

**‘Development Discourses: higher education and transformation in South Africa’**

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**Discourses/index.aspx**

**Briefing Paper 1 by Melanie Walker, September 2009**

**I) Questions**

- Does the capability approach provide an analytical structure that captures social and higher education complexities, while retaining enough simplicity to ensure operational significance and practicality?
- How might ideas from the capability approach inform higher education debates, and national and university policies in South Africa?
- Does the Professional Capabilities Index have relevance for professional education in all South African universities? How and in what practical ways? Is it relevant for evaluations of quality/equality and justice in higher education?
- What would be appropriate strategies for engaging universities and higher education policymakers in dialogue about this research project and its argument and claims for capabilities as a measure of university transformation? Who decides on ‘the public good’?

**II) The research project**

An 18 month research project (July 2008-December 2009) was designed to explore how university-based professional education and training might contribute to poverty reduction and human development in South Africa. The overall project aims were: a) to investigate the equity trajectory of higher education institutions and their role as ‘engines of reform’ in addressing the policy and practical challenges of poverty and associated human talent needs of South Africa in the 21st century, using the lens of human development and professional education; b) to make a major contribution towards policy and practice in the area of higher education and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) by providing a conceptual and practical understanding of Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach and human development, and how capabilities might be formed through teaching and learning in professional education.

The project involved three different South African universities – each having different histories and transformation trajectories, and five professional education departments across the three universities. These were Engineering, Law, Public Health, Social Work and Theology. To promote change the project team worked participatively to develop multi-dimensional ‘metrics’ as a way of mapping and measuring transformation. Professional education was chosen because it is at the nexus of universities and the societies they serve; it points inwards to institutional transformation, and outwards to social transformation. It is where academic knowledge, values and professionalism meet the world of practice and interact with the people who are the users and recipients of professional services.

The project used a case study methodology and mixed methods of data collection. It included

documentary sources, quantitative statistics and 90 qualitative interviews with university leaders, lecturers, students, alumni, professional bodies and NGOs. In addition, each University set up a Research Working Group (RWG) to include one member to be an academic from the participating professional department and two other members with faculty and/or University wide roles (for example PVC Teaching and Learning, Faculty Dean, Transformation/Equity Officer, Director of Teaching and Learning, Academic Planning Officer). Members had to be aware of University transformation goals and processes and be able to relate this to national and University policy. The key tasks of the RWGs were: to respond to the data and emerging analysis; and to discuss how transformation might be evaluated and 'measured' in relation to the MDGs, human development, and poverty reduction.

This project has thus explored how universities ought to and can be engines of reform and social change: critical and transformative spaces to address human problems. Central to conceptualisation and analysis in the project is Amartya Sen's capability approach to underpin human development. Transforming universities involves, among other things, developing people who can contribute to improving society in ways which make it more just and more equitable. Another way to put this is to say that a transformation process would involve universities contributing to human development in ways specific to their positioning as higher education institutions, including their pivotal role in the academic preparation, professional and vocational knowledge formation of public service professionals.

### ***Poverty reduction as capability expansion***

There is a focus in the research on university contributions to poverty reduction. In the project we have conceptualized reducing poverty as expanding human well-being and agency so that one might say poverty has been reduced when a human life has more well being or more capability. Poverty is defined as capability failure; poverty reduction is defined as capability expansion. More capability equates to less poverty.

Capabilities are the real and actual freedoms (opportunities) people have to do and be what they value being and doing. Put simply, the capability approach asks us to evaluate well being in terms of what people value being and doing, and to work to increase their freedom to be in those ways or to do those things. For our purposes it then follows that the responsibility of a university committed to social transformation is to enable students to develop relevant capabilities while at university; that is, to impart the knowledge, skills and competence which constitute the capability to practice as professionals working for social transformation. Professional 'beings and doings' that are valuable to the professionals who emerge from higher education would be functionings; such functionings would be proxies for what we call 'professional capabilities'. The capability approach in our research is a means to theorize questions of professional agency, justice, equality and professional education.

### **III) Professionals and the public good**

The research thus focuses on professional capabilities and the 'public good' in relation to the role of universities in promoting development and more justice in higher education and society. Our aim has been to show how universities can contribute to social change, poverty awareness, rich civic cultures, and other relevant aspects of society. Examples are drawn from our cases to demonstrate how this can be achieved, specifically contributions through teaching and learning and institutional cultures to educating and training public good professionals.

The idea of public good is understood here as a key factor in conceptualising the roles that universities ought to play in society. The key debate is more commonly around financing universities and the payment of student fees where students stand to gain private benefits through expanded economic opportunities and higher earnings. By public good professionals we mean professionals with commitments to the well-being and agency of the publics [whom they serve, including and especially individuals and groups who are marginalised, disadvantaged, or quite simply living in poverty, whether in relative or absolute terms.

Thus while there are different conceptions of the public good, the understanding of the public good informing South African debates was outlined by Mala Singh as meaning ‘a common space within which the content of moral and political goals like democracy and social justice can be negotiated and collectively pursued’. She has argued that transformation in South Africa, in fidelity to its claimed radical roots, must incorporate goals and purposes which are linked, even if indirectly, to an emancipatory and broad-based social and political agenda’.

This version of the public good, requiring universities’ social responsibility and role in human development underpins the way we conceptualise ‘public good’ professionalism. 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. Across the world there is evidence that ideal-typical professionalism, defined as working for the public good, is in crisis: self-interest and technical rationality are prevailing, and there are histories of collusion with corrupt states. Nevertheless, we argue that the integrity of professional life is necessary to the health of civic culture everywhere; and, that there are some grounds for believing that a concept of professionalism that is linked to social functions and the common good can be revived to be of service in any democratic society in the contemporary world, and in South Africa in particular. The research project draws thus on a discourse of transformative professionalism as a resource to elaborate and illuminate the task that faces the educators of professionals.

We therefore understand a public good professional as someone with the multidimensional ‘professional capabilities’ (using Sen and Nussbaum’s use of capabilities) to expand the ‘comprehensive capabilities’ of the disadvantaged so that lives go better in some way, for example, in having more dignity, more respect and more agency. How this contribution to making the lives of those living in poverty go better is implemented will vary across professional groups and may not require or demand that all professionals work only in public services. It would, however, require that each professional is aware of their responsibility to alleviate disadvantage (for example through pro-poor engineering projects or pro-bono legal services, or a contribution to social and community development in rural communities) and to lessen injustice through their professional contributions, even under imperfect social and political conditions.

We propose a professionalism that expects professionals to make accounts to the state and public, and, at the same time, retain the freedom to think, speak and act as they think right. In this sense, the ideology of professionalism can be used as a weapon in a struggle against compromises that are made in the face of socio-economic-political conditions, including market forces, which threaten it. The concept of professionalism, in all its historical and social complexities, offers a range of identities. The one we are offering here to professionals bound up with transformation in universities is founded on ideas about human development that emphasises capability expansion for both professionals and their clients. This particular definition of professionalism carries with it a special emphasis on responsibility for poverty reduction as a social justice imperative linking, in Sen’s formulation, responsibility to capability as effective power and human obligation.

#### **IV) Professional education**

To reiterate, the public good requires of publicly-funded universities a social responsibility mission and a commitment to the public interest in educating professionals. The research takes this preparation of professionals to be one of the essential social functions of the university. As William Sullivan explains, it is the ‘pivotal point at which social needs and economic and political imperatives meet advancing knowledge and aspiring talent’. Graduate professionals may have a negative or positive impact in and on society and human well being. Universities therefore have a fundamental role through curriculum, teaching and learning and the professional values which they inculcate so that students are made aware of and equipped to contribute to the public good through their professional practice.

One of the circumstances therefore that makes possible such a version of professionalism is the potential offered by ‘enlarging freedoms’ through education and training in universities. Globally, professional education in public universities is charged with a social mission to educate professionals for performance, for ethical judgment and for a disposition towards society and clients; professional education departments institutionalize distinctive cultures through their pedagogical and research practices. They form new professionals who will reproduce the lifeworld of the profession. They can of course reproduce privileges of race, gender and social class, and retrogressive traditional practices, and have done so in South Africa during the apartheid era when the professions were deeply racialized in terms of access and wide professional opportunities and choices.

In short, by doing particular kinds of educational things universities educate particular kinds of professionals. We argue that the ‘particular kinds of things’ ought to be to educate public good professionals, with the capabilities to act responsibly towards others. Graduates can contribute in diverse ways to social development. We are more interested in how or whether a public good contribution is related to genuine public service. In the arena of professional education this ought to translate into discourses of transformation and human development in which students learn not only knowledge and skills but the difference between simply having a professional skill on one hand, and on the other having the commitment to use that skill to the benefit of others and to continue questioning and extending expert knowledge and its applications. Not just the education then of professionals, but the formation of critical and socially committed professionals. This is then to conceptualize transformation as deeply imbricated in a view of universities as social institutions (properly governed by conceptions of service: to disciplinary areas, to students, and to society).

Curriculum and pedagogical practices then ought to strengthen such a professionalism for the public good. We therefore conceptualise professional education in universities as a process of capability expansion that will open up freedoms for individual students to be a particular kind of professional. For Sen, capability expansion constitutes advantage, which inescapably generates obligations to be responsible for acting to promote democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; capability, he says, is a kind of power, and it would be a mistake to see capability only as a concept of human advantage, not also as a concept in human obligation. Higher education institutions are major distributors of benefits in society, especially those benefits which penetrate into the future; public good professional education can be a significant distributive mechanism in this process.

Following from this, the primary contribution of our research is the theoretical and practical development of a capability-based public good professional index, and the theorization of comparative social justice in relation to the specificity of university transformation to shape professional education and university policy. While acknowledging the constraining impact

of globalization and neo-liberal policies on higher education internationally in the direction of narrow human capital outcomes for economic growth above all, we nonetheless offer a hopeful challenge in describing how the case study universities contribute both directly and indirectly to individual and social well-being by educating public good professionals with the capabilities and values to contribute to poverty reduction in their societies. We do not see our model as applicable only to South Africa and its particular political conditions. While the philosophical ground of capabilities and the interlocking of professional capabilities and the comprehensive capability expansion of the disadvantaged would hold across diverse national settings, the actual list of professional capabilities might be different for different contexts. This is a matter of dialogue and critical public reasoning to which we would hope our list might contribute, although we would want to argue that the meta-functionings we identify may hold across very diverse contexts. The rich case studies we develop from our research provide multiple voices and perspectives on what constitutes an appropriate professional capability set and the functionings from which professionals can select to improve the lives of the disadvantaged and those living in poverty in urban and rural settings.

At the same time the case studies acknowledge that when they leave university students will make their own choices and they may not all choose professional contributions to the public good. Nonetheless, in contemporary times of growing inequalities both within countries and globally, it remains inescapably the social responsibility of universities as educational institutions to educate for public good awareness and values so that graduates might hopefully make more rather than less worthwhile choices, choosing more rather than less justice as professionals.

## **V) Professional Capabilities Index (PCI)**

Our research has produced a multi-dimensional, multi-layered evidence-based capabilities framework for evaluating public good professional education which should be of wide interest and applicability.

Following Martha Nussbaum, we suggest that any set of capability-based dimensions should be thick, that is philosophically and theoretically meaningful in relation to a life of full human dignity, also vague in not being over specified or derived from a particular metaphysical worldview (for example secular or religious). What is required is a framework of dimensions for the purposes of evaluation and comparison of one life with another life. We need to say what it is we want to develop and what the ends of development ought to be and how we will know, and to be able to identify practical ways to evaluate difficult trade-offs where choice might be expanded in some dimension while being restricted in another, for example, more academic knowledge or more experiential learning. Moreover, in the spirit of the capability approach, the process of specification should be collaborative, visible, defensible and revisable. We do not expect or want these dimensions/capabilities to be complete or exact; we have developed them for the purposes of public dialogue with others who may be interested in this approach.

We first elaborate comprehensive dimensions; all the capabilities everyone needs for full human flourishing. But given the research focus we also pose the further question: which of these capabilities and functionings are specific to professionals working for social transformation and which should, therefore, be incorporated as broad goals in professional education and training? Ideally students' professional education programmes should expand their capability to exercise their functioning professional capabilities. Because pedagogy and student development is institutionally framed, and because there are institutional dimensions to inequality of capabilities, the capability-based evaluative framework develops institutional



dimensions and more specific details, as well as dimensions and details of educational arrangements and social constraints that shape capability formation. The broader university ethos will play a role in shaping the formation of students and what they might potentially be and value. The university transformation dimensions are selected and identified specifically in relation to the formation of students in professional programmes. Institutional dimensions reflect back and on pedagogical arrangements which foster the capability and functioning development of students, studying in diverse professional fields, and how they are being prepared for what it means to 'act rightly' as a professional in conditions of profound inequality and poor quality of life for large numbers of South Africans. Finally, we bring them together in a multi-dimensional, layered and interconnecting evaluation heuristic, in which we have four intersecting tables of dimensions, all of which influence each other, and none of which ought to stand alone.

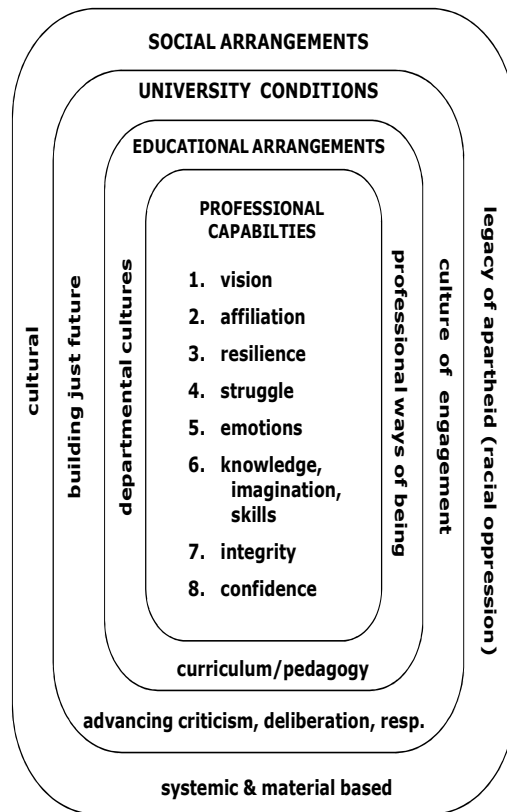
Four original and innovative interlocking tables of dimensions, details/indicators which constitute the framework for evaluation have been developed out of capability theorizing, research, and the empirical case study narratives. We have interlocking tables of dimensions or 'metrics', sketching professional capabilities, university transformation dimensions, educational arrangements and social constraints to guide, in turn, situational analysis, participatory action and evaluation of equality in higher educational and social arrangements.

Public good professionals are multidimensional transformative agents who:

- i. Expand the comprehensive capabilities of people living in poverty
- ii. Act for social transformation and reduce injustice
- iii. Make sound professional judgements
- iv. Recognize the full dignity of every human being.

Through their professional education they ought to have the opportunity to form eight core capabilities which underpin these meta-functionings.

These professional capabilities interlock with dimensions of the University, society and individual. For example, for graduate professionals to work to expand the capabilities of those living in poverty, they need themselves to develop as transformative agents, having the functional professional capabilities to act in this way. To do this, in turn they need exposure to professional programmes in which curriculum, pedagogy and assessment fosters the appropriate knowledge, understanding and identity. In turn again, a university which is connected to changing society through attention to poverty reduction will provide a context which further encourages such ways of being, and supports and rewards professional departments in pursuing these goals. Finally there will be social arrangements, both enabling (e.g. South African Bill of Rights; higher education policy vision) and constraining (legacy of apartheid) which shape possibilities for action and strategic change. In addition individual biographies will shape how each person is able to 'convert' these educational opportunities, resources and experiences into realizing their fully autonomous agency, and in this respect structures of race, class and gender may constrain or enable full professional agency. Thus university education needs to pay attention through educational and institutional arrangements to equipping each student - as best they can - with the capability to realize their professional agency in the social world.



## VI) Praxis pedagogy

We think that the form of education and training that will foster public good professional values is a form of praxis pedagogy which is transformative, critical, and attentive both to knowledge and to responsible action in society. Praxis is understood here to involve both the integration of academic knowledge (acquired at university) and practical knowledge about how one lives as a citizen and human being. We see praxis pedagogies as having these key elements:

- i. Contextual knowledge and understanding. Professionals in South Africa work and will continue to work in challenging circumstances. A broad, critical and reflective understanding of the context in which they will be working will assist in thinking about possibilities as well as what is needed to make changes. A sense of history in general and an understanding of the history of specific professions can develop a sense that things need not be as they are now.
- ii. Developing identity, commitment and community so that professionals oriented to the public good in South Africa turn towards people living in

conditions of poverty. They will need to raise strong and principled voices in policy-making forums and in the communities where they practice; courage and resilience will be needed. The work of change agency cannot be left only to individuals so that making alliances within one's own profession, starting in the professional department or school, and with progressive groups in society will be a sustaining part of professional work.

- iii. Transformative learning to mirror the emphasis on transformation in South African society. Our definition of transformative learning involves students being challenged at personal (values, assumptions, attitudes) and social or discursive (underlying assumptions or worldview) levels. Transformative learning incorporates critical reflective enquiry, and it takes emotions seriously. It involves pedagogies of deliberation and mutual respect in which students are fully participative.

## **VII) Conclusion**

We currently have five rich and detailed draft case studies, which we can group into two broad categories and look at what is happening in different kinds of professional groups: a) social work, theology, public health; b) engineering and law. Each case study provides a detailed account drawing on the voices of students, lecturers, alumni, NGOs and professional bodies, as well as statistical data from each university and professional field. We have been looking at what capabilities different individuals and professional groups value and why, as well as examining educational and pedagogical arrangements. The PCI will be empirically adjusted for each professional group.

However, these case studies are a prospective construction of professional capabilities rather than the more usual capabilities approach of evaluating some development already in place. While the case studies do in a sense evaluate the professional education currently on offer in the five departments and seek to understand the impact of this through discussions with NGOs, alumni and professional bodies, we cannot claim to have a research focus on the impact factor of graduate professionals in different communities – this has not been the focus of this research project. We can however extrapolate to what this impact might be and how it might be increased if universities were to draw on the PCI as a tool to evaluate professional education and training and graduates' subsequent professional contributions.