It is important here to consider the historical conjuncture that shapes experiences of higher education at a particular time, what it may mean and what is entailed in prefiguring universal meanings of the public good in different contexts of historically formed inequalities. In these analyses, the relationship between higher education and the public good means that the public good (often delineated in terms of critiques of forms of power and a site for open access to information) is an intrinsic part of the experience of higher education and the relationships that are nurtured there.

Intrinsic arguments tend to stress the psychosocial, cultural, relational insights and soft power, or forms of insight that are developed in particular kinds of higher education or put under stress through particular relationships of colonialism, racism, misogyny, globalisation and neoliberalism. These arguments assert that it is experiences of the physical, intellectual/cultural

or affective *spaces* of higher education that express and enact public good through 'envisioning' and providing a language for or symbolic depiction of freedom, solidarities and alternative descriptions (Gamedze and Gamedze 2016; Ndebele 2017). Thus, learning in higher education is portrayed as interactive, and what is placed at the forefront of the learning, teaching and research aspects of higher education are critical perspectives with regard to what needs to be explored.

Intrinsic analyses tend to look at what is happening at a particular historical conjuncture regarding the experience of higher education and its relationship with other elements of the public sphere, which is not always associated with the state. They draw out the implications for some broader discussion of public good, with temporal results often only loosely sketched. These analyses also tend to emphasise how participants *interpret* public good, but there has been less theorisation of what *outcomes* are entailed. These may be associated, for example, with participation in the public sphere or supporting forms of social citizenship.

An issue that confronts this loose kind of formulation is how higher education, which will always be a setting in some form for elites, is positioned in these practices. The intrinsic form of analysis is susceptible to misapplication in that in the forms of critique may not be appropriate at particular times and may not in and of themselves help with realising long-term values. For example, a focus on decolonising the curriculum for students at an elite higher education institution might enhance their experience of critical thinking but may not directly contribute to a universalisation of education.

A further consideration in framing intrinsic ideas about higher education and the public good is that higher education is not monolithic; like its socioeconomic context, it is highly stratified and pluralised. There are multiple higher educations, which often aim at educating different social groups and produce many varieties of learning from experience, that underpin this vision of the public good. Many less elite universities have a strong applied focus and provide vocational training. Hence, their contribution to the public good is more self-evident. Elite universities in most national locations, however, tend to educate privileged communities and produce politicians, entrepreneurs or senior managers in the economy, senior civil servants or cultural commentators. Their engagement with the public good in higher education spaces is mediated through many of the relationships of inequality that characterise the national and global political economy.

Thus, there are different kinds of conditions of possibility in play in relation to the different interpretations of the relationship of higher education and the public good. For instrumental arguments, conditions of possibility shape the form of the institution, approaches to learning, teaching and research, relationships of allocation and what is known about outcomes, and how all this is monitored. For intrinsic arguments, conditions of possibility are concerned with the interplay between the institution, socio-cultural and politico-economic processes and interactions around research, teaching and learning. There is much more limited concern for monitoring and evaluating the relationships that might follow.

In considering the connections and disjunctures between these two formulations and the way studies on higher education in contemporary Africa have engaged with this debate, we argue for discussing the importance of processes that link or have the potential to connect instrumental and intrinsic visions of higher education and the public good. We discuss these below, drawing on a set of framing ideas that are associated with conditions of possibility and forms of social contract, which express a less abstract form of this discussion.

We suggest that the intrinsic and instrumental arguments in the existing scholarship rest on a notion of an ideal higher education institution that possibly exists in elite forms of institution, or for elite groups of academics or students, but is very far from many higher education institutions that exist in Africa. The analysis we make seeks to foreground the significance of context and the conditions of possibility in helping to connect a future-oriented and instrumental vision with an interactive, here-and-now, intrinsic approach.

Public Good and Higher Education: Real or Ideal Relationships?

A good is something of benefit to people. A good is public or common when its benefit extends beyond the confines of an individual or small family group, concerns a wider collective and suggests some sense of universal accessibility. The nature of this collective may be defined in 'hard-edged' institutional terms, such as citizenship of a state, or in softer 'fuzzier' ways delimited by a set of social, cultural or ethical ties of affiliation and aspirations for universality. These ties may be narrow, linked to a relatively small group or particular class of goods. Or, as in notions of human development, they may encompass everyone alive in the world and generations not yet born. The wider notion stresses the common sense meaning of public good as being in some ways universal and good for everyone at all times. It is evident that

the notion of the public good is not singular and questions of locus bring different assumptions into play. There are thus some very different ways of understanding what comprises a public good and some very different ideas about how to justly or 'rightly' secure this. These different ethical views are associated with very diverse forms of higher education. Thus, mapping this field is complex.

The notion of public good associated with higher education is contested in questions around how the good or goods manifest themselves, what constitutes their private, public, common or ethical nature, and whether and how they can be produced by universities or other kinds of higher education institution. There are further normative questions, which concern the forms of public goods that should be prioritised and how they should be funded and distributed. Other questions concern what processes of redress of past, current or future inequalities, within and beyond higher education institutions, are appropriate when making assessments about the public good roles of higher education.

Oketch (2016) points out that questions of *how much* higher education is required for what kinds of public good are often not interrogated. In addition, a key question concerns what distributional practices should be considered around public good and higher education—that is, whether the major focus should be on distributing at individual, community, national or international levels, and whether non-market or market goods are to be allocated (Marginson 2016: 95). Many authors have sharply divided views on the question of distribution (eg Olssen and Peters, 2005; McCowan, 2016b). It is linked to a further question, which is concerned with the extent to which higher education can create forms of public good on its own, and whether its capacity to do this is a reason for special treatment for the sector.

An important distinction is made by Locatelli (2017) between education *as* a public good and education *for* the public good. We draw on this in highlighting discussions of intrinsic and instrumental connections between higher education and the public good. In the first sense, the focus is on the need to protect accessibility of all to all levels of education and thus is close to the notion of a (human) right. In the second sense, the attention is on how education can promote public goods that are associated, for example, with improved health and wellbeing, citizenship or decent livelihoods, and it is here that some of the issues particularly pertinent to higher education come into play.

A similar distinction is made by Brennan and Naidoo (2008) in relation to the 'import' and 'export' functions of higher education regarding social justice. Using an industrial frame, we can also view the public good in

higher education in relation to inputs (equity of access), process (experiences within the institution) and outputs (impact on the broader society). One question we are concerned with in response to Oketch's question of *how much*, is whether the instrumental connections between higher education and the public good require only sufficient or minimal levels of experience of higher education for this to count as a public good, or whether some more expansive intrinsic experience of public good in higher education is also needed.

A primary consideration here is what might be distinctive about higher education, in relation to education generally, in the promotion of the public good. Universities are commonly considered to have three primary functions: teaching, research and service or community engagement (Oketch, McCowan and Schendel 2014). They share with schools and other forms of education the provision of a space for learning and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. But what is particular to universities is the production of new knowledge through research and scholarship, although not all universities do this to the same degree and many higher education institutions pass on forms of skill or professional knowledge that draw unevenly on research. Research, however, can often be specialised, and its instrumental public good manifestations may be very slow to take shape. Corporate commissions for research, intellectual property rights and patents may temporarily restrict access to knowledge, but with time it is usually dispersed into the public domain. By contrast, teaching is the most obviously public role with instrumental effects. The benefits of teaching are to some extent dependent on the distribution of access (and are often restricted to the privileged, which, in turn, can cement their privilege in society). But it is relatively hard for knowledge and attitudes distributed through teaching to be corralled, and the growth of digital platforms and ICT has further expanded their reach (Lupton, Mewburn and Thomson 2017). Thus, the instrumental and intrinsic versions of public good have many connections, although the shape of the argument made for each is somewhat different.

In the discussion that follows, we look at instrumental arguments that consider higher education to have a role in bringing public good into being, which can be at a local, national or global level. These are temporal or causal arguments. In assessing the research literature, establishing relationships of causality or association between higher education and public good is a challenge. This form of analysis also raises the question of how much higher education, and in what form, generates some of the instrumental links with the public good.

In the next part of the discussion, we look at arguments that assert that relationships within higher education express intrinsic relationships of public good. These often focus on documenting the space of higher education and the relationships that are formed there. While these are richly documented in some studies from Africa, the long-term outcomes of particular forms of intrinsic public good, which persist over time as an outcome of higher education rather than of other cultural interactions, are harder to document. But the concern to pin down outcomes and causation for both instrumental and intrinsic versions of the arguments may obscure the interrelationship between them and the ways in which particular contexts may require us to reconfigure the notion of public good.

Instrumental Arguments: Higher Education Brings About Public Good

Arguments that connect higher education instrumentally with the public good state that higher education is linked, as a direct or associated cause, to various formations of the public good. These may entail – singly or in some combination – economic growth, innovation, improved distribution of income and wealth, more tolerant attitudes, better informed citizenry, better protection and use of environmental resources, a healthier population, and the creation of new knowledge that can address social problems and challenges and expand human development or social solidarity.

These arguments either amalgamate the formations of goods as 'the public good', or discuss specific forms of good separately as particular instances of the public good. But in whichever form, this type of argument positions higher education as an engine of these public good processes. These arguments are largely framed by a political-economy orientation that draws out some of the public good benefits of higher education as a phase of deepening research and knowledge production. Many writers who use this approach pay less attention to the expression of the public good *within* higher education institutions.

The instrumental version of the idea of public good is often linked to claims about the benefits of a knowledge economy as well as those of research and innovation. These benefits, it is argued, contribute to the public good in ways that are economic and non-economic. The latter are defined as enhanced democratic participation or deepened insights into equalities, although they are contested (Nixon 2010). These economic and non-economic benefits of the public good (singular) flow from higher education, it is sometimes argued, but without assessing how many people participate and in what proportions, what is or is not taught to which people, and the

pedagogic relationships that pertain. The arguments look at the correlation between high levels of participation in higher education in some countries (Korea, Singapore and China are often quoted) and high levels of economic growth, innovation and civic solidarity (Hanushek and Woessmann 2015; Marginson 2016). However, the causal links can be difficult to establish definitively, and some argue that the causality runs in the other direction.

The argument sometimes points to the paradox of high levels of growth in GDP in Africa in the last decade, and high levels of poverty, unequal distribution and limited development of productivity or research, some of which may be linked to poor methods of data collection and inadequate methods of calculation (Fosu 2015; Jerven and Johnston 2015; Hope 1997). This growth paradox is associated with apparently inadequate levels of higher education to 'trigger' a deepening of the public good, although there has clearly been an expansion of participation in higher education in Africa.

Working with Samuelson's (1954) description[1] of public goods as those products or services that are non-rivalrous and non-excludable (cannot be used only by some groups), the clearest example of non-rivalrous and non-excludable public goods is knowledge that is generated through research and scholarship. For example, it is not possible to exclude certain people from the benefit of, say, literature or minimising cross-infections, even though these insights may have begun in specialist institutions. The knowledge a teacher has about how to motivate a learner cannot be confined just to that pedagogic interaction. And the use of that knowledge by other teachers or learners, lovers of literature, or practitioners of high levels of hygiene in hospitals does not detract from its insights, in fact it amplifies them. These kinds of public goods cannot (easily) be monetised or restricted.

However, although public goods are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, we know that the history of education in just about every African country has made it very difficult for groups who are not privileged in some way to access that 'common' knowledge that is certificated. There is nothing particularly context rich about the concept of public goods, but who can and cannot use them in practice will vary across socioeconomic groups and is linked to forms of political power and participation. Thus, conditions in different African countries will determine who can and cannot make use of these public goods, notwithstanding their non-rivalrous and non-excludable form. Public goods are available to all, sometimes associated with the idea of knowledge, communication and educational exchange being open and accessible to everyone, not privatised or put behind pay walls or requiring expensive technologies.

Elements of the public good are realised in connections between communities and collectives that work at a meso or micro level. For example, an individual who studies a degree in medicine will reap the rewards of a high salary and a meaningful livelihood from that experience and the resulting qualification. Nevertheless, public benefits will also be generated by that outcome—in this case, the positive impact of the doctor's work on others' health.

At the other end of the scale, the instrumental links of higher education are associated with global public goods such as clean air, knowledge of public health, support for human rights and conflict resolution. These cross over national boundaries and are not dependent on a single political authority for distribution. But these global public goods require cross-border co-operation that is economic, political and supportive of research and knowledge exchange. This concept of global public goods has attracted significant attention in recent years. For example, Stiglitz (1999) has provided an influential analysis of knowledge as a global public good. The idea has been applied to basic education by Menashy (2009), which has implications for thinking about higher education. Global public goods have been endorsed within mainstream development thought and by agencies such as the World Bank (2007) and the Global Partnership for Education (Unterhalter, Howell and Parkes 2019).

More recent literature on this notion focuses on and raises the possibility of examining the contribution that public higher education systems would make to the realisation of global public institutions (UNESCO 2018; Marginson 2013, 2007). Some of it examines universities as locations of world politics and seeks to better understand and theorise universities as significant political actors (Kamola 2014). However, this literature largely draws on models of higher education institutions and global public goods within the global North. We might consider this nascent work in relation to African higher education institutions and see them as critical providers of global public goods. But we need to pose the question regarding what conditions such institutions would need to satisfy to contribute to global public goods, and then evaluate the institutions we have.

Many discussions on higher education systems in the context of internationalisation (Guri-Rosenblit 2015; Hammond 2016) focus on the emergence of what are seen as 'world-class universities', with specific indicators used to denote the degree of 'worldclassness' of these institutions (Altbach and Salmi 2011). They focus primarily on elite institutions. We need to unpack the link between higher education institutions, global public goods and national and global public institutions. In Africa, many

of these relationships are coloured by past histories of colonialism and continued inequalities in the participation in research and knowledge production. Some of the characteristics associated with world-class universities (Altbach 2015) include their capacity to craft a farsighted approach towards learning and imagination among faculty and students, through developing, for example, outstanding faculty members who can contribute substantively to teaching and research that responds to national and global societal challenges. The role of higher education as a public good would, in this respect, be examined in its contribution to the realisation of various types of global public good services that are critical in helping especially poor countries benefit from global knowledge and skill assets. It would do this by making such assets widely available and by building the capacity of countries to benefit from them (Wanner and Fredriksen 2013). The debate about the decolonisation of the curriculum and recentring ideas about Africa in these discussions raises questions about who defines global challenges and solutions (Heleta 2016).

Even more extensive in scope than arguments about higher education instrumentally linking to global public goods are arguments about higher education and its link to human development, which is a form of public good. Boni and Walker (2013, 2016) develop an analysis of higher education and human development, arguing for enhancing the social change orientation of universities. Their discussion summarises some of the public good goals for universities and some of the forces that create inequalities. While they do not develop a particular normative account of public good with a view to human development, they do delineate some of its features, particularly a concern with the conversion of resources into capabilities, agency, human dignity, equality and public deliberations. Unlike some work that makes claims about the public good outcomes of higher education without looking at conditions within higher education institutions, Boni and Walker (2016) present detailed accounts of intrinsic experiences of public good in higher education. We now turn to look at this form of the argument. A key question concerns what we know about processes of causation between higher education and notions of the public good, and what insights we have on the sustainability of these relationships.

Intrinsic Argument: Higher Education as a Space to Experience Public Good or Human Development

The notion of a public good as something experienced in the mind or the body, both within and beyond higher education institutions, has a number of different facets.

A form of the link between higher education and public good is experientially connected to the idea of the public sphere (Habermas 1989, 1996; Taylor 1991). The public sphere is a fluid space of media, local public meetings and lectures, in which public reasoning and critical commentary on society is aired. This is, ideally, a space of critique in and through higher education institutions that enables the formation of attitudes, participation, citizenship and critical belonging. It also a forum for ideas about building and sustaining the institutions that support greater equalities, social justice and democratisation. Both ideas of the intrinsic form of the public good and the public sphere have a bearing on what is taught in higher education, how it is taught, some of the spatial relationships in higher education and experiential features of working and studying in particular kinds of institutional cultures. Thus, intrinsic ideas about higher education and the public good include discussions of widening participation and enhancing access, although these discussions are also often framed in terms of the instrumental arguments.

Marginson (2011) connects this notion of the university (but not necessarily the technical or vocational tertiary level institutions) with Habermas's depiction of the English coffeehouses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were settings close enough to some centres of power but were also sites of critique of power. Habermas's idea of a public sphere draws on Kant's (1798) views on critical reason and the need for universities to maintain autonomy from the state in order to critically scrutinise politics, economics and society.

For Rawls (1999), and political liberals, the space of the overlapping consensus is a public space in which we all need to co-operate for the common good, regardless of what private and very different ideas of the good one might hold. He derives this notion from the history of dealing with the legacy of ferocious religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But we need to consider the extent to which this form of overlapping consensus as a means to deal with histories of violence, racism and dispossession is appropriate in the African context, or whether other notions of a public sphere of recognition, forgiveness and acknowledgement of difference might be more appropriate. Further, we need to consider what this means for institutions that are primarily constituted by elites, or at least relative elites.

The first wave of universities established in Africa were elite institutions designed for those who would be in government (Mamdani 1996; Cloete and Maassen 2015; Teferra 2017). They remained far removed from the society in which they were located and were socially distant from the people

these universities aimed to serve. They were found in the capital cities of African countries (Ajayi, Goma and Johnson 1996; Teferra 2017) and were sometimes sites of critiques of political centres of power, but those studying and working in those universities were often socially closer to those in power than those who experienced intersecting inequalities   (Mamdani 2008).

There is a dimension of the common good that is distinctive and has some different features from this notion of public sphere. For some writers, the common good is a shared space of collective construction – thereby having a procedural, in addition to a substantive, meaning. This view emphasises the importance of some of the experiences of higher education as offering access to this form of collectivity. As stated by Deneulin and Townsend (2007: 12),

> '[T]he common good is not the outcome of a collective action which makes everybody better off than if they acted individually, but is the good of that shared enterprise itself. It is the good of the community which comes into being in and through that enterprise.'

UNESCO (2015) and Locatelli (2017) employ the term 'common good' to indicate the shared space for the construction of education in practice by communities, and thereby as a critique of the individualist conception of public goods in economics. (This usage is distinct from the term 'common good' in economics, which refers to a good that is non-excludable but may be rivalrous). It is this term, in fact, that appears in the title of Marginson's (2016) latest work on the topic of higher education, which uses it in the sense of 'formation of common relationships and joint (collective) benefits in solidaristic social relations within a country' (2016, 16). Marginson's articulation of ideas about higher education draws mainly on examples from Europe and the US.

A resonance may be seen between this notion and scholarship on collective forms of belonging, epistemologies, culture and values that are sometimes described as a feature of African ways of knowing (Waghid 2014). The scholarship includes epistemic/ethical relationships (Hoffman and Metz 2017), or postcolonial epistemologies (Mamdani 2017; Nyamnjoh 2012; Mbembe 2016) that identify common experiences of knowledge hierarchies, dispossession, racism, violence and connected inequalities.

We need to emphasise that the argument about the intrinsic value of public goods, common goods or the public sphere also has an instrumental dynamic, in that universities can provide a space for discussion, debate and deliberation. In this sense, institutions can represent a public sphere and

have an instrumental role in promoting critical scrutiny of government and policy and allowing for a creative rethinking of society. However, despite all these potentialities, whether universities actually promote public good/s in these ways depends on their commitments and practices, as well as the composition of their staff and student body.

Marginson (2007) argues that the public benefits emanating from universities do not necessarily correspond to their ownership or management, and that both public and private institutions produce a 'variable mix' of public and private goods. Nevertheless, private institutions – unless blessed by a generous endowment or significant public funding – rarely have the financial autonomy to ensure open and equitable access and to conduct research and sustained community engagement in the public interest. In addition to marketisation, Marginson (2007) highlights 'status competition' and the rankings fever as a major impediment to the promotion of the public good. McCowan (2016a) has noted how positional inequalities between institutions in Africa may also have a bearing on realising rights and equalities.

There are a number of contemporary accounts (Singh 2001; Calhoun 2006; Tilak 2008; Dill 2011; Nixon 2010; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Williams 2016) in addition to the ones listed above that address conceptions of public good in and through higher education. To a large extent, these are works of advocacy, written in response to the concerted undermining of the public dimension of universities in the context of the marketisation of public higher education systems, the growth in the number and size of private (and particularly for-profit) institutions, and the intensifying public perception that the university is (and should be) a vehicle for furthering private interests. Nevertheless, these accounts expand our normative and analytical understandings of the relationship between universities and the public good. Their central question is how the institutional form of a higher education institution shapes its capacity to engage in critique and engagements from the perspective of the public sphere.

While a number of authors consider how universities are constituted in a way that they can contribute to the production of public goods (Brennan, King and Lebeau 2004), much of this discussion is anchored in institutional theory and largely focuses on processes of change. These processes enable higher education institutions to accommodate change in the external environment in ways that ensure their continued relevance within the civic community (Clayton, Bringle and Hatcher 2012), but this work does not ask questions about the issues of inequalities, poverty, and politics that are a feature of many African institutions.

The other dimension of this strand of intrinsic formation of public good in higher education concerns community engagement. It discusses how academic departments should create spaces within their structures and through the curriculum to cultivate social and moral values in students and surrounding communities and lay the foundation for social networks that can promote public goods (Clayton, Bringle and Hatcher 2012). Some studies have focused on the behaviour of higher education institutions and how they adjust to be in synergy with and at the same time energise changes in the wider institutions of society that are central to the public goods mission.

In the United States, Fitzgerald et al. (2012) argue that community engagement as a crucial aspect of engaging the public good impact from higher education institutions is undermined by political and economic circumstances. Funding limitations, for example, force institutions to consider disengaging from their communities as they find ways to cut costs, and privilege certain disciplines perceived to have higher returns for both individuals and the institutions. Pasque (2006) traces the genesis of the disengagement of HE institutions from active community engagement to the emergence of the post-war military-industrial complex and the negotiation of new relations with America's research universities. The emergence of specialised research institutes outside the universities to support the military complex gradually shifted the criteria for faculty evaluation from broad social needs to narrow disciplinary expertise. The concept of 'optimal learning' is used in the United States to refer to the capacity of universities to organise learning in ways that help strengthen democratic and civic institutions beyond the classroom, impacting on societal organisations, businesses, corporations and value-based organisations. However, this literature rarely looks at whether these community engagement networks are among elites who attend higher education, and whether it is social solidarity with the poor that is advanced.

A further term that has come to prominence in relation to the public good form of higher education is 'the commons', which has been extended from its original meaning as shared agricultural land to include the cultural and political realm, and particularly knowledge in the digital age (Hess and Ostrom 2006). 'The commons' is an open, non-hierarchical, co-operative space where people come to use and share a commonly owned resource. It is therefore inimical to the market and, possibly, to the state. In education, the commons has manifested itself through new opportunities for autonomous learning offered by the Internet, as well as through the emergence of open

access courseware. Self-directed learning and free courseware call into question the existing role of higher education institutions as a particular situated space for the public good, and raise questions about the commons as a site for learning that dissolves some of the hierarchies of knowledge, pedagogies and inequalities between institutions.

Connecting Instrumental and Intrinsic Ideas of Higher Education and the Public Good: Problematising Publics

While we can distinguish quite clearly between versions of the instrumental and intrinsic notions of the public good and higher education, it is also important to see how they overlap in particular contexts. In addition, a number of studies of effects of widening participation, particularly in South Africa, have highlighted that the notions of the public and the private good of higher education need to be problematised. Higher education may be both instrumental and intrinsic to the public good, servicing what might be understood as private needs but could also be understood as redressing poverty and want.

We need some way to distinguish a public good from a private good. We also need some way of refining the analysis of the public so that it identifies the state as a key provider of universal goods but acknowledges that all states may not act in this way. The histories of all four states in our study illuminate this. Thus, we need a notion of how the public good connects with the public sphere, but we also need to acknowledge that there are different publics. The idea of the public good takes in aspects of private want, need, fear and shame, which the idea of the public sphere might not be refined enough to address at all levels. Universities are places where engagements with public culture take place, but forms of cultural nurturing may be confined to small groups, depending on particular contexts. The intrinsic argument may have implications not just at the rational or critical level, but also at the level of care. We thus need to think about universities as places that treat their staff and students well. This notion of care and connection in the idea of the public good is not just limited to a particular campus.

Unterhalter (2017, 2018), in looking at forms of public private partnership (PPP) in education, argues that there are considerable overlaps in instrumental and intrinsic notions of higher education and the public good, and stresses the importance of paying careful attention to the contexts in which ideas are formulated and the relationships between opportunities and outcomes are developed.

We need to consider a range of ideas about conditions of possibility to expand some of these notions, and draw out some of the implications for the social contract they entail. The phrase 'conditions of possibility' is associated with Kant's metaphysics but has been widely used to indicate forms of socio-political context that acknowledge the situated agency of individuals and institutions (Camic and Gross 1998; Worthington and Hodgson 2005). A related set of ideas that are associated with the capability approach which map out conversion factors (social, environmental, economic, political) that constrain or enable individuals and groups to turn opportunities (or capabilities) into outcomes (or functionings). The divergent discussions of the instrumental and intrinsic relationship between higher education and the public good tend to stress different kinds of conditions of possibility or conversion factors. Thus, instrumental arguments tend to look at conditions of possibility that are associated with funding, governance and fidelity to national development plans, while intrinsic arguments tend to look at conditions of possibility associated with tolerance, reflective exploration and experience. In the language of the capability approach, intrinsic arguments might facilitate capabilities whereas instrumental arguments might support functionings.

Conclusion

This article has argued that ideas about higher education and the public good can be divided into instrumental and intrinsic approaches, and that there is some cross-over between them. While some writers formulate a notion of a single public good, or alternatively many goods from which individuals benefit, there are many who see this as a heterodox process, in that the public good may be tied to the public bad. However, there are few longitudinal studies that consider causation in Africa. Secondly, we have looked at how the public good in higher education is substantive for those who experience it and how this can be expanded to a wider collectivity or develop some sense of solidarity with those who do not share the experience of higher education.

We have argued that these contestations need to be read contextually. Thus, we cannot think of higher education and the public good without thinking about particular formations of higher education, in particular socioeconomic and political settings, and how this problematises and animates the idea of the public good.

Note

1. In Samuelson's 1954 paper titled 'The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure', he proposed a theory the basic assumption of which was a clear distinction between the following two kinds of goods:

    (i)　A private consumption good whose total can be parcelled out among two or more persons, with one person having less if another gets more (Samuelson 1955, 350). Hence, if X^1 is total good, and X^{11} and X^{21} are the respective private consumptions of Person 1 and Person 2, Samuelson said that the total equals the sum of the separate consumptions, or $X^1 = X^{11} + X^{21}$ (Samuelson 1954). This is a condition of summation.

    (ii)　A public consumption good is one that is provided for each person to enjoy or not, according to his or her tastes. Hence, the public good can be varied in total quantity of X^2 for its magnitude. It differs from a private consumption good in that each person's consumption of it, X^{12} and X^{22} respectively, is related to the total X^2 by a condition of equality rather than of summation. This is a condition of equality. Thus, by definition, $X^{12} = X^2$, and $X^{22} = X^2$" (Samuelson 1954). Samuelson acknowledged that, realistically, much—though not all—government activity can be fruitfully analysed as some kind of a blend of these two extreme polar cases.

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