JHEA/RESA Vol. 20, No. 2, 2022, pp. 137-157

(ISSN 0851–7762) (https://doi.org/10.57054/jhea.v20i2.2729)

The Other Side of the Story: The Costs of Being a Public Good Academic

Mthobisi Ndaba*

Abstract

This article argues that the relationship between higher education and the public good should be understood not only from a macro-level point of view, in terms of how higher education systems and institutions contribute to the public good. It should also be understood from a micro-level point of view. Drawing on a qualitative study of the role of academics in higher education's contribution to the public good, this article demonstrates that micro-level-focused research allows for a deeper and richer insight into the intricacies of this relationship. It does this from the vantage point of the costs of being a public good academic, as recounted by fifteen academics from two universities in South Africa. The perceptions of these academics indicate that the costs of producing public good at universities in South Africa are more than just the financial costs covered by student fees, government subsidies and donor funding. They include relational, psychological and career-related costs, as well as those related to personal resources and identity contingencies, which academics must deal with in advancing the public good. This article concludes that further micro-level-focused research can uncover more nuanced aspects of the complex relationship between higher education and the public good.

Keywords: academics, higher education, public good, South Africa

Résumé

Cet article soutient que la relation entre l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public ne doit pas être comprise uniquement d'un point de vue macro, en termes de la manière dont les systèmes et les établissements d'enseignement supérieur contribuent au bien public. Elle doit également être comprise d'un point de vue micro. S'appuyant sur une étude qualitative du rôle des

* Centre For Researching Education and Labour, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: sompisikandaba@gmail.com

universitaires dans la contribution de l'enseignement supérieur au bien public, cet article démontre que la recherche centrée sur le niveau micro permet une compréhension plus profonde et plus riche des subtilités de cette relation. Il le fait du point de vue des coûts d'être un universitaire de bien public, comme l'ont raconté quinze universitaires de deux universités d'Afrique du Sud. Les perceptions de ces universitaires indiquent que les coûts de production du bien public dans les universités d'Afrique du Sud sont plus que les coûts financiers couverts par les frais de scolarité, les subventions gouvernementales, et le financement des donateurs. Ils comprennent les coûts relationnels, psychologiques et liés à la carrière, ainsi que ceux liés aux ressources personnelles et aux contingences identitaires, auxquels les universitaires doivent faire face pour faire avancer le bien public. Cet article conclut que d'autres recherches axées sur le niveau micro peuvent révéler des aspects plus nuancés de la relation complexe entre l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public.

Mots-clés : universitaires, enseignement supérieur, bien public, Afrique du Sud

Introduction

The relationship between higher education and the public good has been extensively studied (Badat 2009; Singh 2001; Calhoun 2006; Tilak 2008; Dill 2011; Jonathan 2001; Leibowitz 2012; Marginson 2011, 2012; Nixon 2011; Unterhalter et al. 2019; Waghid 2009; Walker 2012, 2015; Williams 2016). This body of literature draws attention to how higher education, as a direct or associated cause, can produce and promote various forms of public goods, such as economic growth and development, innovation, reduced inequality, more tolerant attitudes, social justice and transformation, better-informed citizenry, better protection and use of environmental resources, a healthier population, social transformation, and the creation of new knowledge that can address pressing social problems and expand human development. However, this literature does not provide a broad enough understanding of the relationship between higher education and the public good because of the following reasons:

1. It focuses mainly on the macro-level of this relationship (higher education systems and higher education institutions) without saying much about its dynamics at the micro-level (what happens within institutions and the different roles that different stakeholders play therein) (Badat 2009; Singh 2001; Calhoun 2006; Tilak 2008; Dill 2011; Jonathan 2001; Leibowitz 2012; Marginson 2011, 2012; Nixon 2011).
2. The small portion that considers the micro-level of the relationship between higher education and the public good draws attention mainly to students' experiences in higher education institutions and the role of graduates in

society, which presents one side of the story of the public good that higher education produces (or should be producing) for its beneficiaries. It does not say much about what it takes for higher education to be a public good and produce public goods for its beneficiaries (Ashwin and Case 2018; McLean and Walker 2012; Walker and McLean 2010).

3. Considerations of what it takes for higher education to contribute to the public good are mainly about the financial costs that need to be covered through student fees, government subsidies and private donations. Very little, if anything, is said about the role that academics play in higher education's contribution to the public good and what it costs them to play this role. Gaining insight into this extends and deepens our understanding of the other side of the story, which is about what goes into bringing about the public good in higher education. It expands and enriches the literature on the relationship between higher education and the public good.

This article, therefore, argues that an increased focus on the micro-level can deepen our understanding of the other side of the story. Based on a portion of a study about the role of academics in higher education's contribution to the public good, this article outlines the costs (relational, psychological, personal, career and those associated with an academic's racial identity) of being a public good academic, as recounted by academics from two universities in South Africa. These costs relate more to academics' roles that are outside their core functions of teaching and research. This is because the participants of this study did not recount any costs associated with teaching and research. It does not mean that academics contribute to the public good only through roles that are beyond the call of duty, which relate more to social responsiveness or community engagement. It also does not mean there are no costs associated with teaching and research, and the pedagogical, epistemological and research methods that academics choose to use in these roles. Okech (2020: 313) discusses these issues in relation to 'how decolonisation projects in universities in the United Kingdom and South Africa ignore the invisible labour and penalties that accompany this work by illustrating the wider constellations of gender and racialised power operating within them'. Ssentongo (2020) engages with these issues by examining the politics of academic promotion and the predicament of African publication outlets at Ugandan universities, which addresses academics' knowledge production role.

This article extends the debate about the costs of the public good of higher education beyond finances. It also gives insight into the depth of understanding we can gain when we consider the micro-level in our quest for a deeper understanding of the relationship between higher education

and the public good. The term 'public good academics' refers to academics who are driven by a commitment to the public good and are progressive, reflexive, critically conscious, socially competent and have an understating of and commitment to their civic responsibility to advance the public good agenda. In the South African context, which is characterised by a history of colonialism and apartheid, the public good agenda in higher education is centred on the transformation[1] imperative of the democratic dispensation. This includes redressing the injustices of the past by widening access for the previously disadvantaged, improving success, eradicating poverty, inequality and unemployment, and contributing to economic growth and development.

This article's structure is as follows: the first section is an introduction to the article; the second section discusses the methods used in the study; the third and fourth sections discuss literature on higher education *for* the public good and higher education *as* a public good, respectively. The fifth section presents the costs of being a public good academic, as recounted by participants of this study. These include relational, psychological and career-related costs, and those related to personal resources and identity contingencies that academics must deal with in advancing the public good. The final section provides the conclusion of the article and makes recommendations for future research.

Methodology

This article draws on data collected between September 2018 and June 2019 at two universities in South Africa. The data collection was part of a broader study that sought to get some insight into academics' conception(s) of the public good; the role(s) they perceive themselves playing in advancing the public good, being among the key stakeholders in higher education; and their perceptions of the conditions that affect, negatively or positively, their contribution to the public good.

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which allows for an understanding of social or human problems by eliciting participants' accounts of their experiences, perceptions and the meanings they ascribe to the problem in question (Creswell 2014; De Vos, Strydom, Founche and Delpot 2011). This involved using a pre-tested semi-structured interview schedule to conduct fifteen one-on-one in-depth interviews with academics of different levels of seniority and disciplinary backgrounds at two universities in South Africa. One university is a historically white university, and the other is a historically black university.[2]

In this article, I use 'Yellowwood University' and 'Protea University' as pseudonyms to refer to these institutions, respectively. This serves to maintain the ethical principle of anonymity in my presentation of the data (Monette, Sullivan, De Jong and Hilton 2014). For the same reason, I have also assigned pseudonyms to the academics I interviewed. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. The data was analysed using King and Horrocks's (2010) three stages (descriptive coding, interpretive coding and overarching themes), which offer a systematic way of thematic analysis to ensure consistency and rigour. The following section foregrounds some of the gaps in the literature to show that a consideration of the micro-level-focused research can be a helpful undertaking in the quest to better understand the relationship between higher education and the public good. It focuses on literature about higher education for the public good and higher education as a public good.

Higher Education for the Public Good

There is an extensive body of literature that discusses the relationship between higher education and the public good. Different perspectives of this relationship are evident in this literature. Some scholars understand it from an economic perspective, others from a capabilities perspective, and yet others from a socio-political perspective. Those who interpret it from an economic point of view argue that universities play an important role in promoting economic growth and development by producing new knowledge through research, facilitating innovations and producing graduates to become part of a productive workforce in the labour market (Cloete and Maassen 2015; Cloete, Bailey, Pillay, Bunting and Maassen 2011; Altbach 2013; Bloom, Canning and Chan 2006; Sharma 2015).

However, some scholars are critical of the claim that higher education contributes to economic growth and development (Badat 2009; Collini 2012). In an article about theorising institutional change, Badat (2009) argues that the instrumentalist orientation of this claim reduces higher education to its efficacy for economic growth and strips it of its broader social value and functions. Collini (2012) echoes this critique in his discussion of the university as a public good. While acknowledging that universities produce useful outcomes, such as knowledge and graduates, he argues that these outcomes are not the main justification for these institutions to exist. He advocates for a new 'genre' of arguments that would enable universities to be understood as 'a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals' (Collini 2012: 86). Some scholars are supportive while others are critical of the economic

understanding of the relationship between higher education and the public good. However, all their views focus mainly on higher education systems and institutions and what these do for the public good, which gives a macro-level understanding of higher education and the public good.

From a socio-political point of view, Badat (2009) suggests that higher education has great social and political value, which is not accounted for in the economically oriented instrumentalist understanding of its public good. This broader social value is articulated in how other scholars have defined public good in relation to social transformation, social justice, reduction of inequality, democratisation and the cultivation of the human (Badat 2009; Leibowitz 2012; Pusser 2006; Singh 2001, 2011). Leibowitz (2012), for example, argues that the public good of higher education institutions, particularly public universities, cannot be divorced from issues of social justice, especially in societies like South Africa that have a history of colonialism, apartheid, gross inequality and poverty. Following a similar line of thought, Walker (2015: 323) concludes that a public good cannot be provided through market mechanisms but requires public action, agency and a particular stance from academics and students to 'fight for what is valuable about universities'.

Some scholars look at higher education and the public good from the capabilities point of view (Walker 2015; Walker and McClean 2015). The capabilities approach does help to unpack the broader social value of higher education that, according to Badat (2009), is missing from the instrumentalist, economically oriented understanding discussed earlier. Walker (2015) and Walker and McLean (2015) suggest that the production of professionals may not just be about economic growth if universities can produce what they call public good professionals. These are professional graduates who have gained from higher education the knowledge, skills and values that enable them to contribute to poverty alleviation, reduction of inequality and enhancing the wellbeing of other people in general (Walker and McLean 2015). This view mainly focuses on the institutional level of the relationship. It locates the link between higher education and the public good in what higher education institutions do or can do for the public good, which is to produce public good professionals. However, it does not address the question of what it costs academics to produce this calibre of professionals. The common denominator between economic, socio-political and capabilities understandings of the relationship between higher education and the public good is that they all present the ends as more important than the means of public good processes in higher education, which gives one side of the story of higher education and the public good.

Higher Education as a Public Good

Those who understand higher education as a public good in itself draw attention to the need to protect its accessibility to all, a view that is closely associated with the notion of education as a human right (Badat 2009; Kerr and Luescher 2018; Marginson 2011; Masehela 2018; Singh 2001; Walker and McLean 2015; Walker and McLean 2010). This perspective presents the public good as something experienced, in the mind or the body, within and beyond higher education institutions, which links to Habermas's notion of the public sphere (Marginson 2011). It also incorporates ideas about building and sustaining higher education systems and institutions that support greater equality, social justice and democratisation.

Both ideas, of higher education as a public good and a space in which to experience public good, have a bearing on what is taught in higher education, how it is taught, some of the spatial relationships in higher education and the experiential features of working and studying in particular types of institutional cultures. This experiential argument also has an instrumental dynamic, in that universities can provide a space for discussion, debate and deliberation, often between academics and students, about humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances as well as historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs about the natural and social worlds (Badat 2009). In this sense, they 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. This comes out clearly in how Badat (2009), Singh (2001) and Walker (2015), describe the social value of the university as a public sphere.

In Walker's (2015) view, one way in which the university contributes to the public good is through social transformation – that is, in being a public sphere that exposes students to the 'other' and helps them understand 'otherness'. This positions the university as a space of encountering difference, foregrounding the broader social value that Badat (2009) refers to and appealing to intrinsic rather than instrumental notions of the public good. This encounter with diversity, she claims, helps students learn tolerance, thus contributing to reconciliation. This also finds expression, though in a different form, in Singh's (2001: 9) definition of 'public good' as:

> A set of interests that are not reducible to the sum of interests of individual or groups of individuals and that demarcate a common space within which the content of moral and political goals like democracy and social justice can be negotiated and collectively pursued.

These arguments about higher education as a public good, like those that focus on higher education for the public good, look at the relationship at a systemic and institutional level. Even though the argument about the interaction between academics and students in the public sphere of the university says something about the micro-level of this relationship, it doesn't tell us much about what it takes to facilitate that interaction and critical engagement. It tells us only that universities are a public good because they serve as a public sphere – a space in which these kinds of interactions and critical engagements can take place. This is not unique to the literature that argues that higher education is itself a public good. In higher education and public good literature generally, works that consider the micro-level of the relationship mainly focus on students' experiences and the role of graduates, which still presents one side of the story of the public good that higher education is and does for its beneficiaries (Masehela 2018; Kerr and Luescher 2018; Walker and McLean 2015; Walker and McLean 2010).

Findings

This section provides an insight into the other side of the story from the vantage point of the costs of being a public good academic, as recounted by academics from two universities in South Africa. It demonstrates that what it takes to produce the public good at universities in South Africa is more than just the financial costs covered by student fees, government subsidies and donor funding. There are other costs borne by academics, which include relational costs, personal resources, psychological costs, career-related costs and identity contingencies. This discussion reveals the intricacies of the relationship between higher education and the public good that are unlikely to emerge from macro-level-focused research. It demonstrates the benefits of zooming in on the micro-level of this relationship.

Relational Costs

Many of the academics I interviewed at Protea University did not recount any relational costs of advancing the public good agenda. Only Mr Martin, who is a bioinformatics lecturer, and Dr Getz, who is anthropology senior lecturer, mentioned it. Even these two spoke about these costs in a way that suggests that they are not as high as at Yellowwood University. This suggests that there is a stigma associated with one's commitment to social issues and that this commitment can lead to the loss of friendships and collegial relationships. On the one hand, Mr Martin claimed that in his department, the biology department,

> The targets of success are impact on the international stage. So, the impact of that can be quite frustrating because basically if you are interested in social issues, you are very much seen as an odd minority, especially in the faculty of science.

This does not seem to have much impact on the relationships that academics have with each other although 'odd minority' does suggest a kind of isolation or disconnection from the 'majority' who are committed to being competitive in the global stage. On the other hand, Dr Getz recounted how her solidarity with and involvement in the #FeesMustFall Movement, at a historically white university where she worked before moving to Protea University, 'ripped apart' many of her relationships with her then colleagues.

> The student movements really ripped apart a lot of friendships and collegial relationships. So many of us lost friends and colleagues and projects because of how we stood with the student movements. So, I left [the university] in objection but also, I needed a new direction because I didn't want to resent things. (Dr Getz)

While both Mr Martin's and Dr Getz's statements about relational costs suggest that these are not prevalent at Protea University, it does not mean that the collegial relationships there are perfect. These relationships may be affected by factors other than an individual academic's commitment to advancing the public good agenda.

Some of the academics at Yellowwood University argued that advocating for access, equality, and institutional transformation is a fight and a struggle that sometimes impacts negatively on relationships and collegiality among the academic staff members on campus. While this was a common theme in the data from the Yellowwood University interviews, three interviewees spoke about relational costs in more obvious terms. Prof Smith, a language education professor, made an example of the experiences of lecturers who she referred to as 'progressive'; academics who find themselves being silenced by their colleagues. 'I'd say the public good camp, they don't sit in the Senate. In departmental meetings, they feel silenced.' This friction is experienced not only by those who do not sit in the Senate. Prof Logan, an education policy professor, suggested that it is also experienced by those progressive academics who do sit in the Senate. Speaking of his own experience as a member of the Senate and of a number of committees in the university, Prof Logan suggested that there can be friction between those who sit in these bodies because some are resistant to the call for transformation in the university. This tension negatively affects collegial relationships.

Dr Gibbs shared similar views about the impact of the struggle for transformation on collegial relationships among academics on campus. For him, what affects relationships the most is the fact that when they fight for equality and transformation, they are not fighting 'a faceless institution', but their own colleagues:

> The consequences [of the struggle] are very personal. I mean, those structures are deeply embedded in every level of the university. If you take it from school level up, for example, the fact is that you are not fighting a faceless institution. You are fighting people who are sitting with you in the same school, who see access and who see equity in very different ways to you. And so, for example, the kinds of arguments about how one sees access for people who've been historically deprived of access becomes a major issue when you're fighting your own colleagues in your own department, never mind the university as such.

The relational costs that these academics are recounting here also suggest that not all academics view the public good in the same way, even within the same institutions. For example, all the participants of this study perceived institutional transformation as critical to creating a higher education for the public good, especially in the South African historical context. However, the disagreements, conflicts, resistance and breakdown of relationships because of processes of bringing about transformation indicate that some academics in the university do not see transformation as a contribution to the public good.

Personal Resources Costs

A commitment to the public good agenda may mean that academics expend personal resources, particularly in fulfilling their public good roles as lecturers, supervisors, mentors and activists. This was not a prevalent theme in the data collected from Yellowwood University. Only Dr Elba, who is an academic literacy senior lecturer, spoke about activities that academics do for the public good that require the investment of their personal resources. He argued that academics are hesitant to involve themselves in community engagement because it often requires them to commit much more than just themselves. It requires them to invest personal resources because there is often no institutional support for community engagement work. He said, 'People are more prone now than ever before to protect what they have and reaching out means you don't only have to give of yourself, but you also have to give of the resources you have available.' This echoes some of what emerged from the data collected at Protea University, where the theme of personal resource costs was more prevalent.

Given its status as a historically black university, the majority of the student body at Protea University is from disadvantaged backgrounds and the university is not as well-resourced as its historically white counterparts are. The challenges that face these students necessitate that the academics who teach them play roles that are beyond their call of duty. Doing so often requires them to use their own personal resources. For example, Prof. Mathosa, the head of the Anthropology Department at Protea University, has had to be a father figure to some of his students, which has meant using money from his own pocket to cover the costs of some of their basic needs.

> You know, I encounter a lot of problems as a lecturer. Students come here to my office to say, especially at my age now. Students see me more as a father figure. They come here, '*Tata andinamali. Ndicela imali.* (Daddy I don't have money. May I please have money). My parents are struggling. *Nd'celund'ncede* (Please help me) with my schoolwork so that…' So, you end up being this daddy. (Prof Mathosa)

Dr Getz echoed Prof Mathosa, arguing that academics at Protea University routinely spend their own money to ensure that students have something to eat because food insecurity has become an issue and it interferes with teaching and learning on campus.

> There are students who are having panic attacks and really stressing, having to choose whether to eat or to come to campus. It's a lot. So, routinely giving their personal money to students. So that's the kind of comrade academic that I've seen at [Protea University], which has been quite impressive to me, that kind of commitment to students and seeing academic labour as part of political work. (Dr Getz)

The literature shows that student hunger is a common problem in many universities in South Africa (Van den Berg 2015; Rudolph et al. 2018; Dominguez-Whitehead 2015), and it is not uncommon for academics to dig deep into their pockets to help alleviate it, as recounted in several reports from different universities (Jeranji 2019). It makes sense, therefore, to assume academics at Yellowwood University may also spend their money on feeding students, even though the participants in this study did not mention it.

Dr Getz added that, for her, part of advancing the public good agenda beyond the university means 'my salary and the resources of the university can be used to sustain, augment and support the work of really interesting activists in South Africa'. In other words, the political work of bringing about the public good on and off campus comes at a price; it requires academics to invest their personal resources. Academics who pay this price, according to Dr Getz, are 'comrade academics'. For Mr Martin, they are

'progressive as academics'. These terms distinguish public good academics from those who are not as committed to the public good agenda.

According to Mr Martin, those he described as progressive academics, who were in solidarity with the students during the time of the nationwide student protests, put together money from their own pockets to ensure that the student activists who were arrested had access to legal representation and that their bail charges were paid.

> There were about 40 or 50 students, probably 60 students who were arrested during the period from 2015 up until 2017. And they would end up here [in the local Magistrate's court] and the bails charged were quite high. So, at first, some of us were just haphazardly involved in trying to collect money for bail because it was about R3,000 per student. And then we set up a structure to try and like be more organised to try and track what was happening. (Mr Martin)

What is evident from the quotations above is that, for some academics, advancing the public good may mean spending some personal, particularly financial, resources to create the conditions that allow for effective teaching and learning. This decision is not imposed on them – instead, they do it of their own volition, because of their commitment to the public good agenda.

Psychological Costs

Psychological costs are the negative psychological effects of being a public good academic at universities in South Africa. Most participants' comments about psychological costs mainly related to the aftermath of the #FeesMustFall protests, which took place from 2015 to 2018. Dr Getz, for example, as an academic who supported the #FeesMustFall Movement, spoke about her horrific experience of witnessing police brutality and violence during the protests at the historically white university where she worked before moving to Protea University.

> And I was really horrified, not only by the police on campus, police brutality on campus, the escalation of the violence between students and police and also the way in which the university after the student movement started to put surveillance technology everywhere. And I was really horrified by that and I know that I was getting another five-year term and I just thought, 'I'll go crazy'. (Dr Getz)

The psychological aftermaths of the #FeesMustFall protests were also mentioned by some academics at Yellowwood University who even cited the suicide, associated with depression, of a prominent academic from one of the historically white universities in South Africa as an example of the psychological costs that came with the protests.

Psychological costs also refer to the impact of academics' work overload as higher education massifies without a corresponding increase in academic staff. Most academics at Protea University expressed concerns about their added burden of administrative work, providing social support to students, and the pressure that the university was putting on them to do more research since it was establishing itself as a world-class research-intensive university. All these factors contribute to the public good in terms of knowledge production and improved student university experiences and academic success. However, the participants argued that these expose them to the risk of psychological problems, such as stress, fatigue and burnout. This concern was well articulated by Prof Aaron, an accounting professor at Protea University:

> Nothing is taken away from my load. Everything is added to my load, which means I get stretched further. And the pressure of trying to produce the same quality but being stretched, is actually what causes the stress because you're still operating professionally at the same level. ... But it doesn't cause stress for everybody because some people don't have, some people don't care. (Prof Aaron)

The concerns about psychological costs echo the findings of a study by Ntshoe et al. (2008) on changes in the academic profession in South Africa. They found that academics 'are expected to fulfil the roles of administrator, manager, support staff and student counsellor without incentives or the assistance of additional personnel' (Ntshoe et al. 2008: 401). While their study suggests that these increased expectations negatively affect academics, they do not identify this negative impact as the price that academics must pay for their commitment to the public good. Making this link gives us a better understanding of what it costs to produce the public good of higher education.

Career-related Costs

The public good work that academics do over and above their key performance areas is not always recognised by the universities' promotion criteria. This work also involves challenging existing structures to bring about institutional transformation, equality, equity, and non-discrimination. However, fighting to change the status quo for the public good gives them a negative reputation in the university, which works against them when it comes to promotion opportunities. This is evident in the data from both Yellowwood and Protea universities. For example, Prof May, who is a community engagement co-ordinator at Yellowwood University, asserted that unconventional ways of

sharing and distributing knowledge, such as writing articles for news outlets like the *Daily Maverick*, do not always get recognised by the university. She added that a commitment to the public good agenda might put one out of the promotion trajectory, which Dr Getz of Protea University described as a 'self-aggrandisement machine'. Prof May believes that there is a need to disrupt the trajectory in such a way that academics are able to fully commit to the public good agenda and still be able to succeed in their careers in terms of promotion.

> There is a cost. I get the debates about cost and, you don't get promotions and you are not in that kind of trajectory. But I think the trajectory needs to be disrupted. That's my starting point … So, there is a cost to academics of doing public good at the moment, but they need to make the argument that it isn't an either-or if they can. (Prof May)

Academics from Yellowwood University suggested that transformation at their university was happening at a snail's pace. Fighting for decolonisation, equity of access and success for students, and battling against racism on campus, the alienation of black students and staff and the underrepresentation of black academics, could put one at a disadvantage when it comes to promotion and opportunities for career advancement. The findings suggest that, at Yellowwood University, academics who are pressing for transformation, which participants deemed to be an important part of the public good, are less likely to be promoted or receive funding to conduct research that would help them progress in their careers. As Dr Elba put it, this happens to academics who are 'challenging those structures and coming up with alternatives and it's not well-received'. For example, Dr Gibbs argued that arguing for disadvantaged students' access and success 'backfires on those who are fighting for them. The backfiring is simply exclusion. And so, if you want to play the promotion game, if you want to play the access game for yourself, it becomes really difficult.' He added, 'If I were to fight this kind of fight and I were to apply to the faculty for funding, there is no way that your application is going to hold the same weight as somebody who works favourably at other levels.' In other words, challenging the system disadvantages one when it comes to opportunities for personal career advancement.

For some academics, the exclusion that Dr Gibbs referred to went to the extent of forcing them out of their jobs at the university. As Dr Zoziwa explicitly stated, 'We all know how some lecturers were told to leave because they dared talk about notions such as transformation.' She cited the case of a prominent professor who was forced out of the university because of his commitment to fighting for decolonisation. The same example was

made by Prof Logan. He described this prominent professor as one of the first academics to make the call for decolonisation, saying to university management, 'We need to undo your understanding of what black learners know … my black students know more than you think that they know. I'll teach them at a level that is empowering.' Prof Logan argued that part of the reason why the professor was forced out of Yellowwood University was that the management 'didn't want to open the door to changing the white curriculum, essentially' and the professor had refused to budge on his commitment to decolonisation.

Academics at Protea University also spoke about experiencing career-related costs even though the reasons behind these costs were different from those recounted by academics at Yellowwood University. Dr Getz, for example, argued that 'The institution of the university is becoming more and more corporatised, more and more conservative and more and more invested in its own reproduction as opposed to invested in changing the society in which it exists.' As a result, she argued, academics who are committed to the public good, particularly in the community beyond the borders of the university, may 'lose the capacity for promotion' because they 'lose being the darling of the university' and 'lose people respecting you within the terms of the university'. She made an example of the advocacy work that some of her colleagues spent a lot of their time doing. This advocacy work led to the insourcing of workers at one of South Africa's historically white universities. She argued that advocacy is not recognised as part of their job as academics. As a result, it 'doesn't count in terms of promotion but is absolutely about building a university that can speak to the consolidation of a public'. Mr Martin and Dr Swan echoed Dr Getz in arguing that some of the public good work that academics do beyond the call of duty is not always recognised nor rewarded by the university. This includes advocacy and political activism.

Academics from Protea University referred to their university's transition from being teaching-intensive towards establishing itself as a world-class research-intensive university. They argued that, because of this mission, there had been increasing pressure on them to do more research and write more publications. This pressure was evident in that research now weighed more than teaching and community engagement when it came to promotion. This meant that academics who did more teaching and community engagement, which they perceived as important contributions to the public good, were less likely to get promotions than those who do more research. In Dr Swan's words, 'people might just want to run off to promotions and that you know. They don't maybe make an effort so much with their teaching.'

Identity Contingencies

Academics also face costs associated with their given social identity, particularly their racial identity. I refer to these costs as identity contingencies, a term coined by Claude Steele (2010), which means situations that a person with a given social identity has to deal with in order to get what he or she wants. In this study, academics from both universities spoke mainly about racial identity contingencies, which are the most common in South Africa, given its colonial and apartheid history. However, the silence of some participants about other social identity markers, such as gender, race, and nationality, does not necessarily mean there are no identity contingencies associated with them. The literature suggests that there are challenges that academics face because of these identity markers, even though they are not directly associated with their contribution to the public good, but have an impact on it (Ayala-López 2018; Harry et al. 2017; Khunou et al. 2019; Muberekwa and Nkomo 2016; Ramohai 2019; Shober 2014).

While it was mainly black academics who spoke about these racial identity contingencies, Dr Elba made an interesting point, which suggested that racial identity contingencies are experienced by white academics too, even though none of those I interviewed mentioned them. He said, 'There is a stigma attached to whiteness as there are stigmas attached to blackness and I think that staff in themselves should be proactive in debunking those stigmas.' Black academics, particularly at Yellowwood University, argued that they have to deal with several racial identity contingencies in their pursuit of the public good. These include racism and being alienated from the social, intellectual and political life of the university in different ways. It also includes being treated with contempt and condescension by students and colleagues for no reason other than that they are black and therefore have to prove that they are worthy and competent enough. This is something that they believe white academics never have to do. Dr Gibbs's words capture these identity contingencies very well:

> So, for me, I think part of the experience at the university, as I said, it's highly contradictory. You have this fabulous opportunity to work with students from across ranges of wealth and poverty and with all its problems ... At the same time, the space is alien. I do not feel at home at [Yellowwood University]. … I don't belong here. I've got to prove myself. Students who challenge me, they wouldn't challenge white colleagues. They want to know your qualifications. They want to know how long you've been qualified. Are you more senior to this one or less senior to this one … (Dr Gibbs).

In this quote, Dr Gibbs suggests that to play their role(s) as public good professionals at historically white institutions like Yellowwood University,

academics of colour must first deal with being alienated and having their competence constantly questioned because of their racial identity.

Other academics shared similar views. Dr Zoziwa asserted, '[Yellowwood University] will always remind you that you're black.' She also stated that there were numerous stories of black academics who had been treated with contempt and condescension by their students not only at Yellowwood University but also in other historically white universities. As an example, she mentioned her sister, who works at another university. 'You come [into class] and you immediately know that, as a black lecturer, people are saying, "Oh! Why are you standing in front of me?" My sister is a lecturer at [a historically white university] and she has got those kinds of stories.' This example echoes Dr Gibbs's experience at Yellowwood University. He recounted his experience of several incidents where he, as a coloured person,[3] was alienated from a particular political forum run by students in the university. His account of these incidents reveals how the country and the university's history have laid the foundation for the alienation that people of colour continue to experience on campus:

> So, what I do, I walk around campus and I go to student meetings. Yeah, I've been chucked out before because I am not dark enough. That's happened on the campus on three big occasions. But I understand where it comes from. It's not gonna be a case of labelling or whatever. And then the other day I got an email from one of the students who said, 'I'd love to engage with you. You are consistently coming back and we consistently push you out of our forum. But I've heard from some of my friends at res that you are doing this kind of work in your master's program. I'd love to engage with you'. In other words, we are sitting in complexities of a past here that makes us not sit with each other. (Dr Gibbs)

Academics from Protea University were silent about racial identity contingencies. This does not necessarily mean that they do not exist on their campus. However, their responses suggested that they find their university space welcoming to people of all races and that its culture is more accommodating to diversity. Most of them spoke about experiencing a sense of belonging on campus because of the culture that exists in it. In Prof Mathosa's words:

> But one thing about Protea University that I can tell you, which is still the case now. As a black scholar, academic, here I don't feel like I don't belong in this place. I've never once felt like I don't belong. There are frustrating things as you were saying, you know. There are frustrating things maybe administratively but I never for once felt like there is an agenda here to somehow compromise me scholarly or as a person. (Prof Mathosa)

Prof Mathosa's words are the extreme opposite of what Dr Zoziwa and Dr Gibbs said about their experience at Yellowwood University as black

academics. This suggests that experiences of advancing the public good are different for the academics at these two universities. The racial and political histories of the universities may have something to do with these differences.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the link between higher education and the public good should not be understood at a macro level only, with the focus mainly on how higher education systems and institutions contribute to the public good. A micro-level view, focusing on what happens within institutions and on the different role-players, enhances and deepens our understanding of the complex relationship between higher education and the public good. This was demonstrated in this article through a discussion of the costs of being a public good academic, as recounted by academics from a historically white university and a historically black university in South Africa. This discussion indicates that the costs of producing public goods at universities in South Africa are more than just the financial costs covered by student fees, government subsidies and donor funding.

Zooming in on the micro-level of the relationship between higher education and the public good gives an insight into the costs that academics incur as key role-players in higher education's contribution to the public good. It revealed relational, psychological and career-related costs and those related to personal resources and identity contingencies. This means that to be a public good academic at a university in South Africa, one must be willing to pay the price. The costs, as discussed in this article, are just one aspect of what we can learn about higher education and the public good when we focus on the micro-level of this relationship. Based on the findings of this study, I believe that further micro-level-focused research can help uncover more aspects to deepen and enhance our understanding of the link between higher education and the public good.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of higher education transformation in South Africa see *Researching the Public Good: Reflections on experiences of doing research on higher education and the public good in South Africa*, in this special issue.
2. In South Africa, historically white universities are those that were for the exclusive education of white people, and historically black universities are those that were for the exclusive education of black (African, Coloured and Indian) people before the dawn of democracy.
3. Coloured people in South Africa are people of mixed European and African or Asian ancestry.

References

Altbach, P. G., 2013, Advancing the national and global knowledge economy: the role of research universities in developing countries, *Studies in Higher Education,* Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 316–330.

Ayala-López, S., 2018, Foreigners and Inclusion in Academia. *Hypatia*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 325–342.

Ashwin, P. and Case, J., 2018, *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good*, Cape Town: African Minds.

Badat, S., 2009, *The Role of Higher Education in Society*, Cape Town: HERS-SA Academy.

Bloom, D., Canning, D., and Chan, K., 2006, *Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa,* Washington DC: The World Bank.

Calhoun, C., 2006, The University and the Public Good, *Thesis Eleven*, pp. 7–43.

Cloete, N., Bailey, T., Pillay, P., Bunting, I. and Maassen, P., 2011, *Universities and Economic Development in* Africa, Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET).

Cloete, N., Maassen, P., and Bailey, T., 2015, *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher* Education, Cape Town: African Minds.

Collini, S., 2012, *hat are Universities for?* London, UK: Penguin.

Creswell, J. W., 2014, *Research design : qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* 4th ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Founche, C. B. and Delpot, C. S., 2011, *Research at Grass Roots: For the Soical Sciences and Human Servicea Professions*, Cape Town: Van Schaik.

Dominguez-Whitehead, Y., 2015, Students' Food Acquisition Struggles in the Context of South Africa: The Fundamentals of Student Development, *Journal of College Student Development*, pp. 292–308.

Harry, T. T., Dodd, N. M., and Chinyamurindi, W. T., 2017, Using narratives to understand the motivational factors and experience of being a self-initiated academic expatriate in South Africa, *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

Jeranji, T., 2019, *People's Post*, 16 February, https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/Peoples-Post/lecturers-dig-dip-to-help-students-20190415

Jonathan, R., 2001, Higher education transformation and the public good. *Kagisano Higher Education Discussion Series, 1*(1), 28-63.Kerr, P. and Luescher, T., 2018, Students' Experiences of University Life Beyond the Curriculum, in Ashwin, P. and Case, J., *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good*, Cape Town: African Minds, pp. 216–231).

King, N., and Horrocks, C., 2010, *Interviews in Qualitative Research*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Khunou, G., Phaswana, E. D., Khoza-Shangase, K., and Canham, H., eds., 2019, *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*, Johannesburg: HSRC Press.

Leibowitz, B., 2012, Introduction: Reflections on education and the public good, in Leibowitz, B., ed., *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*, Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, pp. xvii–xxvii.

Marginson, S., 2011, Higher Education and Public Good, *Higher Education Quarterly,* Vol. 65, No. 4, pp. 411–433.

Marginson, S., 2012, The Problem of Public Good(s), Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

Masehela, L., 2018, The Rising Challenge of University Access for Students From Low-income Families, in Ashwin, P. and Case, J., *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good*, Cape Town: African Minds, pp. 165–176.

Monette, D. R., Sullivan, T. J., De Jong, C. R., and Hilton, T. P., 2014, *Applied Social Science Research: A Tool for Human Services,* USA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.

Muberekwa, E., and Nkomo, T., 2016, Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women About Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st-Century South Africa, *SAGE Open*, Vol. 6, No. 4.

Nixon, J., 2011, *Higher Education and the Public Good: Imagining the University,* London, UK: Continuum.

Ntshoe, I., Higgs, P., Higgs, G. L. and Wolhuter, C. C., 2008, The changing academic profession in higher education and new managerialism and corporatism in South Africa, *South African Journal of Higher Education,* Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 391–403.

Okech, A., 2020, African feminist epistemic communities and decoloniality,
Critical African Studies, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 313–329.

Pusser, B., 2006, Reconsidering Higher Education and the Public Good: The role of Public Spheres, in Tierney, W. G., ed., *Governance and the Public Good* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 11–28.

Ramohai, J., 2019, A black woman's perspective on understanding transformation and diversity in South African higher education, *Transformation in Higher Education*, Vol. 4.

Rudolph, M., Kroll, F., Muchesa, E., Manderson, A., Berry, M. and Richard, N., 2018, Food Insecurity and Coping Strategies amongst Students at University of Witwatersrand, *Journal of Food Security*, pp. 20–25.

Sharma, R., 2015, Role of Universities in Development of Civil Society and Social Transformation, Vienna: International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences.

Shober, D., 2014, Women in Higher Education in South Africa, in Demos, V., Berheide, C. W. and Segal, M. T., eds., *Advances in Gender Research*, Vol. 19, pp. 315–332.

Singh, M., 2001, Re-inserting 'public good' into higher education transformation, *Kagisano Higher Education Discussion Series,* Vol. 1, pp. 8–18.

Singh, M., 2011, The Place of Social Justice in Higher Education and Social Change Discourses, *A Journal of Comparative and International Education,* Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 481–494.

Ssentongo, J. S., 2020, 'Which journal is that?' Politics of academic promotion in Uganda and the predicament of African publication outlets, *Critical African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 283–301.

Steele, C., 2010, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do,* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Tilak, J. B., 2008, Higher education: a public good or a commodity for trade? *Prospects ,* Vol. 38, pp. 449–466.

Unterhalter, E., Allais, S., Howell, C., Adu-Yeboah, C., Fongwa, S., Ibrahim, J., Oketch, M., Posholi, L., and Selepe, C., 2019, *Higher education, inequalities and the public good: Perspectives from four African countries*, London, UK: University College London. http://rgdoi.net/10.13140/RG.2.2.30962.66248

Van den Berg, L., 2015, Food insecurity among students at the University of the Free State, South Africa, *South African Journal of Clinical Nutrition* , pp. 160–169 .

Waghid, Y., 2009, Universities and public goods: In defence of democratic deliberation,compassionate imagining and cosmopolitan justice, in Bitzer E., ed., *Higher Education in South Africa – A scholarly look behind the scenes*, Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, pp. 71–84.

Walker, M., 2006, *Higher Education Pedagogies* (1st ed.), Maidenhead: Open University Press .

Walker, M., 2012, Universities, professional capabilities and contributions to the public good in South Africa, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education,* Vol. 42, No. 6, pp. 819–838.

Walker, M., 2015, Universities as a Public Good, in McGrath, S. and Gu, Q., eds, *Routledge International Handbook on Education and Development*, London, UK and New York: Routledge, pp. 313–324.

Walker, M., and McLean, M., 2010, Making lives go better: University education and 'professional capabilities', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, pp. 847–869.

Walker, M., and McLean, M., 2015, Professionals and Public-Good Capabilities, *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning,* Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 2310–7103.

Williams, G., 2016, Higher education: Public good or private commodity? *London Review of Education,* Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 131–142.