



Researching the Public Good: Reflections on Experiences of Doing Research on Higher Education and the Public Good in South Africa

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Abstract

This article discusses the experience of doing research on higher education and the public good in South Africa within a bigger project titled 'Higher Education, Inequalities and the Public Good: Perspectives from Four African Countries'. Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews by a team of eight researchers who concentrated on specific groups of stakeholders as per the themes of the research. The aim of the interviews was to understand the perceptions of stakeholders both within and outside the university system on the public good role of university education in South Africa. This article focuses on three key issues: locating the research in the context of South Africa's democratic transition, methodological challenges and pitfalls, tensions, and missing questions/silences. We were doing our research in the aftermath of the student protests of 2015 and 2016, and many of the stakeholders we interviewed were actively involved in making sense of the issues that the students raised. The research team formulated the 'DNA' framework for analysing qualitative data from the stakeholders, which refers to the *descriptive, normative and analytic* aspects of the data that pointed to a unique way in which we could frame our findings. By reflecting on the research process and our positionality in it, the paper contributes to the general field of qualitative research studies, bringing in the dynamics of conducting research in large-scale cross-national projects.

Keywords: public good, higher education, South Africa, qualitative research, #FeesMustFall

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Résumé

Cet article traite de l'expérience de la recherche sur l'enseignement supérieur et le bien public en Afrique du Sud dans le cadre d'un projet plus vaste intitulé « Enseignement supérieur, inégalités et bien public : perspectives de quatre pays africains ». Des données qualitatives ont été recueillies au moyen d'entretiens avec des informateurs clés par une équipe de huit chercheurs qui se sont concentrés sur des groupes spécifiques d'intervenants selon les thèmes de la recherche. L'objectif des entretiens était de comprendre les perceptions des parties prenantes à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du système universitaire sur le rôle de bien public de l'enseignement universitaire en Afrique du Sud. Cet article se concentre sur trois questions clés : situer la recherche dans le contexte de la transition démocratique en Afrique du Sud, les défis et les pièges méthodologiques, les tensions et les questions manquantes/silences. Nous avons fait nos recherches à la suite des manifestations des étudiants de 2015 et 2016, et bon nombre des parties prenantes que nous avons interrogées ont participé activement à donner un sens aux problèmes soulevés par les étudiants. L'équipe de recherche a formulé le cadre « ADN » pour analyser les données qualitatives des parties prenantes, qui fait référence aux aspects descriptifs, normatifs et analytiques des données qui indiquent une manière unique de formuler nos conclusions. En réfléchissant sur le processus de recherche et notre position dans celui-ci, l'article contribue au domaine général des études de recherche qualitatives, apportant la dynamique de la conduite de la recherche dans des projets transnationaux à grande échelle.

Mots-clés : bien public, enseignement supérieur, Afrique du Sud, recherche qualitative, #FeesMustFall

Introduction: The Qualitative Approach

At the centre of qualitative research are questions of access, 'trustworthiness', sampling, ethics, identity, objectivity, and subjectivity, which place emphasis on the shaping and reliability of the research. Interviewing a wide range of stakeholders is therefore crucial in gathering sufficient data on these aspects. A very important concern of doing the South African research for the 'Higher Education, Inequalities and the Public Good: Perspectives from Four African Countries' project was to reach stakeholders from and associated with universities that reflected the key apartheid historical divides, primarily around race and associated urban planning, that remain so important to the university system.

The interviews were therefore conducted with six categories of informants: three vice-chancellors and one deputy vice-chancellor; student leaders, including leaders of four student representative councils and an

elected leader of the national union of students – the South African Union of Students; seven academics, one from an academic staff union and the others (referred to as Experts) from a range of institutions that specialise in researching higher education. The interviewees were associated with four types of universities: Small Town Historically White University; Large Urban Historically White University; Large Urban University of Technology; Rural Historically Black University.

Most participants were very keen to be interviewed even though they were sceptical about our central theme of the public good concept. However, this also intrigued them. The wide range of participants at different professional levels meant that the team had to negotiate several boundaries and adapt to identities as ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ simultaneously. Our entire research team consisted of academics and PhD students who are situated in a particular way as scholars in the higher education system. Participants who were in government, business and university management tended to have a policy and political orientation to the issues we raised, whereas students, unionists and civil society activists saw the research as an extension of their activism and raised pertinent issues in relation to the public good more generally.

When we spoke to academic staff, our positionality was that of peers, as many of us are fully aware of and involved in the issues that emerged in the discussions. What we gained was valuable insights into how the underlying issues that inform the transformation of higher education in South Africa remain critical in realising the public good. The interviews made it clear that the stakeholders viewed the concept of public good as encompassing a much wider range of issues, many of which relate to the socioeconomic inequalities that prevail in South Africa. Our reflection is that the interviews showed that the question of public good cannot be studied in isolation from the politics and character of the state. Participants largely explained their understanding of public good as tightly connected to the nature of the state’s approach to development and social transformation.

Interviewing across a wide range of stakeholders produced a large amount of data, which needed to be analysed in a systematic way through coding and generating themes. In tackling the challenge of analysing the data we originated our own framework, which we have termed the ‘DNA’ framework (descriptive, normative and analytical) for analysing the data. This will be elaborated on further in the article. The basic premise of the DNA framework was that the questions that were pursued produced data in the three categories. It was *descriptive*, in the sense that the respondents simply described what they understood public good to be or not be. It was *normative*, in that interviewees spoke extensively on what ought to be the

public good in university education. And it was *analytic*, being largely about tensions and contestations over the meaning of the public good, exploring ways in which it intersects and contradicts other paradigms of development within university education.

This article focuses on three key issues:

1. Locating the research in the context of South Africa's democratic transition
2. Methodological challenges
3. Pitfalls, tensions, and missing questions/silences.

Locating the Research in the Context of South Africa's Democratic Transition

Higher Education Transformation, Post-1994

The policy landscape of higher education in South Africa has been influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, many of which are closely connected to the nature of the democratic transition in South Africa. In the early 1990s, there were strongly contending positions on how equality, equity and redress, as well as development and quality, should be approached in the university system. This related to which apartheid legacies should be accorded priority and the most appropriate way to configure a post-apartheid higher education landscape (Badat 2019). At the core of dealing with the apartheid legacy was the paradox of redressing historical imbalances in the context of a global capitalist order that, since the 1990s, has pressured institutions in the global North to adopt neoliberal reforms aligned to cost-sharing, rankings and fiscal austerity.

Since 1994 there has been a dramatic expansion in the enrolment of black African students in higher education institutions, in absolute numbers as well as proportionally. A report by the National Department of Education in 2001 states:

This is illustrated by the fact that while in 1993 only 30 000 (or 25 per cent) of the African students in contact higher education institutions were enrolled in the historically white institutions, this had increased by 1999 to 148 000 (or 57 per cent). Thus, social redress, which includes both the provision of student financial aid for poor students and the provision of resources to institutions to deal with the learning needs of under-prepared students, cuts across the past divide between the historically black and historically white institutions.

The demographic shifts in higher education occurred because of the emergence of a new social order in South Africa that is central to our research on the public good. The notion of public good in the South African

context is interpreted to relate strongly to transformation, which is centred primarily on redressing racialised inequalities of the past. National policy positions over the democratic era have acknowledged that demographic changes in access are inadequate if they do not translate to success and the timely completion of academic studies, by black African students. A strong sentiment in higher education policies is that the efficiency of the system needs to be improved, the poor success rate of black African students is a matter of serious concern, the mix of academic programmes needs to favour having more black African students in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and more supportive mechanisms need to be put in place to support black students in the university system.

In a critical analysis of the enrolment trends in South African universities between 1998 and 2012, Cooper (2019) makes the compelling argument that what occurred was a combination of what he calls a 'skewed' and a 'stalled' revolution when it comes to the race-class demographics of university enrolments and transformation. The revolution is 'skewed' in that the inherited legacy of inequality in the South African higher education landscape meant that Historically White Universities (HWUs) continued to attract more white students while Historically Black Universities (HBUs) experienced a decline in total student numbers in the early to mid-1990s.

At the six black African HBUs, there was an unexpected decline in total student numbers. While also maintaining more than 95 per cent black African enrolments, each of these six HBUs at first showed an increase in total student numbers up to 1993, but then saw a dramatic decline in student enrolments, especially at the University of Fort Hare and the University of the North, where total enrolments decreased by more than 30 per cent after 1996 (Cooper 2019: 296).

The revolution is 'stalled' according to Cooper in that the leadership of the upper band of the HWU institutions seemingly have:

... sought to slow down the decline of absolute numbers of white students to retain what they have viewed as the quality side of the 'equity-quality paradox' – not least in terms of the current academic ideology among such institutions of seeking standards as judged by international university league tables about so called (research) quality (Cooper 2019: 318).

Cooper's perspective is vital in understanding the race and class dynamics that intersect to shape the higher education sector in South Africa.

The above discussion points to the importance of understanding the socioeconomic context of higher education transformation in South Africa to ensure that the study of the public good is not disarticulated from the

realities facing the system. South Africa is a country with high levels of inequality, which poses a variety of tensions on the processes of transforming universities. Ashwin and Case (2018) argue that two main tensions prevail in the higher education system of democratic South Africa:

1. Between the aspirations of school-leavers and the current provision of undergraduate higher education: public funding has not grown in accordance with growing enrolments in South Africa and thus an increasing share of the cost has been shifted to students and their families.
2. Between massification and stratification: the massification of higher education is typically, but not inevitably, accompanied by increased stratification (Ashwin and Case 2018).

These tensions ultimately create new patterns of inequality. The questions of affordability of university tuition fees and a family's inability to meet the costs of tuition fees mostly affect black students. More specifically, the #FeesMustFall (FMF) mobilisation had to do not only with financial exclusion but a much broader failure of post-apartheid higher education and a much deeper problem of exclusion for black South Africans, whose contestation had been at the centre of student protests earlier in the year (Cini 2019).

#FeesMustFall and the Struggle for Free Education

The #FeesMustFall student protests of 2015 and 2016 arose after the vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand announced a fee increment of 10 per cent. The protests sparked wide analysis (Booyesen 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Allais 2018b; Mathebula and Calitz 2018; Motala, Vally and Maharajh 2018) about the financing of higher education, the prospects of fee-free higher education, access and success within higher education, the colonial orientation of the curriculum, student voices and the political economy of falling fees.

University funding in South Africa has historically been characterised by constraints and tensions related to the fiscal situation as well the economic performance of the country. Funding frameworks since the apartheid era have been situated within the divisions between Historically Black Universities (HBU) and Historically White Universities (HWUs). The key concern of policy-makers and researchers has been the adequacy of financial resources for the sector and the role that tuition fees play in the overall budgetary environment for universities. Allais (2018b) identifies three components in the university funding model for universities in South Africa:

1. The direct state subsidy, given based on student enrolment, student graduation, research which is published in recognised outlets and for specifically designated programmes and projects.

2. Student fees, which vary from institution to institution as public universities are autonomous. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is offered to very poor undergraduate students.
3. Third-stream income, which is obtained from donors, research grants, beneficiation of intellectual property, university-owned enterprises, and other sources. This is not large in most universities (Allais 2018b: 160).

Tuition fees are at the centre of the debate about free education in South Africa's university system. A comparison of South Africa's system of determining university tuition with other African countries shows that South African universities set their own fees whereas in other African countries the state determines the fees structure across universities and programmes. For example, Wangenge-Ouma and Carpentier (2018) argue:

Unlike many African countries, for example, Tanzania, Mozambique and Uganda, where tuition fees are controlled by government, are often undifferentiated across institutions and programmes and frozen; in South Africa individual universities set their own fees. Accordingly, fees at South African universities are differentiated by programmes and institutions. The differences in tuition fee levels between universities, even for similar programmes, can be considerable. Every year, except in 2016 when a freeze on tuition fee increases was implemented, South African universities increase their tuition fee levels. For a long time, students, government, and the general public, lamented the high tuition fee increases, but the practice persisted. Universities argued that the tuition fee increases were necessitated by existential needs – to mitigate inadequate public funding and avoid institutional decline (Wangenge-Ouma and Carpentier 2018: 52).

The #FeesMustFall protests raised serious questions about the affordability of fee-free higher education in the context of tight fiscal resources and a decreasing revenue base. The political call for free education generated varying responses from researchers, with some arguing that it was not only unaffordable but would ultimately sacrifice resources in other priority areas of the government. For example, Allais (2018b) argues:

The #FeesMustFall movement has not won any breakthrough to increase the size of the fiscus – only to redeploy funds. In practice, this has meant taking money away from social services for much poorer sections of the population. Activists inevitably distance themselves from this and state that the fiscus can and should be increased. But the focus of the protests and demands has not been increasing the size of the fiscus ('We won't go back to class until the nuclear deal is cancelled') but increasing the size of the slice given to higher education (Allais 2018: 156).

The fact that fees have emerged as a central issue is because of the burden felt mainly by black middle-class and working-class families who have endured heavy debt levels in paying for their children's primary and secondary education. The pressures carried by those families coupled with the need to assist their children to advance to the higher education level means that in many instances those families simply cannot afford to enrol their children without expanded assistance from the state. It is a societal issue, which is a result of the political history of exclusion during apartheid and colonisation. It is also an issue of public policy consideration in many African countries, as shown in Languille's (2020) study of public private partnerships (PPPs) in Senegal's universities, wherein she analyses the difficulties of the state's management of competing objectives in public higher education resources,

The fate of state-subsidised students in the private sector vividly symbolises the Senegalese state's impossible balancing act when trying to meet a series of competing objectives assigned to public higher education resources. They try to propel the country to the core of the global knowledge economy, open market opportunities to attract global capital and encourage the formation of a local capitalist class, manage the youth in a context of job-scarcity, secure social order on campuses, produce a skilled labour force and comfort the population of their commitment to social justice in education (Languille 2020: 31).

The #FeesMustFall campaign opened a debate that goes beyond the balancing act required to keep the fiscus stabilised and allocate resources fairly across all the pressing needs facing the government. Essentially this is a question about the nature of social and political redress in South Africa. It involves the types of choices that are required to make social transformation and inclusion truly possible. I am raising this within the context of the old adage that education is necessary but not sufficient to address the socioeconomic challenges facing society.

In addition to the wide array of issues that have arisen due to the #FeesMustFall campaign are questions of whether fee-free education would need to be provided for the poor only or should be offered on a universal basis to all who desire and qualify for higher education – what is called 'fee free for all'. Proponents of this view maintain that the question of the affordability of free higher education, as well as its underfunding, should be based not only on the quantum of resources available to the state for expenditure but also on a reformulation of social goals and critical examination of the state's fiscal capacity more broadly. One group of analysts who take up this argument are Motala, Vally and Maharajh (2018), who contend that:

We think that a perspective less submissive to fiscal realism is necessary – whatever its complexities. This would require an interrogation of the state's

fiscal capacity more broadly; a critical examination of its political and social choices and processes and an examination of what interests are dominant in present policy and practice. The fallibility of the claims about unaffordability lies in their inability to ask the question about what goals need to be achieved – that is, about the nature of the society envisaged in the prescriptions about fiscal rectitude. (Motala, Vally and Maharajh 2018: 171)

The social upheavals that occurred under the banner of #FeesMustFall signalled several structural fault lines in South African society, which are a direct result of the apartheid legacy as well as policy choices adopted by the democratic government after 1994. Debates about the university funding model must be located within wider changes to the funding of the social sphere within the state's budgeting system. Conceptualisations of the role of the tax system in this debate should not be seen as a mere technical exercise, they should be understood as part of an ideological and political issue which is shaped by the character of the state at a given time within a country's development. Budgeting and fiscal issues are as much about financial resources for income and expenditure as much as they are also about political economy questions that take into consideration the interaction of the state, the economy, and the society. The South African government, through policy documents such as the National Development Plan (NDP), speaks of the aim of building a 'democratic developmental state'. How does the prevailing tax system support such a vision of the state? A commission appointed by the Minister of Finance at the time – the Davis Tax Commission – found that the South African tax system was slightly progressive in nature but less so than countries at a similar level of development as South Africa. The commission stated:

Overall, the tax system is slightly progressive, with progressive direct taxes compensating for more regressive indirect taxes. However, the South African tax system is less progressive than countries such as Brazil and Mexico, indicating that there may be some room for more progressivity in the tax system (Davis Tax Commission 2016: 102).

Our research on higher education Inequality and the public good was situated within a context of universities transforming in a political economy of neoliberalism. Our interviews with different stakeholders within and outside of the higher education sector revealed that the term 'public good' is quite elusive and gives rise to different interpretations. In the following sections I discuss the methodological approaches and challenges that confronted us, as a research team. Our experience is that multi-investigator and multi-institutional research in higher education elicits many tensions and difficult questions over key decision points in the analysis and reporting of the findings.

Methodological Challenges

According to Kinzie, Magolda, Kezar, Kuh, Hinkle and Whitt (2007), large-scale, multi-investigator studies in higher education – particularly those that use qualitative research methods – are less common, in part because such projects require funding and resources in amounts that only foundations and government agencies can supply. Several previous research studies analysed the complexity of international qualitative studies by exploring conceptual and ethical issues; changing modalities in international education development; interdisciplinarity; power and social justice; and stakeholder perceptions of higher education reforms (Kinzie et al. 2019; Mason, Crossley, and Bond 2019; Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz and Gildersleeve 2012; Shaw 2019). Our approach was to interpret ethically and faithfully what we found to stimulate the discussion on the public good dimensions of higher education in South Africa.

At the foundation of any investigation, the researcher(s) must decide on the method of inquiry that is appropriate to the specific phenomena under investigation. In many cases, this involves ‘charting new territory’ for the researcher. ‘It is impossible to do research in a conceptual vacuum. Whether it is viewed as given, or socially constructed, the empirical world is limitless in its detail, complexity, specificity, and uniqueness’ (Ragin 1992, 217). In the same vein, Burawoy (2009) argues that qualitative research is theory-bound: ‘Theory guides the research from day to day, suggesting hypotheses to be investigated and anomalies to be tackled’ (Burawoy 2009: 15). In other words, methodology is in the first instance related to and informed by theory. The research in this case occurred in a context of social upheaval, anxiety, and uncertainty within the higher education sector in South Africa. Our research was happening in the aftermath of the student-led protests under #FeesMustFall, which were based on the struggle for free education and widening access to higher education for those from historically marginalised black communities.

Our project opted for a qualitative research design, which included semi-structured interviews as primary sources of data, which were anchored on the research question of the study:

What views and debates exist around higher education and the public good in the four selected African countries, and how do the similarities and differences between these enable us to understand how meanings are constituted and changed around these concerns within and between different countries?

Data Collection

Two interviews were conducted with non-academic staff unions. The first was with representatives of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), a large public-sector union that organises many non-academic university workers. The second was with a representative of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), one of South Africa's five federations of trade unions and historically the largest and most influential. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of government and regulatory bodies. These were with: the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET); the Department of Science and Technology (DST); the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS); the Council on Higher Education (CHE); Universities South Africa (USAF) (the vice-chancellors' body); and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).

A range of people from civil society were also interviewed. They were captured as: Gender Equity Officer; Save South Africa representative; Employer Association Representative; LGBTI and gender activist 1; LGBTI and gender activist 2; Right to Know representative; Social Justice NGO representative; University Community Engagement Officer; and Accountability International representative.

A team consisting of eight researchers (a professor, two senior researchers and four PhD candidates) conducted thirty-three interviews in five of the nine provinces of South Africa with a range of stakeholders. The team embarked on extensive work prior to conducting interviews to clarify key questions and review critical documents that would support our research process. We organised several workshops in South Africa and in London to ensure that the teams (the larger project includes Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana) had a common approach conceptually and methodologically. Our position was that the nature of our research required that we go beyond mere 'textbook' approaches to qualitative research. This was due to the dynamics of the field we were researching, which is characterised by change and eruptions daily. Qualitative inquiry employs different philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Qualitative procedures rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis and draw on diverse strategies of inquiry (Cresswell 2009).

We entered the field with full knowledge that a study of this nature brings a certain number of *doubts and fears* of our own as researchers, given that higher education is to a large extent a 'known' field to most of the

team members. I refer to *doubts*, as it was impossible to insulate ourselves and pretend that we could be doing the research with a clean 'lens' without subjectively having our own perspectives on the matters. At times, previous contacts were used to secure appointments with the targeted interviewees.

Many of us have immersed ourselves in the theories and ideologies that prevail in higher education. Interviewing our own peers or colleagues in the broader sense of the 'field' posed questions of perception and preconception. We had to negotiate the identity of being 'insiders' as well as being to some extent 'outsiders' given our positionalities. We also had to deal with the realities of interviewing peers, some of whom we knew personally or knew as activists, academics, and senior managers within a variety of public institutions. Since some of us were already known by some of the interviewees, it meant that our professional identity as researchers in the field could have influenced the way the responses in the interviews were framed. While this vantage point is critical, we have found that being within the field also meant that some interviewees could have concealed more than they revealed within the interview process, due to sensitivities and ideological contestations in the university education research space.

In qualitative research literature there is a constant reference to the pros and cons of doing research among peers (Hockey 1993; Hellowell 2006; Mercer 2007). Hellowell (2006) has pointed out that in this type of research a dichotomy between insider and outsider research is almost established, whereas ethnographic fieldwork should be a continuum that combines both an 'outsider' and 'insider' dynamic. According to Hockey (1993) there are strengths to the insider view:

The advantages of researching in familiar settings, for example the relative lack of culture shock or disorientation, the possibility of enhanced rapport and communication, the ability to gauge the honesty and accuracy of responses and the likelihood that respondents will reveal more intimate details of their lives to someone considered empathetic are juxtaposed with the problems that proponents of insider research nevertheless acknowledge (Hockey 1993, 199)

We found ourselves challenging each other as researchers about what we understood public good to mean and whether the interview was addressing the matter or was more about the role of the state in higher education or even the way inequalities in society shape higher education. It emerged in the findings that the public good is a concept intermediated by relations of power, the structure of the economy and is non-rivalrous.

Fears related mostly to the stature and positionality of those who were interviewed, as some were powerful members in society and had a strong

influence within policymaking processes while many had a very strong activist orientation, such as the students, trade unionists and several researchers. Interviewing those in positions of power influences positionality as well as the critical discussions about the research topic.

The interview dynamic presented a challenge to the researchers because the respondents often created a wider dialogue, at times deviating from the questions, which prompted the researchers to ask probing questions to ensure that adequate responses were received. We were not interviewing people from one constituency, organisation, or social group. We realised that the wide range of stakeholders required that we adapt our formal questions to elicit as much information on the topic based on their respective backgrounds. The style of questions followed Becker's (1998) advice, that qualitative researchers must focus on asking 'how?' not 'why?' questions. Becker says 'how?' questions give people more leeway, are less constraining, and invite them to answer in any way that suits them, to tell a story that includes whatever they think the story ought to include to make sense. 'Why' questions tend to be understood to be looking for a cause, maybe even causes for something that can be summarised in a few words (Becker 1998).

Data Analysis

The coding and analysis of qualitative data cannot be systematised or taught. It is an interpretive process that necessarily involves creativity and subjectivity. There are a growing number of researchers who believe that laying out procedures and calling for clarity and transparency in reporting of how researchers code their data goes a long way towards helping to deal with the issue of reliability of qualitative research (Benaquisto 2008). We realised that thirty-three interviews would produce huge amounts of data, particularly since these interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. This meant that we had to adopt a careful approach to data analysis, one that was innovative and not tied down by the rigidities of textbook prescriptions on how to analyse data. The team acknowledged that analysing qualitative data of the magnitude our research had generated required an iterative approach.

It became quite clear to us after the first few interviews that the research team would need to compare field notes and summarise our individual observations as part of the initial step of data analysis. The field notes taken after every interview were a crucial source of data as they assisted in capturing the nuances of the fieldwork research. There is a contention amongst some scholars about the validity of field notes. For example, Mulhall states: 'Many would concede that field notes are only comprehensible to their author. If field notes are incomprehensible to outsiders, then assessing auditability may

be problematic' (Mulhall 2003, 309). As far as it was physically possible, we ensured that at least two researchers formed part of an interview to ensure that they could debrief each other, make necessary additions during the interview and make recommendations for modification of the research interview schedules.

Our coding strategy was based on four categories:

1. Background and positionality: this is how the interviewees described their professional and personal background in relation to their role in higher education.
2. Understanding of higher education and the public good: how respondents explained their understanding of the public good and what influenced their understanding.
3. Context: we asked respondents to indicate two or three challenges that higher education faced South Africa
4. Evaluating: issues that would be important to consider/measure if we wanted to evaluate or 'judge' the progress that higher education was making towards the public good.

Developing the 'DNA' Framework

As stated above, we realised that the data generated from the thirty-three interviews would be bulky and require an approach to building themes that would be rigorous while also relating to our research topic. While it is common in large-scale research to use modern software to analyse and create themes, ours was an approach based on the nature of the research questions we asked as well as the international dimensions of the research.

What we called the 'DNA' framework is an abbreviation for descriptive, normative, and analytic. We created these categories based on the nature of questions we asked and the complexity of researching the public good, which is essentially a philosophical construct. We appreciated the fact that asking people in interviews to expand on a philosophical idea would be challenging given that there is a long intellectual tradition of studying the public good within disciplines such as Philosophy and Political Science. As we proceeded with the research, we asked ourselves 'Can the public good be researched through qualitative interviews?' 'What additional new insights would such interviews bring?' 'Are the perceptions of stakeholders in higher education any different from any other person's views on the public good question?' The idea of the 'DNA' framework was to narrow down these concerns, develop a way of having a better handle over the data and therefore produce reliable findings.

The additional four criteria that informed the DNA framework were elaborated in the following ways:

1. The tension between *instrumental* (e.g., comments about economic growth) and *intrinsic* (e.g. deliberation, tolerance) statements.
2. Internal and external conditions of possibility (IC and EC).
3. The role of higher education in/for public good today (descriptive). What should higher education do in South Africa (normative)? How do they analyse their role in this (analytic)?
4. Private vs public – explore the positions taken by different stakeholders on the ways that private and public universities advance the public good.

We developed the idea DNA framework after careful consideration of the deep explanations that came from the respondents and the need to show the patterns in the data. The *descriptive* part showed the interactions between a variety of factors that shape the role of higher education in South Africa: these pointed to convergence and divergence in the data. We found this very important in the initial stages of developing themes. The *normative* aspect of the framework concerns itself with statements that respondents made about what the role of higher education in South Africa ought to be. These normative statements indicated the importance of understanding the source of the claims that people make about the role of higher education and exposed the ways in which it is contested. This shows the kind of tensions that are elaborated in the findings of the study. *Analytic* statements involved making judgements on the ‘success’ or ‘failures’ of the higher education system in relation to the public good. We saw these statements as critical in making meaning of the information from the interviews as well as of the nuances in the statements of the respondents.

Considering all the innovations and interpretations outlined above, the team acknowledged that there would still be missing questions, silences and issues that were not adequately accounted for. The research topic itself elicited significant disagreements over which voices are heard and gain prominence and which voices are not prominently recognised. We took this seriously because qualitative research should not be merely about a rigid set of procedures and processes but should open our thinking about questions of power, culture and political processes that ultimately shape the higher education sector. It is against that backdrop that the article now discusses the pitfalls, tensions, and missing questions.

Pitfalls, Tensions and Missing Questions/Silences

It is self-evident that a study of this scope and depth may overlook several issues, given the complicated nature of the research design as well as the complexity of bringing on board multiple researchers across many research sites. In addition, our 'unit of analysis', which is higher education, is in a state of change in South Africa given the social upheavals discussed earlier.

Pasque et al. (2012) argue that as an applied and interdisciplinary field of study, higher education has an incredible opportunity to draw on a wealth of scholarly traditions to critique the status quo, interrogate power, theorise agency and work towards social justice. The study of higher education is not bound by any one discipline or its methods. Rather, scientists, humanists, artists, therapists, architects, critics, activists and many more individuals could potentially populate the scholarly landscape. As an applied field, the study of higher education could draw from all scholarly traditions where new methodologies and methods could be forged.

In pursuing this research, we realised that the higher education landscape mirrors many of the prevalent inequalities that exist in society, especially within an African context. While we could not possibly have exhausted all such issues, we do acknowledge that, globally, higher education is transforming in ways that are aligning strongly with the nature of neoliberal changes that have engulfed early twenty-first-century society across the world. The attempt to subject all facets of human life to the capitalist logic has not escaped the university system at micro or macro institutional levels. Drawing on the insights of our participants in the Knowledge Sharing Workshop2 hosted by Wits University on 4 March 2019 we briefly synthesise some important questions for future research in this field.

Lack, Deficit, and the Need to 'Catch up'

The competitive nature of universities as well as the commodification of higher education generally has placed pressure on universities in the global South to catch up with global North universities and move up the ladder of what is called the 'global prestige economy' of universities. A general trend now is the growing agenda of the corporatisation of universities, which questions the role of the university as pursuing social justice, developing mechanisms for addressing social inequality and facilitating the circulation of knowledge (Vally 2019).

Voice Theory – Representation, Homogenisation, and Abject terrains

Questions of gender, identity and sexuality are critical to any true understanding of the public good and require a specific focus in future research. Our engagements with many civil society gender-focused movements and activists showed that the universities in many instances have become sites for the reproduction of gendered inequalities as well as marginalization, as opposed to being the spaces in which these issues should be addressed. University campuses have become sites of masculine and aggressive cultures in which gender-based violence against women and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersexual (LGBTI) communities are becoming more prevalent (Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Mogotsi 2017). A public good agenda in higher education has to address such questions and create the kind of conditions to enable all voices that have been marginalised to be heard.

From a Human to a Post-human University

The university historically is an institution where masses of people (mostly young) have gathered in pursuit of knowledge, learning, inventing, and teaching. The idea of the university as a space where intellectuals gather for the sole purpose of knowledge development has been undermined by the growth of digital platforms that have had limited the interaction between the university and its constituencies, such as students. The widescale adoption of processes such as ‘blended learning’ in teaching is encouraging a culture of the university (at least those that are deemed to be comprehensively teaching- and research-focused) that is not necessarily a place of physical engagement between students and professors (Hill and Lawton 2018; Czerniewicz and Rother 2018).

Some South African universities have bought wholeheartedly into the notion of a so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (4IR) and transformed their entire branding and teaching methodologies to comply with the requirements of 4IR (Xing and Marwala 2017). The consequence of the adoption of some of these technologies could be that the university as an intellectual space may cease to create the kind of interactions that have produced generations of critical thinkers and scholars. Professors and lecturers are having to teach through podcasts, engage their students through electronic platforms such as Blackboard and reduce their classroom time. They are increasingly being casualised as a result. In the context of the prevailing inequalities in societies such as South Africa, the adoption of these technologies may result in the further marginalisation of students from poor

and working-class backgrounds. These are serious questions when trying to understand higher education and the public good. They lead to important further questions about the future of the university and the character it will take in the context of the changes outlined in this subsection.

Conclusion

This article has sought to locate our reflections on the research for this project in the context of the higher education system in South Africa, which has been characterised by important changes since 1994. The student protests of the #FeesMustFall movement have brought into sharp focus the question of access and funding of higher education. Our experience from this research contributes to the field of interdisciplinary research on higher education within large cross-national projects. We did this by researching what different stakeholders of the South African university sector understand as the public good.

The research process outlined in this article illustrates the complexities of doing qualitative research that involves multiple stakeholders with a big team of researchers. Identifying a common framework was the major challenge at the beginning of the project, and this was tied to the need to build a strong conceptual approach to the study. While most of the participants were willing and eager to participate, there was also resistance and querying of the research by some participants. This is mainly because the theme of public good evokes diverse emotional, philosophical, political and policy responses. As shown in the discussion on methodologies, we had to negotiate many boundaries due to power relations and pre-existing social relations within the field.

Notes

1. The #FeesMustFall movement was a hashtag-initiated movement of widespread student protests in South African universities. The protests were not the first – there had been many other protests about access to higher education, which were led by organisations such as SASCO since the early 1990s. What gave prominence to the #FeesMustFall were two things: (1) its association with a struggle for decolonisation under the aegis of #RhodesMustFall and (2) the situation of these struggles in Historically White Universities that are in the top tier of South African Universities and largely attract students from middle class backgrounds and the elite.
2. These three issues discussed are drawn from Prof Louise Morley's critical input to the Knowledge Sharing Symposium; she had titled the talk 'Provocations'.

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