



Mapping the Literature on Higher Education and the Public Good in Africa

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Abstract

This article presents the main outcomes of a rigorous review of literature undertaken for the project 'Higher Education, Inequality and the Public Good: A Study in Four African Countries', which is discussed in this special edition. We set out to review some of the literature on higher education in the four countries that were the focus of the project – Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa – and to map its conceptual and contextual focal points. The article presents and discusses the trends that emerged from this mapping exercise and, in conclusion, reflects on what some of these trends may mean for the relationship between higher education and the public good in Africa.

Keywords: higher education, Africa, context, inequality, public good

Résumé

Cet article présente les principaux résultats d'une revue rigoureuse de la littérature entreprise pour le projet « Enseignement supérieur, inégalités et bien public : une étude dans quatre pays africains », qui est discutée dans cette édition spéciale. Nous avons entrepris d'examiner une partie de la littérature sur l'enseignement supérieur dans les quatre pays qui étaient au centre du projet – le Ghana, le Kenya, le Nigéria et l'Afrique du Sud – et de cartographier ses axes conceptuels et contextuels. L'article présente et discute les tendances qui ont émergé de cet exercice de cartographie et, en conclusion, réfléchit sur ce que certaines de ces tendances peuvent signifier pour considérer la relation entre l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public en Afrique.

Mots-clés : enseignement supérieur, Afrique, contexte, inégalité, bien public

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Introduction

A central concern of the research project that is the topic of this special issue was to understand how higher education and its relationship to the public good may be conceptualised in the African context, given Africa's particular complexities and patterns of inequality that are strongly shaped by the colonial legacy and its postcolonial relationships (Lebeau and Milla 2008; Mamdani 2016, 2017; Habib 2019). We therefore asked the question: Who is defining the public good and how? (Unterhalter et al. 2019). We were cognisant of the complexities and inequalities in setting the parameters around what scholarship contributes to these debates, and that the voices of African scholars are often marginalised as a result of the relatively weak research capacity of the region's universities (Cloete et al. 2015) and the unequal geographies of knowledge that frame the global knowledge economy (Badat 2010). With this in mind we set as one of our research objectives the undertaking of a rigorous review of literature relevant to the contextual and conceptual concerns of the study.

This article presents the main outcomes of a key line of enquiry within this review. This was to map the conceptual and contextual foci of some of the literature on higher education in Africa. It discusses the trends that were evident from this line of enquiry and considers some of the issues that emerged that we regarded as important to the concerns of the project.

Methods of Conducting the Review

The literature review drew on a number of the principles of systematic reviewing, in an effort to make the engagement as rigorous as possible. This was largely enabled through the EPPI software,¹ which assisted us to systematically screen and code the literature and follow clear steps of analysis in relation to our research objectives.

From the start, two overarching intentions informed our approach to the review. The first was to develop, through the eyes of scholars and researchers from and writing about the African continent, a careful understanding of the contexts in which they were doing their research. We focused particularly on the critical issues that have shaped the development and functioning of the higher education systems being studied, both positively and negatively. The second intention was to take the widest possible view of how research and scholarship around higher education and the public good in Africa has been defined.

We recognised that, to meet these objectives, the literature review would need to move beyond an exploration of mainstream databases to mine other, less prominent sources that contribute to African scholarship. We were also cognisant of the fluidity of meanings behind terms that were important to the project, such as ‘higher education’ and ‘public good’. This alerted us to the need to try to use terms, in our search of the literature, that would capture the different ways in which higher education might be described across the different contexts, but without losing the focus of the review.

Despite our efforts to expand the scope of information sources and the terms, there were still a number of important but inevitable limitations to the review process. Central to these was the fact that the review was still strongly dependent on accessing literature that was available online, mainly through university repositories, open access knowledge platforms and organisational websites. Thus, publications that were not in digital form were excluded.

We also restricted the review to literature published in English. Although English dominates the research spaces of the four countries we focused on in this project, we recognised that in considering only English literature we would be excluding the contributions of many African scholars, especially those publishing in French and Portuguese. We acknowledge that the literature review was limited by these constraints, which create equally important limitations to what is presented and discussed in this paper.

Searching the Literature

The initial search of the literature targeted selected research platforms and databases,² using various search strings and limiting the search criteria to works published in English between 1994 and 2018. This resulted in an initial database of 5,969 references. Through a careful screening of titles and abstracts, we then excluded 4,599 references. Our exclusion criteria included: no focus on higher education; no explicit discussion of the role of higher education in relation to society, especially around ideas of the public good or common good (even if these terms were not used); and no contextual relevance to the project. A source was seen as contextually relevant if it dealt with one or more of the project countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa) or other African countries, or discussed higher education in the context of countries in the global South, with conceptual relevance to the project.

This screening process resulted in 1,370 contributions that met the criteria for inclusion in the review. We coded this literature according to its main geographical or 'contextual' focus – that is, the main country or region being researched and/or discussed – using the following codes:

- Ghana
- Kenya
- Nigeria
- South Africa
- Broad Africa focus
- Global South focus (broadly)
- Global North and South (sources that covered both contexts)
- Global North with conceptual relevance.

To enable us to look more carefully at the countries and regional context of the project, we then collated the contributions that had been coded for Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria or South Africa, or as having a 'Broad Africa focus'. This refined list of 1,012 references created the body of what we called the 'African literature'. This paper discusses some of the patterns that were evident across this body of work.

To further analyse the African literature, we coded it into two main categories. One delineated those studies that were strongly conceptual in nature, where the focus was mainly on exploring, broadly or through a particular lens, the relationship between higher education and society. The second broad category denoted the literature that primarily focused on particular contextual issues – that is, issues that are important to the functioning of higher education in the specific countries or across the region.

At a later point in the research process, we coded these two groups once more. For the first, we drew on the conceptual frame of the project to categorise the literature according to how the relationship between higher education and the public good was discussed and understood. Our framework recognised that conceptualisations of the relationship between higher education and the public good have tended to have 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' dynamics (Unterhalter et al. 2019). The former emphasises higher education's role in leading to particular manifestations of the public good in the future, such as levels of skill and knowledge needed by the country. The latter concentrates on higher education as a 'space' where intellectual, physical and cultural experiences express and enact the public good (ibid). We used this conceptualisation to code this literature according to whether it largely addressed the 'instrumental' or 'intrinsic' role of higher education, or where there was evidence that both were being explored.

The second group of literature was further coded for the specific contextual issue that was being explored. In line with our conceptual framework for the research we understood that these contextual issues reflected the conditions of possibility that might enable or hinder higher education's enactment of the public good in the countries and the region (Unterhalter et al. 2019). We developed fourteen codes to capture these contextual issues. These were:

1. Colonial legacy
2. Globalisation and internationalisation
3. Equity issues to do with access, participation and inclusivity (this code included inequalities and access to higher education as well as equitable participation and discrimination within higher education, including gender and disability)
4. Curriculum and pedagogy
5. Research and research development
6. Funding
7. ICTs (including distance education and the use of ICTs in higher education)
8. Academics (conditions and struggles)
9. Student struggles
10. Academic freedom and autonomy
11. Governance, leadership and management
12. Private higher education
13. Quality assurance and accountability
14. General overview (broad spectrum with no one issue dominating the discussion).

The discussion that follows describes some of the trends that were evident from mapping the African literature in this way. It also reflects on some of the issues that emerged from this mapping and considers their importance to the concerns of the project.

Emerging Trends from Mapping the African Literature

The focus of the African literature

As already explained, the first step towards reviewing this literature was considering what it addressed – whether it was primarily conceptual in nature, theorising the relationship between higher education and society, or whether its main focus was on researching and discussing contextual issues that impacted on and shaped higher education. Figure 1 shows this broad cut of the African literature for each of the countries and for the literature with a wider African focus.

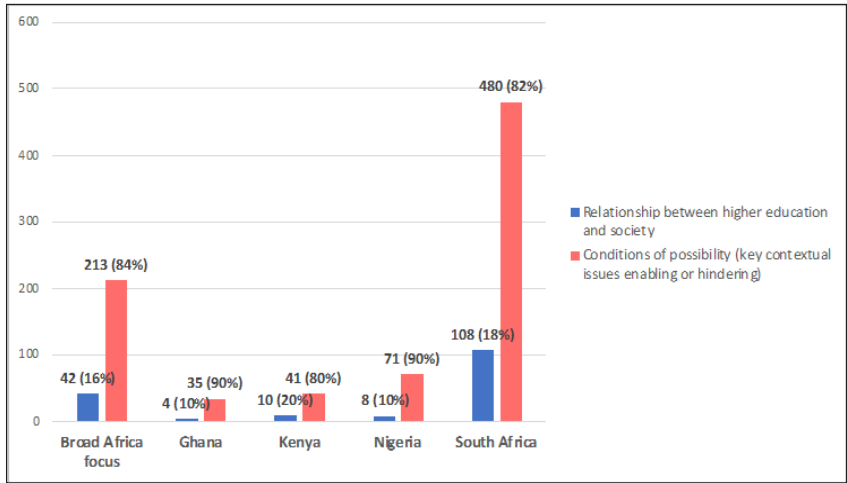


Figure 1: The focus of the African literature (n = 1012)

This process of coding showed that there is a strong orientation in the African literature towards grappling with the contextual issues that are seen as important to understanding the role of higher education on the continent (83 per cent). One example is the debates on the funding of higher education and the extent to which the costs of higher education might restrict the enactment of its public good role, especially in relation to broader issues of equity (Breier 2010; Ilie and Rose 2018). So, while this literature was regarded as relevant to the concerns of the review, because it explored the relationship between higher education and the public good, this relationship was primarily explored through research and scholarship on the contextual issues that enabled or hindered this relationship – the conditions of possibility (Unterhalter et al. 2019).

Only 17 per cent of the literature explored this relationship at a largely conceptual level. Looking at it from a country level, for Ghana and Nigeria, the proportion of articles with a strong conceptual focus was especially low (10 per cent), whereas for Kenya and South Africa, it was slightly higher (20 per cent and 18 per cent respectively). What is important to note is that the number of conceptual contributions from South Africa was nearly double the number for all the other countries and those with a broader Africa focus combined. Even if the key limitations of the review process discussed above are recognised, such as the inclusion of literature published in English only, this finding highlighted a trend that was evident across the review process – the relative strength of South Africa’s higher education research infrastructure and its knowledge production capacity across the continent

(Cloete, Bailey and Pillay 2011) at both national and institutional levels. There is, however, an increasing awareness, particularly at government level, of the importance of universities in the global context of the knowledge economy.² Research production at the eight African universities is not strong enough to enable them to build on their traditional undergraduate teaching roles and make a sustained contribution to development via new knowledge production. A number of universities have manageable student-staff ratios and adequately qualified staff, but inadequate funds for staff to engage in research. In addition, the incentive regimes do not support knowledge production.³ In none of the countries in the sample is there a coordinated effort between government, external stakeholders and the university to systematically strengthen the university's contribution to development. While at each of the universities there are exemplary development projects that connect strongly to external stakeholders and strengthen the academic core, the challenge is how to increase the number of these projects. The project on which this report is based forms part of a larger study on Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa, undertaken by the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA; Cloete, Maassen and Bailey 2015). This dominant trend across the African literature is discussed further on.

It is important to recognise that dividing the foci of the African literature into the two broad categories, 'conceptual' and 'contextual', involved a process of analysis and thus judgement of what we considered to be the primary focus of the contribution. There were some studies that had both a conceptual and contextual focus, but more often it was the engagement with the contextual issues that dominated the work and we therefore coded it as having this emphasis.

Coding the literature this way may have allowed for a distinction to emerge between these two broad foci that is less clear than it implies. When these findings were presented and discussed at events across the four countries to share the research findings, a number of stakeholders emphasised that researchers studying higher education in Africa focus on the contextual issues that influence it because for many of them these issues are so fundamental to their own lives, especially if they are teaching or working within universities or in government ministries tasked with the management and governance of the system (Unterhalter et al. 2019). It was argued that it is not possible to begin to conceptualise higher education and the public good in Africa outside of a careful engagement with the context and the complex set of historical and contemporary forces that influence the role and functioning of universities (ibid). The dominance

of this contextual literature and these assertions emphasise the importance of context in understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good (Unterhalter et al. 2019) and, arguably, any considerations around higher education and its role in development (Howell et al. 2020; Unterhalter and Howell 2020). This argument is discussed further on.

The Relationship Between African Higher Education and Society

Although this broad categorisation of the African literature identified a relatively small number of strongly conceptual contributions (17 per cent, or 172), some important issues emerged from further analysis of this scholarship. As already explained, we drew on the conceptual framework of the project to do this, coding this literature according to how the relationship between higher education and the public good was articulated. Table 1 shows the distribution of this literature when it was coded in this way and cross-tabulated with its contextual focus.

Table 1: The African literature on the relationship of higher education and the public good (n = 172)

Contextual Focus	Intrinsic	Instrumental	Both
Broad Africa focus	7	18	17
South Africa	24	43	41
Ghana	0	3	1
Kenya	3	4	3
Nigeria	1	5	2
Total	35 (20%)	73 (43%)	64 (37%)

This process of coding showed that a greater number of articles discussed the relationship between higher education and society in largely ‘instrumental’ terms (73 or 43 per cent). An important theme in this literature was the ways in which higher education contributes (or not) to development. Although some of the studies discussed development in social and economic terms, the strongest orientation in this literature was on the relationship between higher education and economic development. This was explored in relation to higher education’s role in ‘economic growth’ (Gyimah-Brempong et al. 2006; Uetela 2017) and through its knowledge production function, especially in positioning Africa within the global knowledge economy (Cloete et al. 2011; Cloete et al. 2015).

Other contributions that covered the relationship between higher education and economic development drew attention to its 'productivity effects' (Bokana and Akinola 2017), the alignment or misalignment of higher education with the 'world of work' (Kruss 2004; Wolhuter and Wiseman 2013) and the importance of higher education's contribution to the technological capability of countries for their development (Kruss et al. 2015).

Although only 35 articles (20 per cent) primarily explored what we had conceptualised as the 'intrinsic' relationship between higher education and the public good, these contributions were valuable in emphasising a number of important points that were salient to the region about the perceived role of higher education and 'public good issues'. Especially notable here were arguments around universities as 'agents of social change' across the continent (Chege 2009). These included the role of universities in 'peace education' (Ameyaw and Adzahlie-Mensah 2012) or as spaces able to play a critical role in conflict mediation and resolution in contexts of sustained or intermittent political conflict (Soyinka-Airewele 2003; Johnson 2013, 2017). These latter arguments suggested that, as institutions that reflect the broader society, universities in volatile political contexts with deep societal divisions bring people together across these divisions and lines of conflict (Johnson 2013). As such they have the capacity to become models of 'peaceful communal co-existence' and 'equity and democratic values' (Ameyaw and Adzahlie-Mensah 2012: 200)

Discussing further how higher education may do this, some studies drew on research evidence to argue that higher education institutions facilitate particular levels of understanding and skill that are important to stable and democratic societies (Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2011; Mattes and Luescher-Mamashela 2012; Johnson 2013). These arguments tend to suggest that this role has both instrumental and intrinsic elements to it. Democratic values that inform future practices are strengthened through the knowledge and skills acquired by students and graduates in their courses, and through their participation in university processes, especially around student governance (Luescher-Mamashela and Kiiru 2011; Mattes and Luescher-Mamashela 2012).

It is also argued that what is taught and experienced in universities by students, other role players and members of the surrounding communities who interact with them, can counter 'hegemonic discourse' (Chege 2009) and create 'new paradigms' (Assié-Lumumba 2011). Similarly, universities offer opportunities for critique and mobilisation for political change

(Lebeau et al. 2008) and enable a deepened and more nuanced engagement with political problems, allowing for the development of new forms of 'consciousness' that draw from different disciplines, forms of knowledge and experiences (Johnson 2013). These arguments resonate strongly with other work that has been done on the role of tertiary education in development in low and lower-middle-income countries (Howell et al. 2020). A rigorous review of research from the last ten years on the role of tertiary education in development in low and lower-middle income countries showed a small but important body of evidence for how tertiary education (mainly higher education) 'plays (or has the potential to play) a very important role in strengthening and building the capacity of a vibrant and engaged civil society' (ibid 2020: 36).

These contributions in the literature and the research they draw from are important to deepening understandings of the 'intrinsic' public good role of higher education in Africa. However, some contributions emphasise that the capacity of universities in Africa to enact their public good role in these 'intrinsic' ways is challenged by contextual factors that make them vulnerable 'spaces' for the enactment of the public good (Soyinka-Airewele 2003; Howell et al. 2020). These scholars argue that Africa's colonial past and the extent to which its universities continue to reflect the 'colonial relations' of the past is central to this 'vulnerability' (Assié-Lumumba 2011). Their enactment of a public good role therefore requires systematic processes of decolonisation (Assie-Lumumba 2007, 2011; Ameyaw and Adzahlie-Mensah 2012; Mbembe 2016; Mamdani 2016; Maringe and Ojo 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017).

Other scholars argue that universities continue to be embedded within complex relationships with the state and the broader society, which requires them to manage contradictory functions (Castells 2001) and makes them vulnerable to broader societal influences, such as those of party politics (Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume 2014). Thus, enacting a public good role in the ways noted above requires universities to grapple with complex processes and conflicting influences (Howell et al. 2020). What is perhaps most important for some scholars is that despite their potential to be spaces for the enactment of an 'intrinsic' public good, universities in Africa still largely remain 'elite' spaces (Ogunsanya and Lebeau 2015) and persist as 'powerful mechanism(s) of social exclusion and injustice' (Badat 2016: 82).

The Conditions of Possibility

The 840 contributions in the African literature that focused primarily on the contextual issues that impact on and shape higher education were also analysed using the fourteen ‘conditions of possibility’ codes described earlier. Figure 2 shows the broad picture that emerged across the African literature when it was coded in this way. Although there were some differences across the four countries, the overall picture indicates that the greatest emphasis in this literature was around equity concerns in higher education. This included research and scholarship focusing on: access to and participation within higher education systems; ongoing discrimination within institutions, particularly in relation to gender; and associated concerns around building more inclusive higher education institutions. The impact of globalisation on higher education on the continent and the opportunities and challenges of greater internationalisation for institutions also emerged as a relatively important issue across the studies reviewed.

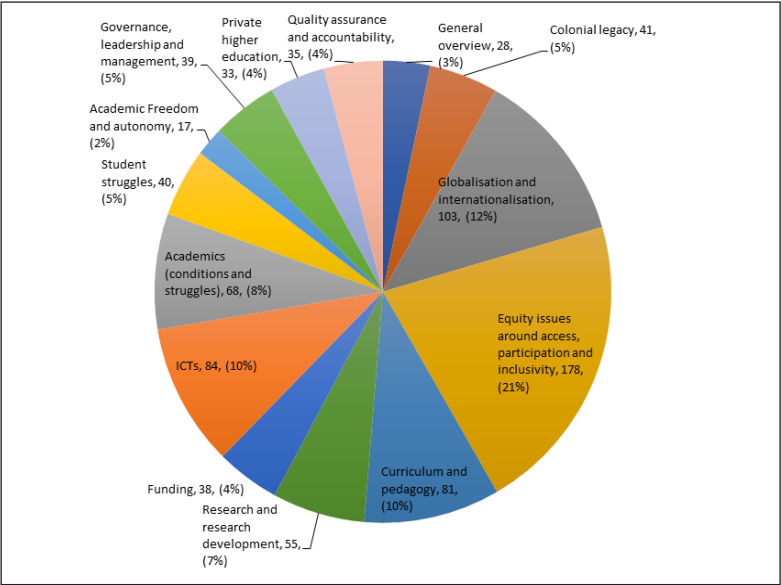


Figure 2: The conditions of possibility explored in the African literature (n=840)

While the importance of equity issues was evident in all four countries, the picture was slightly different when the literature that focused broadly on the continent (coded as having a ‘broad Africa focus’) was considered on its own. Figure 3 shows that issues around globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education are given the greatest attention in

this literature (29 per cent). Additionally, this literature tends to focus more on the impact (and persistence, for some writers) of the colonial legacy on higher education across the continent than was evident in the literature on specific country contexts. This suggests that although a number of scholars address issues around globalisation and the implications of the colonial legacy within the context of their own country, they are often discussed as regional concerns.

Another matter that is addressed fairly often in this literature is Information Communication Technology (ICT) and its impact on our potential for higher education in the region. They discuss the use of ICTs in higher education mainly in relation to the curriculum, stressing both the opportunities and challenges it presents. However, this category also includes studies on the issue of distance education in Africa and, most particularly, its potential (or not) for increasing access to higher education across the region.

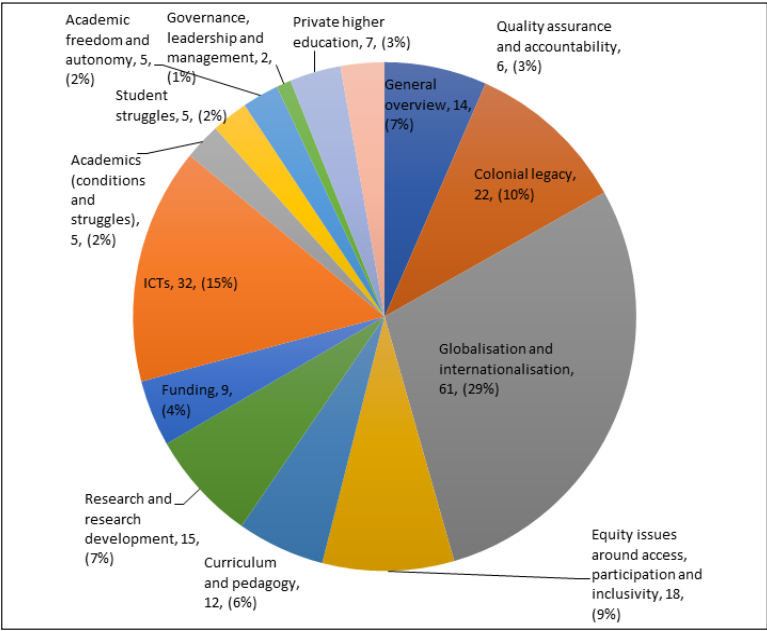


Figure 3: The conditions of possibility explored in the literature with a ‘broad Africa focus’ (n = 213)

The discussion that follows presents some of the noticeable trends in this literature across the four countries. Although, in some cases the number of contributions for a particular code is relatively small, some interesting trends and differences are evident across the four countries.³

Ghana

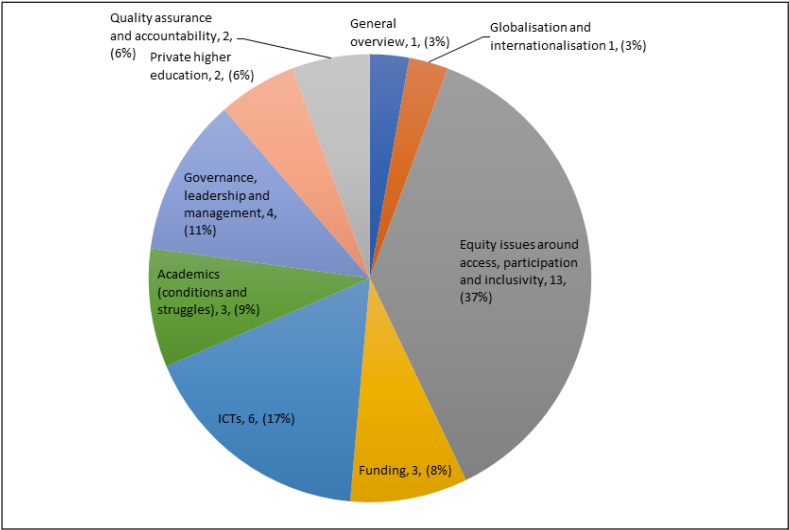


Figure 4: The conditions of possibility explored in the literature on Ghana (n = 35)

A total of thirty-five studies explored the conditions of possibility that presently shape higher education in Ghana. This literature was dominated by equity concerns in higher education, proportionally the highest (37 per cent) across all four countries. The key issues were around access to higher education and unease that, despite the significant expansion that has taken place in Ghana in higher education provision over the last twenty years, inequities remain regarding who can access this provision—a ‘participation gap with respect to students’ socio-economic status, gender, regions of origin, and the type and location of secondary schools attended’ (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah 2013: 1).

A number of the studies look more carefully into one or more of these fault lines, emphasising their intersections and the complex ways in which these affect access to higher education. Important examples explored gender, socio-economic status (Morley Leach and Lugg 2009; Morley and Lussier 2009), family size, and the quality of the schools children attend (Yusif, Yussuf and Osman 2013). Gender also features in this literature through studies that deal with the persistence of gender discrimination within institutions, especially considering how it impacts participation and shapes the experiences of women students and staff (Adusah-Karikari 2008; Adu-Yeboah and Forde 2011; Badoo 2013; Adu-Yeboah 2017). Central to these contributions is the pervasive influence of patriarchy within

higher education and the complex ways it plays out within institutions. They explore issues such as underrepresentation in leadership positions, the multiple responsibilities and dynamics of balancing home and work, interrupted careers, the lack of mentoring and support networks within higher education, and the persistence of practices within institutions that continue to effectively exclude women. Some of these studies also explore the complexities of institutional initiatives to address these challenges and what enables or hinders their success.

The Ghanaian literature also has a relatively strong focus on ICTs (17 per cent). It offers critical reflections on the use of ICTs in teaching and learning within university programmes, including student perceptions about online learning (Asunka 2009; Oteng-Ababio 2011; Buabeng-Andoh 2017). The literature considers more broadly the value and importance of distance education in Ghana, especially in relation to increasing access (Kumi-Yeboah, Young and Boadu 2013; Tagoe and Abakah 2014).

There is also some emphasis in the Ghanaian literature on the ‘institutional realities’ that universities face on a daily basis (Abugre 2017). These impact on improvement efforts and the complexities of strengthening governance mechanisms and processes for institutions to operate in service to society.

Kenya

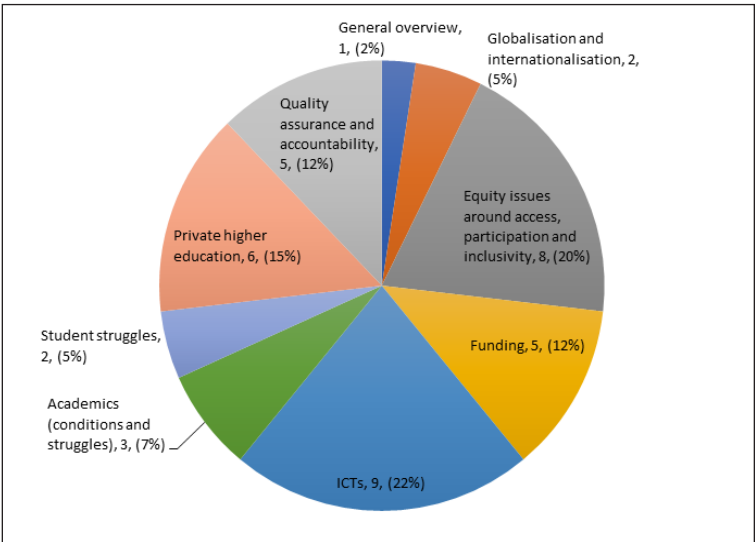


Figure 5: The conditions of possibility explored in the literature on Kenya (n = 41)

Forty-one studies focused on the conditions of possibility that enable or hinder higher education in Kenya. Like Ghana, the greatest number of these studies deal with equity issues (20 per cent) and ICTs in higher education (22 per cent). Also, gender features strongly in this literature, with studies looking at access to higher education for women students and the institutional experiences of women students and staff (Kamau 2004; Barasa 2013; Machira 2013). Other equity concerns that are raised include those contextual factors that are important in influencing academic success (Karimi 2012), and the complexities of 'ethnicity' or 'tribalism' in the development of the university system in Kenya (Munene 2012).

The potential and challenges of distance education for the country (and the continent), and the context of the 'digital divide', is the focus of a number of Kenyan studies. There is a particular emphasis in some of these contributions on the African Virtual University initiative and its impact (Amutabi and Oketch 2003; Munene 2007; Nafukho and Muyia 2013). This work includes initial concerns about the ability of online provision to increase access, and later reflections that suggest that, despite the pioneering role of online learning, a number of challenges undermined its potential to really address the key equity issues that still persist in higher education.

The development of private higher education in Kenya is another important focus in this literature, which engages critically with the implications of the growth of this sector for equity concerns; the quality of provision; the knowledge production role of universities; the different 'categories' of private institutions that exist; and the implications of their continued development going forward (Oketch 2004; Oanda, Chege and Wesonga 2009; Bonnell 2015; Irungu and Kimencu 2016).

Nigeria

A total of seventy-one studies looked at the contextual issues that shape higher education in Nigeria. Once again, equity featured relatively prominently. An important focus here is on who gains access to universities in the country and thus who benefits from higher education provision. Regional divisions are noted in Nigeria, what Isomonah and Egwaikhide (2013) call the 'North/South Dichotomy'. A number of studies explore how these divisions affect patterns of access to higher education and the quality of the education that is offered (Adeyemi 2001; Ingwe, Ikeji, Ugwu 2011; Isomonah and Egwaikhide 2013; Nsoedo 2014).

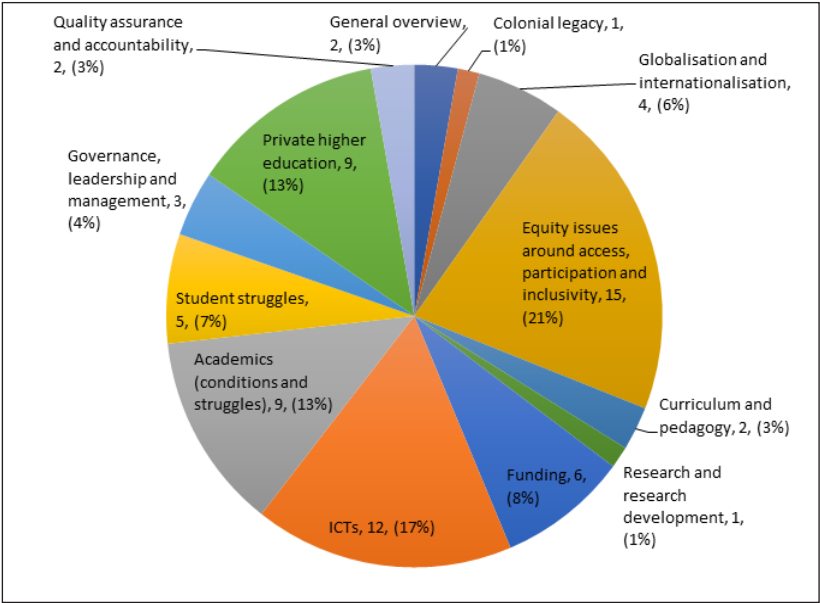


Figure 6: The conditions of possibility explored in the literature on Nigeria (n= 71)

The literature on equity concerns in Nigerian higher education also has a strong focus on gender. It considers the factors that impact the enrolment of women in higher education (Mukoro 2013; Oti 2013; Eraikhuemen and Oteze 2015), including the intersections between gender-related issues and other contextual concerns, such as the regional inequalities noted above (Adeyemi and Akpotu 2004). Other studies comment on the complex experiences of women students and staff within universities and the gendered nature of the university environment (Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle 2006; Imonikhe, Aluede and Idogho 2012; Oti 2013).

As in Kenya, the growth of private higher education in Nigeria is discussed by a number of scholars, who engage critically with its positive and negative effects (Umahi 2015; Abidogun 2015; Aremu 2015). Studies that address the struggles of students and academic staff also feature relatively prominently in Nigerian literature. At the time of the review, Nigeria had proportionally the largest number of studies on academic and student struggles.⁴ Among these studies, Beckman and Jega (1998), Adeola and Bukola (2014) and Aghedo (2015) address student struggles and concerns in Nigeria and the factors that influence industrial action by academic staff in Nigeria (Ineme and Ineme 2016).

South Africa

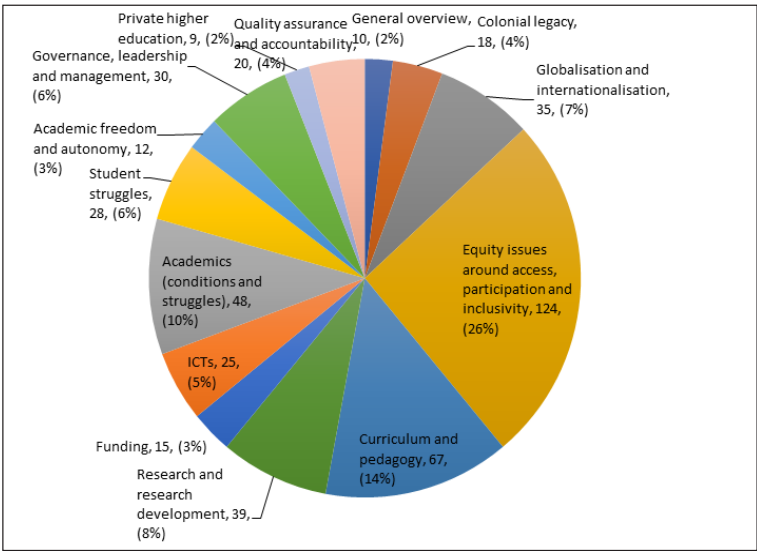


Figure 7: The conditions of possibility explored in the literature on South Africa (n = 480)

A total of 480 contributions in the review focused on the conditions of possibility in South Africa. As with the other countries, the literature is dominated by concerns around equity in higher education (26 per cent). Inequalities in access to the public higher education system, which is still strongly shaped by the inequalities of the country’s apartheid past, comprise a key theme (Nkomo 2012; Cooper 2015; Mabokela and Mlambo 2017). However, compared to the other three countries there is a greater focus in this body of literature on issues of student success once students enter the system. A number of writers emphasise how existing patterns of inequality in the society influence participation and progression through the system (Boughey 2012a; Scott 2010, 2013; Calitz, Walker and Wilson-Strydom 2016), with a range of societal and institutional factors influencing student success (Boughey 2005; Bokana 2010; Boughey 2012b; Bokana and Tewari 2014; Cloete and Duncan 2016; Cosser 2018). Although research around gender discrimination and its persistence in higher education is also emphasised in the South African literature, unlike the other countries the issue of language and its relationship to persistent inequalities in higher education is emphasised in this context, with studies showing the complex ways in which language interacts with class, privilege and power within the university (Leibowitz 2015).

A much larger proportion of studies compared to the other countries are concerned with curriculum and pedagogical practice within universities in South Africa, which are argued to be fundamental to the public good role of universities (Behari-Leak and McKenna 2017). Particular initiatives to affect necessary change in teaching practice, recognising its critical importance to social justice concerns within South African higher education, have been published (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016; Leibowitz and Naidoo 2017; Bozalek and Zembylas 2017). Over the last few years, this focus in the South African literature has increasingly sought to address the complexities of decolonising university curricula as a central social justice concern within the country's higher education system (Higgs 2016; Luckett 2016; Heleta 2016; Horsthemke 2017).

Like the Nigerian literature, the South African studies also have a relatively strong focus on student and academic struggles. Important here is the literature that has emerged since 2015 and the system-wide student protests that were encapsulated by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (Booyesen, 2016; Badat 2016)

Conclusion

This article has presented and discussed the picture that emerged when we mapped the conceptual and contextual foci of the African literature that were included in a rigorous literature review undertaken for the project. Although mapping this literature in this way has limitations that are essential to acknowledge, this picture still suggests some trends that are important to reflect on.

The first of these is that, in whichever way this African literature is categorised, it is dominated by literature on higher education in South Africa, mostly published by South African scholars. The historical forces that have contributed to this picture (Mamdani 1993; Sawyer 2004; Assié-Lumumba 2011) and the more contemporary ones that shape the global knowledge space (Badat 2010) are discussed in more depth in other contributions to this special edition. What is important here is that the South African literature strongly interrogates higher education's apartheid past and the processes of transformation since the advent of democracy (Badat 2009). While this context may offer important insights into understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good in Africa, the skewing of the regional picture through this dominance cannot be ignored (Unterhalter et al. 2019).

What is equally concerning is that across all the countries, including South Africa, there appears to be limited critical engagement with research

and research development in universities. Only fifty-five (7 per cent) of the articles from this African literature were coded as focusing on research and research development. Of these, thirty-nine dealt with South Africa, one with Nigeria and fifteen had a broad Africa focus. This research gap may in itself reflect the challenges around research capacity across many African universities, which is a concern for higher education systems in many low- and lower-middle income countries (Howell et al. 2020). However, it still has important implications for the issues we explored in the project and discuss in this special edition. It has consequences for the research and knowledge that informs and frames global debates and dominant understandings and conceptualisations of the relationship of higher education and the public good. The most serious of these is that African experiences and voices are restricted in these debates, and the published scholarship that can be drawn on is skewed towards South Africa.

Mapping the African literature in the review also highlighted context as central to understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good. On the one hand the mapping brought to the fore the forms of inequality that persist in each country and thus the relations of inequality in which higher education is embedded. In all four countries, issues of income and inequality are noted, as are issues of gender. However, in South Africa race and associated matters around language are of major concern in the debates around higher education and inequality. Ethnicity is raised in discussions of Kenyan higher education and in Nigeria and Ghana regional issues appear to link inequalities with ethnicity. Thus, there are different dimensions of inequality across the region and within country contexts. Although these differences make formulating a common understanding of the public good across the region a complex task, they alert us to the importance of understanding how the relationship between higher education and the public good is enacted and made meaning of within its context.

On the one hand we therefore need to proceed carefully with how conceptualisations of higher education and the public good are developed and applied. However, we also need to be alert to the ‘pitfall of according higher education too “immense and unwarranted weight” as an agent of social justice, in isolation from the conditions in society at large, ‘which may either facilitate or block (its) effects’ (Badat 2020, citing Wolpe and Unterhalter 1991: 2–3). We need to understand that higher education’s enactment of the public good is constrained by those social, economic and political forces at the national and global level that constitute the ‘underlying generative framework’ (Fraser 1995: 82) that shapes the inequalities that persist across the continent.

Notes

1. EPPI (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information) is the online tool for research synthesis of literature reviews developed by the EPPI Centre, UCL, IOE, <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>.
2. The following databases/research platforms were explored: SCOPUS, ProQUEST, Web of Science, African Education Research Database (AERD) (<https://essa-africa.org/AERD>), African Journals Online (AJOL) (<https://www.ajol.info>) and the CODESRIA online library (<https://www.codesria.org>).
3. The charts (figures 4 to 7) reflecting the conditions of possibility discussed in the country context include only those codes that received some attention in the literature, that is where there was at least one or more contribution.
4. These are also important in the South African context and are increasingly prominent in the literature following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMust Fall movements in that country.

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