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Place, Public Good and Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Worsening poverty and inequality continue to affect large segments of the South African population. Universities are critical in contributing to overcoming these challenges. This article looks at the relationship between South African universities and the communities and places in which they are located. The history of South African higher education shows different kinds of relationships with the places in which universities were set. Data collected from interviews in 2018 with key informants in South African universities notes their criticisms of government development policies that lacked vision with regard to the development of place-based relationships for the public good. This data indicates that in the absence of an enabling policy framework to link communities and places, certain universities, individuals who work in them and members of communities around universities have developed their own approaches. I argue that these activities indicate actions by certain members of a spatial community, which can be understood as practices associated with a public sphere. Through this process individuals and institutions can play a central role in defining and contextualising the public good role of universities in their communities.

Keywords: public good, public sphere, universities, place-based development

Résumé

L'aggravation de la pauvreté et des inégalités continue d'affecter de larges segments de la population sud-africaine. Les universités sont essentielles pour contribuer à surmonter ces défis. Cet article examine la relation entre les universités sud-africaines et les communautés et les lieux dans lesquels elles sont situées. L'histoire de l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain montre différents types de relations avec les lieux d'implantation des universités.

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Les données recueillies à partir d'entretiens en 2018 avec des informateurs clés dans les universités sud-africaines notent leurs critiques des politiques de développement gouvernementales qui manquaient de vision en ce qui concerne le développement de relations territoriales pour le bien public. Ces données indiquent qu'en l'absence d'un cadre politique habilitant pour relier les communautés et les lieux, certaines universités, les individus qui y travaillent et les membres des communautés autour des universités ont développé leurs propres approches. Je soutiens que ces activités indiquent des actions de certains membres d'une communauté spatiale, qui peuvent être comprises comme des pratiques associées à une sphère publique. Grâce à ce processus, les individus et les institutions peuvent jouer un rôle central dans la définition et la contextualisation du rôle de bien public des universités dans leurs communautés.

Mots-clés : bien public, sphère publique, universités, développement territorial

Introduction

Place-based development refers to the extent to which multidimensional development strategies – which include improvements in economic, social and cultural wellbeing – are relevant and responsive to the specific needs of a spatial location; the location may be rural/urban, and it may be a town, city, region or country (Barca, McCann and Rodriguez-Pose 2012). Interventions associated with place-based development may be designated as opposed to place-neutral development, where similar (if not identical) development strategies are adopted in different places (Chien 2008). Place-neutral strategies tend to give little detailed attention to the specificities of place.

Universities may be understood as engaged in place-based development, which takes account of their location, or in place-neutral development, which underplays aspects of their regional or locational setting. This orientation may have particular consequences for how the relationships between universities and the public good and the public sphere are understood. The public good role of higher education refers to the indirect benefits that wider society enjoys from the expansion of higher education. It includes benefits like economic growth, better health outcomes and increased public debate (McMahon 2009). The idea of the public sphere draws on the ideas of Habermas and is discussed by him as a public space where ideas are exchanged and formulated, allowing public discourse to occur (Habermas 1989). In the abstract, neither concept says much about place-based development, but this notion is useful in reading some of the histories of universities in Africa.

In the book *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, Auerbach (2019) makes the case that the African universities of Dar es Salaam and Makerere have made different contributions to the places in which they are spatially located. For instance, while Dar es Salaam has 'stood as a nationalist hallmark', Makerere was intended to be the 'quintessential colonial university' (Auerbach 2019: 80). Although Makerere University has changed substantially since its founding and oriented itself to the needs of its urban setting through, for example, the Urban Action Lab (UAL), established in 2016 to research urban infrastructure waste and sanitation (Ernston 2016), the history highlights how universities can shift between place-neutral and place-based orientations.

In this article, I look at the relationship between South African universities and their place-based communities. A number of writers on South African universities and place-based development argue that the democratic South African state has failed to adequately appreciate and support the role of universities in contributing to place-based development. They highlight how the debate around whether universities are for elites or for the masses has made it difficult to agree on the place-based role of different universities (Thakrar 2018: 195). Fongwa (2017) notes the importance of ensuring that knowledge institutions and workers are embedded in a local context, which is not always the case for all South African universities. Schalkwyk and De Lange (2018) understand institutional embeddedness as a product of scholarly engagement, organisational strategies, a coherent policy framework and capable leadership. Nkomo (2007) argues that the government should ensure that policy objectives like land reform are met in order to support community-based income-generating projects. This is necessary so that local municipalities are better able to support universities and the communities around them (Nkomo 2007).

In their book, *Anchored in Place: Rethinking the University and Development in South Africa,* Bank et al. (2018) discuss the inadequacies of the South African democratic state in facilitating a relationship between South African universities and the communities in which they are located. The book analyses the different strategies that have been used either by the South African government or by universities themselves (in the absence of a facilitating state) in attempts to stimulate place-based development. Aspects of the book, written in 2018, deal with social movements, such as student protests, which have been organised in response to the lack of place-based development through universities (Bank and Sibanda 2018).

The aim of this paper is to explore the contribution that universities can make to the social, economic and cultural development of their local

communities. Place-based development through the public good role of universities is made difficult in South Africa by the fact that mutual benefit does not always accrue organically from simple agreements between communities and universities (Bank 2019). It requires continuous, patient and concerted effort underpinned by a realistic sense of the capabilities and responsibilities of all actors (Bank 2019). This raises questions about how the public good role of universities affects the ways in which higher education for the public good is conceptualised and spatially realised by a range of actors in different contexts.

The article builds on the argument made by Bank et al. (2018) and presents some additional policy analysis to illustrate how the higher education policy framework formulated in post-apartheid South Africa inadequately facilitated the development of a relationship between South African universities and their surrounding communities. Using interview data from key informants in selected universities, gathered in 2018, pockets of place-based development that have taken place in and around some of South Africa's universities can be sketched, enabling some reflections on place and the public good in relation to South African higher education.

The Historical Relationship Between South African Universities and their Place-based Communities

A history of South African higher education highlights the selective use of place-based development policies by certain universities, which drew on particular conceptions of the public good in certain moments.

In the main, universities under apartheid could be categorised according to one of two types of public good relationships with the broader South African society. In the first instance was a group of universities that worked closely with the state to respond to the needs of the places they were located in. These were the white Afrikaner universities and the Bantustan universities set up in the former homelands of the 1970s (Bank 2018). These universities played a highly instrumental public good role in social and economic development for the apartheid project. In the second instance was a group of universities that distanced themselves from the places they were anchored in and from the wider national society. These were the white English universities, which can be described as more place-neutral. These universities viewed themselves as playing a more intrinsic public good role in South African society and referred to themselves as 'liberal universities' (Bunting 2006: 42). While they understood themselves as public institutions that were entitled to public financial resources, they

did not concede to the idea that they were under the control of the state. Specifically, these universities understood their missions to include inherent academic freedom, meaning that they had the prerogative to teach what they deemed suitable and research what interested them (Bunting 2006: 42).

The new democratic government, established in 1994, had a choice to make regarding which of these two types of institutional arrangement it would move forward with when restructuring the university sector. To structure higher education with a place-based emphasis would require that the public good role of universities be linked to and defined by a particular perspective on place, addressing the inequalities that affected the most marginalised members of communities who lived around the universities. This would require some appreciation of what the place-based relationships entail. Cloete and Van Schalkwyk (2021) show how the South African state has not supported such a move and has maintained a higher education system that largely appears to serve elite segments of the population. They conclude that university education, in some instances, facilitates elite formation (Cloete and Van Schalkwyk 2021).

In charting a path in a different direction, a direction towards a higher education system that included marginalised communities, the democratic government would have had to focus on identifying previously excluded members of the spatial community associated with each university. These members of the community would then need to be involved in the activities of the higher education sector. For example, they could be involved through the establishment of civic spaces, rural development programmes and evaluations of the impact of higher education institutions on communities.

A second approach was to consider a place-neutral choice with regard to universities. This would entail that the state play a classic role of non-interference with universities, simply setting up the conditions for universities to steer their own missions both internally and in relation to the communities located around them. While both choices at the time were critical for the future of democratic South Africa, a balance between them was required.

In section two I discuss in more detail the restructuring of the university sector after 1994. I show how the new democratic government's policies neglected to adequately promote the idea of universities having development roles that emphasised instrumentally and intrinsically place-based public good outcomes. Perhaps not intentionally, the policies were slanted towards a more place-neutral approach. Before turning to that discussion I first consider some issues that arise from thinking about place-based development, universities, the public good and the notion of the public sphere.

The 'Public Good' as Contextualised in the 'Public Sphere'

There are different interpretations of the relationship between universities, place and the public good. These interpretations usually depend on the conditions of possibility within a particular place and context. Inequalities in higher education in different places and contexts often limit the conditions of possibility for realising the public good. This raises the question of how different ideas of the relationship between higher education and the public good suggest various kinds of links with notions of place-based development. Therefore, analyses of higher education, place-based development and the public good require substantial contextual reflection.

The notion of the public good is highly contested. Samuelson gave his well-known definition of public goods as non-excludable and non-rivalrous (Samuelson 1954). In the first instance, this means that consumer A's consumption cannot exclude consumer B from enjoying the benefits of the public good; hence there is no reason for consumer B to cover the expenditure of providing the public good (Buchanan 1968). Therefore, consumer B may free ride. In the second instance, provision of a good for consumer A involves provision of the same good for consumer B (for example a lighthouse) (Buchanan 1968). In contrast, private goods are sold to consumers who can afford market prices (McNutt 1999). This dichotomy, though it has become naturalised, is seemingly unhelpful because it is an oversimplification. The public/private divide can be understood conceptually, empirically, or both ways. The empirical component presents an opportunity to foreground place and context when theorising the relationship between higher education and the public good. In the empirical sense, the concept of public good must be understood in terms of the place and context it is located in (Marginson and Considine 2000: 28). The public good can be defined as the benefits, whether economic, social, political or cultural (Unterhalter et al. 2019), that the public derives from a particular action or intervention undertaken by either themselves or others. In this case the action or intervention is higher education.

There are two distinct ways in which the public good discourse is framed in higher education: the instrumental role that higher education can play in society (such as developing knowledge, professionals and innovation), and the intrinsic role (such as shaping culture) (Oketch et al. 2014; Unterhalter et al. 2017; Unterhalter and Howell 2021). In the instrumental view, the public good is understood as leading to development outcomes like economic growth through aggregate increases in national productivity, individual labour market earnings and social cohesion, among other outcomes (McMahon 2009). The intrinsic conceptions of the public

good include among others the notion that more higher education leads to outcomes like public dialogue, democracy and participatory citizenship (Leibowitz 2012).

These outcomes may take different shapes in different places. The instrumental and intrinsic ideas about the relationship between higher education and the public good may also take a shape that mirrors the local context. For example, in South Africa, some believe that in order to mirror the local context the notion of entrepreneurial-ness should be understood and enacted through the 'Ubuntu' moral code. Thus, this notion of entrepreneurialism seems to overlap the intrinsic and instrumental conceptions of the public good. I expand on this later when I discuss the interview data presented in this article.

The idea of the public good has close conceptual connections with the idea of the public sphere. The public sphere concept has evolved to describe societies in Western Europe, making it a key example of a place-based concept. Habermas's definition is widely cited. Habermas defined the public sphere as a shared space that is created and maintained through critical discourse and argumentation (Habermas 1989). Put differently, the public sphere is a social *space* where different ideas are exchanged between members of the public. It can be both a physical and non-physical place (Adut 2012). Problems arise with the theory of public spheres because Habermas' formulation of the public sphere is based on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century elitist democracy of bourgeois European society (Fraser 1990). This democracy excluded anyone who came from an 'alternative' public sphere (alternative meaning anything deviating from the bourgeois norm) or from different places (Fraser 1990). As Benson (2009) states, this formulation failed to appreciate the need to incorporate pluralistic and diverse discursive styles that are not associated with elites. The less pluralistic a public sphere is, the more likely it is that the distribution of the public good will be unequal. From this discussion it is evident that the public sphere concept can be strongly grounded in place.

The public sphere concept allows us to foreground inequalities like class and gender among other crucial problems when thinking about place-based development, but it may not be able to accommodate the range of competing views on these issues. Place-based development strategies that take pluralistic public spheres into account allow multidimensional relevance and responsiveness to the specific needs of varying spatial locations (Barca et al. 2012), but this requires a range of conditions to make these possible. In the following section I explore the context of South African higher education. I consider some of the historical trends around the spatial locations of, and conditions of possibility for, universities.

Universities Under Apartheid: Place-based and Place-neutral Development

When the Nationalist Party came into government in 1948, all segments of society and the economy were structured along racial lines (Feinstein 2005). By the 1970s, South Africa was formally divided into ten separate territories on the basis of ethnicity (Feinstein 2005). Racial groups in South Africa were categorised into four defined groups: Black Africans, White, Indian or Coloured (Posel 2011). All people who were classified as Black African were considered citizens of one of the Bantustans, although in reality this was a law that was impossible to put into practice (Unterhalter 1987). The different independent and non-independent states and Bantustans were governed through different sets of policies and for many this entailed the establishment of universities.

The overarching motivation of all policies across all groups of states was to advance the development of the white Republic of South Africa (Posel 2011). The Bantustans were granted *de jure* independent traditional leadership. On paper their leadership had the freedom to do what was in the interests of their citizens' separate development. For example, the traditional leaders had the right to allocate land for agricultural production and for housing (Legassick and Wolpe 1976: 88). In reality, however, some Bantustan leaders and their allies enjoyed personal benefits to the detriment of their citizens. In Bophuthatswana, Mangope's regime was held together by patronage and corruption: jobs, land and trading licences were distributed in return for political support (Khunou 2009: 13).

A very different vision for South Africa was formulated at the University of Fort Hare, which was established in 1916 (UFH 2021). The physical structure had served as a fort or stronghold for the British military, so that to this day the ruins that remain are a visible symbol of the strong place-based function of the architecture of Fort Hare (UFH 2021). Yet despite the presence of the ruins as a symbol of defence (and exclusion), the university operated as a racially inclusive physical space until the 1959–60 takeover of the National Party.

When the apartheid state took control of South Africa and all its institutions, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 was passed, and a number of new universities were set up linked to the Bantustan project (Scott 2009). Each Bantustan was accorded a university. These included the University Colleges of the North (Turfloop) and Zululand (Bunting 2006). Outside the Bantustans, racially segregated universities were established for Coloured people in the Western Cape and for Indian people at Durban-

Westville (Illorah 2006). Badat (1999: 9) emphasises the active role that the state played in seeing to it that education policy served the separate development goals of that period: 'African education needed to reflect the superiority and supremacy of the ideology of white rule and superiority.' For instance, the University of the Transkei was set up in 1977 with the expectation that it would produce the human resources required to run the Bantustan's independent economy (Khunou 2009). Thus, under apartheid, universities in the Bantustans played an instrumental public good role as place-based agents of change linked to the apartheid project (Bank 2018: 4). The apartheid project was controversial and unjust because the distribution of the public good, associated with economic, political and cultural power, was to the benefit of a minority of white people.

Despite the intention of the apartheid state to limit the Bantustan universities to place-based and narrowly specified forms of development associated with the training of teachers, health workers, and administrators to fulfil the vision of the apartheid project, this aspiration failed. The 1972 student protests co-ordinated by the South African Student Organisation (SASO) were triggered by the expulsion of student struggle leader, Onkgopotse Tiro, who had urged his peers at Turfloop to resist segregated education (Badat 1999: 116–117). Several other acts of resistance ensued across other universities. At the University of the Western Cape and the University of Durban-Westville students fought for anti-racist reforms on campuses, supported by some staff and faculty (Anderson 2003; Badat 1999; Barnes 2006).

In the areas of South Africa that were reserved for the white population, the Afrikaans universities played significant place-based roles (Bank 2018). One of the main Afrikaans institutions, Stellenbosch University, which was established in 1918 (Baumert and Botha 2016), is situated in a wine-growing region along the banks of the Eersterivier. Stellenbosch has for many years produced research and skilled graduates to support the wine industry in the Western Cape (Bank 2018). With significant endowments from wealthy white farmers, Bank (2019) cautions that, according to her, this is an institution immersed in white privilege. It has for this reason, according to Bank (2019), been able to support and be supported by a wealthy white farming population (although Stellenbosch has since become a more urban 'secondary city') (Bank 2018).

There are plans to ensure that research goes towards responding to the vulnerability of communities around Stellenbosch. To mitigate the risk of house fires, these plans propose the development of smart green architecture, keeping the town small and developing housing recycling projects to limit

the use of material like wood (which leads to deforestation) (ESSHF 2014). This demonstrates the relationship that can arise between place and the shape that the research function takes in a university. In turn, universities then make public good contributions to their local communities through their research function.

In the 1930s, the state committed to addressing the poor-white problem. The University of Pretoria established departments of social work and applied sociology to respond to the 'social deviance' among poor whites (Fourie 2006; Thumbran 2017). In 1968, the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) was established in Johannesburg to serve an urban Afrikaans-speaking population with a '…policy phase that focused on "particularism". In other words, the university had an ethnic definition imposed on it because it was closely related to the community it was located, and particularly focused on the needs of the community' (Klee 2017: 58). Klee (2017: 56) notes that the Rand Afrikaans University, now known as the University of Johannesburg, was established to '… address the lack of skills among Afrikaners' and train students '… to keep up with the modern world especially in the fields of industry, media, and technology' (Klee 2017: 114).

In contrast, the English-speaking historically white universities resisted place-based 'functional definitions' of their roles under apartheid (Bank 2018: 4). Many faculties distanced themselves from making an instrumental public good contribution as this was associated with propping up apartheid. They branded themselves as universities committed to academic freedom and merit, distinct from the 'applied universities' of the Afrikaners and Africans (Davies 1996). These universities took a place-neutral stance and considered that they played an intrinsic public good role in South Africa society.

In certain respects, some of these universities made themselves accessible in ways that gave the public access to some physical and cultural public goods, fostering the intrinsic public good. For example, the historically advantaged university (HAU) known as Rhodes University is famous for not being gated-off. That said, it is also located in the hills above Grahamstown (RU 2021b), seemingly distanced from the local community below it. This symbol amplifies the image of white liberal universities as lofty or out of touch. While Fort Hare is a historically disadvantaged university (HDU), and aspects of the two campuses have been merged, Bank (2019) accuses both Fort Hare and Rhodes University of seemingly failing to react to the needs of their contexts. She argues that both institutions have 'misread the curvatures of their contexts' (Bank 2019). Bank does not state explicitly what she means by this, but other scholars have elaborated on this statement.

Goga (2010) describes the ongoing problem of racism at Rhodes, which has been apparent even in online discussion forums. This demonstrates how exclusion may not be physically visible in the form of a fence that surrounds the university but does rear its head in other non-physical ways (Goga 2010). The university has been accused of not seeing and addressing forms of racism in its institutional culture that are hidden. On its website, Rhodes University makes the claim that changing the institutional culture is particularly hard because of its invisibility (RU 2021a).

These complex issues of culture affect universities and their sense of place differently. Chimucheka (2012) argues that one of the reasons that community engagement at Fort Hare is seemingly less effective than it could be is that the reasons for which students choose to participate in community engagement are not well-enough understood. This, according to Chimucheka, impedes the ability of the state and the university to develop policies that would motivate students to participate in community engagement initiatives.

Digby (2013) suggests that, in contrast, the medical campus of the University of Natal was very politically active. The political aspirations of the black medical students included using their education to uplift black people. These students criticised black students on other medical campuses for being too liberal (Noble 2021) because they directed their medical education towards lofty and elitist ends (Noble 2021: 141).

In another liberal white university example, according to Adam (2009), the University of the Witwatersrand was characterised by a liberal tradition that permeated even the faculties that were, by nature, instrumental. And yet, not only did the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) have a distant relationship with its inner-city community during the period under the 1980s and 1990s (Mabin 2019), but a significant share of its on-campus presence was modelled on its British peers (Bank 2018: 3). Moodie (1994) states that for many years most senior academic staff at the University of the Witwatersrand were made up of graduates from British universities. In 1948, the Senate was made up of twenty-eight professors with first degrees from abroad, while only nineteen had degrees from South Africa. Thus, Wits has had a tense relationship with its local community.

In sum, the apartheid state left something of a binary system behind with respect to place and ideas about public good. The democratic government had a choice to make about which of these two types of institutional arrangements it would move forward with when restructuring the university sector. A first policy choice for the post-apartheid government would require a focus on those who had previously been excluded from the

better-developed segments of the public sphere, associated with the white population. The post-apartheid government would need to support their integration into a new unified national public sphere through the right sets of policy tools. These tools would need to facilitate the role of universities in strengthening or creating new connections between universities and a geographic place-based public sphere. They would also enable a process whereby contextually relevant conceptions of the public good could be derived from members of local communities. A second choice would be to promote particular conceptions of the public good that were place-neutral and not linked to particular contexts. The policy discussion around these two poles are outlined in the next section.

Universities as Tools for Transformation Under the New Democratic Government

From its inception in 1994, the democratic government of South Africa understood the difficulty of changing the old institutional arrangements that it had inherited from the apartheid state. The policy-making process for a post-apartheid South Africa was structured to negotiate the complex institutional terrain in the university sector. A Government of National Unity was set up on 11 May 1994 (Habib and Taylor 2001), which brought together members of the newly elected African National Congress (ANC), members of the National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party (Beall et al. 2005). Transformation was foregrounded in all policies (Habib and Taylor 2001), but at the same time was underspecified and ambiguous (Du Preez et al. 2016). For example, the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 mainly framed transformation in terms of efficiency (Du Preez et al. 2016). This meant increasing the numbers of previously disadvantaged students in lecture halls while also granting subsidies to universities that had a good rate of awarding degrees to this demographic (Wangenge-Ouma 2010).

In 1996, the newly elected president directed the National Commission on Higher Education to 'preserve what is valuable and to address what is defective and requires transformation' (NCHE 1996: 1). Under the Government of National Unity, the policy-making process for higher education included a variety of actors: political parties that had been involved in the liberation process; the newly elected ANC government; student organisations; academics; and civil society, to name a few (Davies 1996). Contestations arose between these different actors, stemming from the need to respond to the instrumental forms of public good, which could address the enormous challenges of a very unequal society, and maintain the vision of an intrinsic public good ideal associated with higher

education, free speech, critical scholarship and independent research. The policy document concluded that instrumental needs were to be addressed through 'the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation' (DoE 1997a: 4).

The intrinsic public good ideals associated with academic freedom and the space for universities to lead critical public discourse were also articulated in the policy paper (Bank 2019: 4). For instance, the policy paper states that the education system would 'support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights through educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order …' (DoE 1997a: 6).

In an attempt to balance these potentially contradictory demands, the transformation project was framed in a two-pronged manner by the new South African government: the first goal was to create a higher education system aligned to racial redress, and the second was to contribute to the common good of society by producing and applying knowledge in society and the economy, ensuring the availability of human capacity, and availing opportunities for lifelong learning opportunities (DoE 1997b). There were, therefore, a number of transformation-oriented initiatives and processes that sought to develop policies and implementation strategies in areas such as the size and shape of higher education, governance, funding and quality assurance (Badat 2010). For example, the National Higher Education Plan (DoE 1997a) established targets for participation rates, institutional and programme mixes, the vision, principles and policy goals for the system.

With respect to changing the size and shape of the system, closing the gap between historically advantaged universities and historically disadvantaged universities was a critical imperative. HAUs comprised the white English and white Afrikaner universities, while the HDUs comprised the universities that historically had catered to students in the Bantustans (Bunting 2006). Black, Coloured and Indian students were to be given better physical and financial access to higher education (DoE 1997a). This approach was intended to unify the system by addressing the imbalance in resources provided to white and non-white groups of students. Previously, most non-white students were in HDUs with fewer resources (e.g. staffing resources) (Odhav 2009), while white students often had greater and easier access to higher education in the better resourced HAUs (Reddy 2004). Despite redressing the resource imbalance, not enough concern was given to

developing a place-based connection between the unification of the system, HAUs and HDUs and activities in the universities that could benefit the surrounding communities and/or contribute to transformation Grobbelaar (2018: 129).

The need to change resource allocations and widen access to the non-white demographic of students in South African universities quickly turned into a numbers race that ultimately reproduced inequalities in universities. Reddy (2004) describes this approach to transformation as emphasising quantitative, procedural changes so that the system would be efficiently regulated and co-ordinated by the state. This approach was not only important in order to serve local instrumental needs. It was critical in reinserting the country into global relations from which it had been excluded due to the sanctions under apartheid. Reddy (2004) describes this aspect of transformation as the need for the state to be more responsive to the challenges presented by globalisation through the production of a skilled workforce for the knowledge economy. Given that one of the contradictions that had made apartheid unsustainable was that it had created a skills shortage in various sectors of the economy (Feinstein 2005), building a solid workforce was crucial for social and economic transformation. But the focus on a knowledge society meant that the global space was configured as more important than the local. Marginson (2004) argues that the national and the local have in some moments been sacrificed for global affirmation. Reddy (1998) confirms this for the transition moment in South Africa, describing how a consultant from the World Bank significantly guided the values and visions in the White Paper.

When the Nationalist Party government was elected in 1948 the proportion of black students in universities was as low as 4.6 per cent of the total student body (Badat 1999: 48), and most were enrolled at the University of Fort Hare. In 2017, 84,8 per cent of South Africa's university students were black (Essop 2020). The fast growth in numbers of students from 1997 meant that the policy framework for transformation grew progressively more focused on the quality of higher education. The White Paper on Higher Education released in 2013 stated that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) would focus on staffing, retaining academics and ensuring that academic careers were attractive in order to meet the needs of the quickly expanding system (DHET 2013). To some extent this led to a narrow focus on the internal affairs of the campuses of South African universities. While this focus was necessary to address some quality issues, the student demonstrations highlighted the effects of the neglected relations between universities and the local communities outside the campuses.

It can be argued that the 'Rhodes-Must-Fall' student protests of 2015 were in part a reaction to this neglect. These protests criticised and aimed to dismantle institutional alienation and discrimination, which made students feel disconnected from the universities. Students also felt that given their socioeconomic backgrounds, their support needs were not catered for (Jansen 2017). The initial 'Rhodes-Must-Fall' Movement drew attention to the lack of transformation in South African universities. Universities were found wanting as spaces that reflected the identities of most South African students. Students understood symbols like the statue of Rhodes as indicating a white cultural hegemony still embedded in campus structures and activities (Jansen 2017). There was a feeling among students that their struggles in the university were connected to the places, households especially, that they had come from. Their place/household contexts had been contexts of poverty and deprivation (*City Press* 2021). Students felt that universities were not doing enough to acknowledge and respond to their backgrounds of poverty and deprivation (Pillay 2016). Research has been conducted to show that students' socioeconomic backgrounds affect their academic experiences and their academic success. Student poverty has since become a key theme in South Africa's university sector (Jansen 2017). Out of the 'Rhodes-Must-Fall' protests emerged the 'Fees-Must-Fall' protests (Pillay 2016). This was an extension of the resistance against the problems already outlined, after it was declared that fees would rise for the academic year of 2015 (Jansen 2017).

As the protests spread across South African universities, students expressed disdain for the generally unequal structure of not just universities but all of South Africa's social, political and economic structures (Mpofu 2017). They lamented that universities were structured in a way that distanced them from not only students but also the other people who worked in the university. In other words, the university, which should have been a public sphere for the collective of listeners and speakers, was silencing the voices or ideas of some through structural exclusion.Among the excluded, the students identified cleaning and other campus staff. They noted the plight of outsourced workers, whom they referred to as their parents. Maduna (2018) quotes one of the movements most visible leaders, Naledi Chirwa, who said that their parents (workers) would still have to suffer the feeling of alienation even after the insourcing victory had been won:

> But it's not the end because the institution still subjects our parents to inhumane conditions, ostracisation and marginalisation. But the insourcing victory is one for the books because it particularly has to do with how whiteness places a price tag on labour that is flooded by black people.

Students identified with workers because their own socioeconomic backgrounds were such that their real parents were in fact cleaners or work in similarly low-level jobs. What students were highlighting was their frustration with the general treatment of all low-level workers, not just at universities, but in other sectors of society and the economy (Maduna 2018). Through this line of discourse, students found solidarity with workers on their campuses (Mokoena 2019). Students became the source of a place-based connection between themselves and marginalised workers in a geographically contoured public sphere. This demonstrates that although the democratic government had set out to racially transform and unify the higher education sector, it had failed to orient its policies to include those who had been structurally excluded. The state's development goals seemingly failed to draw out conceptions of the public good that ought to have included everyone within the university public sphere.

While the 'Fees-Must-Fall' student protests gained significant momentum and public support, they did not resolve the problem of unaffordable fees for most South African students. As a result of those protests, in 2017 then president Jacob Zuma declared that the government would fully subsidise free higher education and training for poor/socioeconomically challenged students going forward (Areff and Spies 2017). In the first weeks of March 2021, however, students at Wits took up the struggle again (Felix 2021). This was triggered by the state's announcement that funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which loans money to poor and lower-middle class students, would be reduced.

In the post-apartheid period actors in higher education had different understandings of needs in the context of the space associated with the sector. Some of the detail of how this was linked with place emerges from the interview data.

Place-based Conceptions of the Public Good and the Public Sphere

Data was collected from thirty-four key informants[1] who were working/studying or living in and around universities in South Africa in 2018/19. Analysis of these interviews indicates how some of the unresolved tensions between different notions of the public good and the public sphere of the university were articulated. Those interviewed included higher education experts, academics, university leaders, students, academic and non-academic unions, government departments, regulatory bodies, and civil society. They were asked a range of questions about how they understood the relationship between higher education and the public good, and what some of their experiences of this had been.

Three main themes came out from the interviews:

1. A lack of co-ordination from the state and a lack of political will from university management to drive a place-based public good role for universities.
2. Pockets of place-based public good interventions that were manifesting in community engagement projects. In some universities, these were formal and in others they were informal.
3. A widely circulating idea about the community and each individual's relationship to it, understood through the moral code of Ubuntu.[2]

A senior figure in public administration expressed the importance of state co-ordination so that innovation policies met community needs:

> … there is need to coordinate government policies, the other one is to localise innovation. The problem that we tend to have is that we globalise innovation. If I am here, I must understand what the problems in this community. (Interview, senior government official 16, 1 December 2018)

Thus, a place-based public good can only be achieved if government policies foreground the needs of the localised community. But a lack of political will from university management to imbue universities with the sorts of values that are oriented towards the spatially derived public good was also noted. A member of civil society pointed out that:

> If you look, there was a generation of rectors at some stage and you knew where they were standing, and now there is a new generation that you can't even say what are the values of him as a person … the fortunate or unfortunate part is that institutions become what their leaders are …

Despite this, pockets of place-based public good interventions were described in the community engagement of some universities. Among these was a formal community service-learning initiative that is part of a course offering. Students get credits for performing this service-learning component in their course:

> … we also have what we call community service learning, which is an academic programme credit theory done in a number of programmes … it would be those students who are doing language could go and work with communities and design programmes say in a Court of Law because some people go to jail, not because they have done something wrong, but they don't understand the language or that the interpreter himself does not interpret correctly. So, we have a programme where our students work even with interpreters, we help them with the vocabulary. (Interview, university administrator, community interface, 15 March 2018)

This was one among a limited number of examples of initiatives driven by universities. In contrast, a notable proportion of place-based public good community engagement appears to be initiated by civil society. According to one Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transexual Queer Intersexed (LGBTQI) activist working within an inner-city community:

> … it's up to us as civil society to broker this kind of relationship … we really got into the partnership with (the university). LGBTI learners need to be better protected on campuses. (Interview, leader of civil society organisation 22, 10 September 2018)

This LGBTQI activist was one key informant among a number who spoke about community engagement as a predominantly self-driven exercise. In addition, a member of a worker trade union at a HAU felt that most of the time it was actors other than the university who drove community initiatives – actors like workers:

> … there is the policy of this university is very it is 100% super, but when it comes for implementation that is not accommodating there is a barrier somewhere somehow … we workers have to push that … (the university) is a research university but sometimes we have a problem with water, where are the researchers we cannot say I'm researching in this part but the problem of the public because the water is affecting all of us. (Interview, representative of trade union at a HAU, 16 February 2018)

Like workers, it seems that in some cases students rather than the university take the initiative in thinking about broader societal issues and possible solutions. A student at a HDU in a low-income urban area explained:

> For students here in (the low-income urban area), we are staying with the community here, how best we can try to change the conditions of this community? You can see when you enter the gate it's them, how do we deal with the issue of shebeens just opposite our institution, and what image do those give our institutions. (Interview, student leader, at an urban HDU, 4 May 2018)

This example indicates that the state's policies exclude members of each community who are already marginalised, fragmenting the public sphere. Some actors in the university sector take it upon themselves to include these groups, and in so doing, they surface place-based conceptions of the public good role that universities ought to play. What key informants seem to suggest is that their understanding of the public good role of universities is quite unlike what is stated in the official policies of the state covered over the course of this article.

Where actors spoke strongly in favour of a responsive place-based public good role for universities, they used the concept of Ubuntu. This suggests

that some actors view social and economic contributions to place-based public good interventions as insufficient without the normative emphasis on the bonds that connect all human beings, but especially communities and families. A senior official in a government agency stated that if Ubuntu were prioritised, it might not matter that some of the outcomes of universities' work were not 'commercially viable'.

> I think for me public good is personified by Ubuntu, which is doing something without having to expect recognition or reward for it … Interventions might not be commercially viable to be sold as products, but if they change lives, that for me is my understanding of public good … also, it is an honour to be able, as blacks, to support our people. (Interview, chief executive officer of a government agency, 20 February 2018)

He went on to say that the financial support that black people give their families and communities should not be referred to using terms with negative connotations, like 'black tax':

> For me that is the problem, that we call it a tax. The word tax is bad. It should not be 'black tax' because it is a good thing for graduates to do. That's also where entrepreneurship must come from; from this spirit of giving. Even the next generation of students will grow up to know their role in the community, especially the villages and the rural communities. (Interview, chief executive officer of a government agency, 20 February 2018)

To summarise, the data collected from the interviews with key informants shows that the state is perceived as having failed to drive a place-based public good role for universities in South Africa. In participants' view the initiative for place-based community engagement in universities is coming from a few individuals or from small groups of actors in the university sector. They considered that the public good can only be realised if the public sphere includes those who are otherwise excluded from social, cultural and economic life. Concepts such as black tax and Ubuntu appeared to be place-based development processes that key informants supported, and considered as related to the public good role of universities in South African communities.

Conclusion

The South African case is clearly a complex one. There are seeming inconsistencies in the state's policy goals for place-based development associated with the university sector and what actors in the sector aspire to. While the state has attempted since democracy to restructure the higher education sector and redress the inequalities of the past, its policies seem to

have fallen short of meeting the aspirations of a large proportion of actors in the university sector. The different types of contributions to higher education transformation have been underpinned by different conceptions of the public good role of universities. The new democratic government's policies appear to have inadequately promoted the idea of universities with development roles that emphasise instrumentally and intrinsically place-based public good outcomes. Interviews conducted with actors in South Africa's higher education sector between 2018/19 suggest that key informants have grown impatient with the effects of the state's place-neutral development policies. In the absence of an enabling policy framework, universities, individuals in universities and members of the communities around them are leading their own projects. Their conceptions of the public good are derived from expanded ideas of the public spheres to include diverse communities that are expressed through the concepts of Ubuntu, support, partnership and service, among others discussed in this article.

Because the impetus for place-based development has come from certain actors within universities and the communities around them, this has come with some advantages and disadvantages for how and where they locate ideas of the public good role of universities in relation to their communities. There is the advantage that previously excluded members of the community or public sphere are increasingly included. However, there is also the disadvantage that it seems universities are expected to play every public good role in the community—from entrepreneurship to 'black tax'. Two issues arise with this. The first is, as Tilak (2018) warns, a delicate balance to be struck so that universities do not become too parochial when striving to be relevant and responsive. The second is that not much policy or research is available in South Africa on what more place-based interventions or more community engagement interventions mean for the 'core functions' of universities in South Africa (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 130). Place-based development through universities may be necessary and desirable. However, it must be managed so that South African universities can still be sufficiently outward-looking. It must also be managed so that thought can be given to the implications for the role of research or teaching in place-based development interventions.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted as part of the research project *Higher Education, Inequality and the Public Good (*ESRC/NRF award number 174071*).* The breakdown of the numbers in terms of key informants interviewed were: 7 academics (from 4 different universities, referred to as small town historically white universities; large urban historically white universities; large urban universities

of technology; and rural historically black universities) and higher education experts; 6 regulatory bodies and government departments/agencies; 6 civil society organisations; 5 student representatives; 7 university leaders; and 3 worker union representatives. For full discussion of these data see Unterhalter et al. 2019.

2. 'Ubuntu' is the moral philosophy which states 'I am because others are' (Metz 2007).

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