



South African universities and human development: Towards a theorisation and operationalisation of professional capabilities for poverty reduction

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research project investigating the role of universities in South Africa in contributing to poverty reduction through the quality of their professional education programmes. The focus here is on theorising and the early operationalisation of multi-layered, multi-dimensional transformation based on ideas from Amartya Sen's capability approach. Key features of a professionalism oriented to public service, which in South Africa must mean the needs and lives of the poor, are outlined. These features include: the demand from justice; the expansion of the comprehensive capabilities both of the poor and professional capability formation to be able to act in 'pro-poor' ways; and, praxis pedagogies which shape this connected process. This theorisation is then tentatively operationalised in a process of selecting transformation dimensions.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on research in progress from an 18-month research project, directed by the lead author, and funded by ESRC/DfID to explore how university-based professional education and training might contribute to poverty reduction and human development in South Africa. The project is developing an interwoven theorising of equality, disadvantage and 'pro-poor' professionalism in investigating the transformation of universities to meet South Africa's human resource needs for the challenges of reconstruction, development and transformation in the 21st century.¹ The broad goal of our research project is to investigate poverty reduction, understood as 'human development' (Sen, 1999) as a social transformation goal for South African universities.

Specifically, the lens of professionalism and professional education has been identified as a measure for evaluating the extent to which universities are contributing to social change. We take the preparation of professionals as one of the essential social functions of the university; it is the 'pivotal point at which social needs and economic and political imperatives meet advancing knowledge and aspiring talent' (Sullivan, 2005, p. 10).

We describe this as 'pro-poor' professionalism but understand this not as top-down, paternalistic 'doing good to the poor', but as a public good professionalism which in South Africa, where poverty is deep and wide (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005), must mean improving the lives of the poor. Our focus is on how higher education then develops educational functionings and professional values by providing transformational resources of teaching and learning so that students might choose to be professionals responsibly committed to pro-poor human development as a core professional value and guide to action. However, the research also includes careful empirical attention to the specific social and educational capability constraints confronting transformative professional education in South African universities.

Our theorising is shaped by Sen's (1992, 1999) capability approach and its further development by Nussbaum (2000); we are therefore exploring how university transformation might be understood as two intersecting layers of an educational contribution to poverty reduction:

- (i) through expanding the capabilities and functionings of students in professional education; who in turn are able
- (ii) to expand the capabilities of poor and disadvantaged individuals and communities.

The research team is developing case studies at three South African universities selected for their diverse historical trajectories of apartheid dis/advantage, to include an historically white,

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¹ For information and working papers in this project see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/projects/mw-poverty-reduction.index.php>.

English medium university, an historically white, Afrikaans medium university and an historically black university.² We have selected five professional education sites, at least one in each university, comprising social work, law, engineering, public health and theology. These professional sites have both been selected pragmatically in relation to access to research sites, but also to represent a cross-section of different professional groups which includes those working more and less directly at the interface of professional contributions and the lives of the poor and vulnerable. While data includes statistical information and relevant policy and university documents, the central data set is made up of qualitative interviews at each professional education site of lecturers and heads of departments, students, alumni, NGOs and professional bodies, together with senior university leaders. A research working group at each university acts as consultants to the project and a sounding board for our analysis, theorisation and dimensions of 'professional capabilities'.

2. 'Transformation': challenge and change

As many scholarly commentators remind us, everywhere universities and the professional education located within them have the potential, enshrined in their histories, to pursue either reproductive or transformative goals (McLean et al., 2008). Our discussion about strengthening professionalism for the public good and public service is located in the South African Constitution, which enshrines the ideals of improving the quality of life of all citizens and establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights (Magasela, 2006). It is further bolstered by the White Paper on Higher Education (DOE, 1997) which identifies the purposes of higher education in South Africa as contributing to societal transformation by combining economic priorities with the need to support a democratic civil society. The transformation agenda set out in the White Paper is then both a resource to advocate change, and a major challenge; it declares that 'higher education [be] transformed to meet the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all' (p. 4), underpinned by transformations in identities, learning and a culture of respect. Thus a transformed higher education system promotes equity and access for individual development, but also the building of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society.

Transformation in relation to South African universities is commonly understood to refer to changing demographics of race and gender (Cloete et al., 2006). Our understanding includes the importance of these shifts and acknowledges that racially and gender distorted higher education obstructs deep transformation and democratic cultures. At the same time we also understand that transformation needs to extend beyond race and gender demographics to include attention to social class (Hall, 2007), not only the social class of students entering and succeeding in universities but also the much wider issue of the poor in South Africa and how they are to benefit from publicly-funded higher education, as the White Paper implies. We think one way in which this ought to happen is through universities educating professionals who are all critically aware (regardless of their own gender, race or class) of the society in which they will work and oriented to understanding and acting on their own individual and collective responsibility to act to bring about improvements. Our argument is that when universities do certain kinds of things, certain kinds of student professionals are formed. This is further developed in the paper as aspects of justice.

Suffice to note at this point that, as Morrow (1998, p. 387) points out, higher education institutions 'are major distributors of benefits in society, especially those benefits which stretch forward into the future'. Such benefits need to be made available to South African society now and in the future and public good professional education is a significant distributive mechanism in this process. Transforming universities then involves demographic shifts but also developing people [professionals] who can contribute to changing society. The view of transformation that informs this project is therefore that, 'transformation is not just its own goal; the goal is an improved, more just and more equitable society' (Van Niekerk, 1998, p. 301). Another way to put this, is to say that a transformation process would involve universities contributing to human development but in ways also appropriate to their positioning as higher education institutions, in this project, the professional education they provide.

Yet the social and educational challenges are immense, given the continuing legacy of apartheid inequality and oppression, including racially skewed professional groups. The South African Finance Minister, Trevor Manuel, said on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the United Democratic Front³ that public servants, who should be the 'mainstay for transformation', have lost the passion for their work. He continued in his public speech that, 'Our ability to deliver a deep and durable democracy focused on improving living standards will never be attained without the commitment of our public servants in the key social sciences' (quoted in Joseph, 2008, p. 3). Manuel's speech points to a tension, which we acknowledge in our discussion of universities and transformation. There is the pull on the one hand, 'towards an ethos of individual competition and the reproduction of a hierarchy of social advantage' (Jonathan, 2001, p. 48) and, on the other, towards social transformation.

This is further exacerbated by absolute and relative income poverty in South Africa. If household incomes are divided into deciles, and the relationship between the lowest and highest decile is expressed as a ratio, most countries in the South have a ratio of between 1:10 and 1:20. The ratio for Brazil is about 1:50. The ratio for South Africa is more than 1:100, and continues to widen (Hall, 2007; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). While taking serious note of this wealth inequality, in our project we are working with a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty and poverty reduction to include both low income and low quality of life. We are influenced by literature and research on empowerment of the poor, which emphasises the importance of dignity and empowerment. For example, 60000 people in Narayan et al's (2000) comprehensive project on the *Voices of the Poor* spoke about the importance of relationships of, 'respect, not being rude, honesty, fairness, not being corrupt, truthful, not lying, not cheating, listening, and being caring, loving, kind and compassionate, hard-working, helpful and professional' (2000, p. 188). These perceptions map over Nussbaum's (2000) concern with human dignity and that each person is treated as a human being worthy of respect and dignity; we have intrinsic worth by virtue of our human beingness. Nussbaum writes that the idea of human dignity 'has broad cross-cultural resonance and intuitive power' (2000, p. 72); 'each person [is] a bearer of value, and an end' (2000, p. 73). Indeed, it features prominently in the 1996 South African Bill of Rights South African Government, 1996). 'What this approach is after', Nussbaum says, 'is a society in which persons are treated as each worthy of regard, and in which each has been put in a position to live really humanly' (2000, p. 74). Enabling people 'to live really humanly' is to reduce

² For a detailed account of the historically trajectories and development commitments of different kinds of South African universities, and for an explanation of these descriptors, see Cloete et al. (2006).

³ The United Democratic Front comprised a broad ANC-aligned coalition of mass democratic organisations, formed in 1983 to resist and overturn apartheid from within South Africa. See Seekings (2000).

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