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Universities and the public good: capability formation and 'transformative' professionals

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Background

The education of ethical professional agents who act to remove injustice and reduce poverty is important for at least three reasons. Firstly, people in conditions of poverty are highly dependent on public action and public services as they have no private resources to invest and suffer most from poor service provision and delivery. Secondly, socially conscious elites can play a significant role in affecting social policy and change in society when they see themselves as having interdependent lives with those living in poverty, obligations towards the poor, and believe that public action to reduce poverty is possible. Thirdly, professionals equipped with knowledge, practical skills and public service values can make a positive difference in the everyday lives of the people with whom they come into contact: personal choices to do professional good can contribute to reducing injustice.

Research Questions

This paper reports on an 18 month ESRC/DfID-funded project which investigated the role of universities in the formation of transformative professionals in South Africa. Theorizing the educational production of public-good professionalism provides relevance beyond the South African context. The project considered (i) how professional education in South African universities might contribute to poverty reduction and social transformation; and (ii) the equity trajectory of universities and their role in addressing the challenges of poverty and human development in South Africa, specifically how advancing professional capability formation might expand the capabilities of the poor. Professional education was chosen as the site of the investigation because it is at the nexus of universities and the societies they serve; it points inwards to institutional transformation, and outwards to social transformation. The project sought to develop a prospective analysis of valuable professional capabilities, asking which policies and actions would yield greater capabilities.

Methods

The project involved three different South African universities with different histories and transformation trajectories, and five different professional education case study departments across the three universities. We drew on documentary and statistical data and conducted 90 qualitative interviews with students, lecturers, university leaders, alumni, professional bodies and NGOs in each professional field. We worked iteratively from the start of the project with a research working group at each university. We asked which professional capabilities were valued by diverse individuals and groups, as well as looking at policies, practices and institutional cultures which would promote capability expansion, such as curricula and pedagogies within the programmes.

Frame

The project drew theoretically on concepts from human development and Amartya Sen's capabilities as a normative approach to transformation at the intersecting levels of society, university, programmes and individuals, and in contrast to reductionist human capital policy. Human development is a rich, plural approach to assessing well-being, participation and agency, and also economic opportunities. Capabilities are the real and actual freedoms people have to do and be what they value being and doing and to be able to choose between different kinds of lives. With capability also comes responsibility for what we do, and the obligations we then owe to others. We analyzed the data bearing in mind three themes: i) the integration of macro/meso and micro levels; ii) what kind of professional is envisioned; and iii) what is actually going on in professional education at each site. Working with nine analytical codes, we first generated four central capabilities working with the data

set from Social Work as an exemplar of a profession working directly at the interface of vulnerable lives. We then looked analytically for a thread running through from valued capabilities to educational arrangements, informed by the confirming or differing perspectives of lecturers, students and alumni. Coding the case study data and iterative discussion with each university yielded evidence-based tables organized around three key categories of (i) human development professional capabilities, (ii) educational arrangements (including institutional conditions), and (iii) social constraints. We arrived at an overarching theme, conceptualized as 'human development public good professionalism'. By doing particular kinds of educational things universities educate particular kinds of professionals; 'particular kinds of things' ought to be to educate public good professionals, with the capabilities to act responsibly towards others. In the arena of professional education this ought to translate into students learning 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.

Research findings

The project has produced a theorized and practical professional capabilities index for wider discussion and potential applications. We found that the concepts of human development and capabilities constituted a significant space for thinking about i) the public good; ii) public good professional education; (iii) university transformation. We think 'professional capabilities' can capture institutional and social complexities, while also being clear enough to have practical usefulness as an evaluative and developmental framework. We generated an Index with four elements. (i) Eight core, multi-dimensional professional capabilities from data and dialogue, namely: 1) Informed Vision (eg. being able to imagine alternative futures and improved social arrangements); 2) Affiliation (solidarity) (eg. accepting obligations to others); 3) Resilience (eg. perseverance in difficult circumstances); 4) Social and collective struggles (eg. participating in public reasoning/listening to all voices in the 'conversation'); 5) Emotion (eg. empathy, understood as having a narrative imagination); 6) Integrity (eg. being responsible & accountable to communities and colleagues); 7) Assurance & confidence (eg. expressing and asserting own professional priorities); 8) Knowledge, imagination, practical skills (eg. having a firm, critical grounding in disciplinary, academic knowledge). Based on these we identified four non-hierarchical key professional meta-functionings: (i) recognising the full dignity of every human being; (ii) acting for social transformation and to reduce injustice; (iii) making sound, knowledgeable, thoughtful, imaginative, professional judgements; (iv) working/acting with others to expand the comprehensive capabilities ('fully human lives') of people living in poverty. The professional capabilities intersect with dimensions of educational arrangements, university conditions, social arrangements, and individual biographies, all of which shape learning outcomes (capabilities). Taken together these levels constitute a situated professional capabilities index, which might inform situational analysis (what is going on here), participatory action, and the evaluation of e/quality in university educational and social arrangements.