Editorial

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This special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* examines global debates concerned with higher education as a public good, in the context of the lived realities, political and economic constraints as well as opportunities in contemporary Africa. While the articles draw on research and analysis conducted from 2017 to 2019, and were completed before the seismic changes associated with the COVID pandemic, the framing ideas regarding a contextualised understanding of the relationship between higher education and the public good are highly resonant with the processes of the COVID conjuncture. In this Editorial, we distil the key ideas that have shaped this collection of works, describe the research study that connected them, and draw out some of the implications of the findings for thinking about higher education and the public good in the light of the major disruptions of 2020–2021 for higher education in many African countries.

Higher education has been the object of much policy and research attention in Africa, with a focus on delivering particular kinds of institutional orientations regarding teaching, learning, research, socio-economic and politico-cultural development. Higher education has been seen as key to unlocking the potential of the youth bulge in Africa, responding to the demands of a growing middle class, and transforming commodities-based economies into knowledge societies (World Bank 2009; Cloete, Maassen and Bailey 2015; Chuks 2017). It has been seen as a key element in supporting peace-building and healing the divisions of deep conflict in a number of African countries (Milton and Barakat 2016). The health research conducted in a number of African countries during COVID-19 has played a key role in sequencing the virus, trialling the vaccine and understanding community health support (Adepoju 2020; Mutapi 2021). But the connection of higher education systems to the enormous needs of health, education and socioeconomic development through the pandemic has been uneven (Kana, La Porte and Jaye 2021; Mutapi 2021; Reimers 2021).

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The potential of higher education in Africa to connect with and support a range of development outcomes has been noted as significant but under realised, for some decades (Oketch, McCowan and Schendel 2014; Teffera 2017; Howell, Unterhalter and Oketch 2020; Nhamo and Mjimba 2020). While some comment on a 'renaissance in African higher education' (Higgs 2016), and others on the effects and framings of colonial epistemicides (Nyamnjoh 2012), key questions abound about relevance, quality, financing and power relations, hierarchies and exclusions. These bring to the fore arguments to decolonise the curriculum, consider epistemic exclusions and forms of violence, appropriate pedagogies and languages, as well as to consider the structure, organisation, political, economic, social and spatial cultures and relationships of universities.

The student protests in South Africa in 2015 highlighted the problems of access and funding, but these were not isolated events, and student protests – with very different dynamics and aims – have been noted in the past six years in diverse countries, which include Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya, Ghana and Senegal (Fourie-Malherbe and Muller 2020; Rukato 2020; Mulinge and Arasa 2017; Egwurube 2021; Noll and Budniok 2021). They expose an unresolved colonial legacy in these higher education systems, partly linked to their relationships with the postcolonial state and uneven forms of development, provision, and connection to pressing local political developments.

The articles in this Special Issue focus on Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, but many of the trends reported here, which concern a difficult and highly differentiated relationship between higher education institutions in Africa and the conceptualisation and enactment of the idea of public good, have been associated with other countries on the continent (Woldegiorgis, Turner and Brahima 2020; Languille 2021).

Higher education in Africa has moved through several phases, from the establishment of flagship national universities in the post-independence period for state bureaucracy formation (Teffera 2017), to the emergence of developmental universities with a commitment to indigenising knowledge and benefiting marginalised populations (Assié-Lumumba and CODESRIA 2006; ADEA and AAU 2004; Coleman 1986; Mamdani 2007; McCowan 2016); from more recent tendencies towards the marketisation of public institutions as a significant growth of the private sector (Wangege-Ouma 2008; Provini 2019; Mogaji, Maringe and Hinson 2020), to concerns to develop research intensity in some institutions (Sawyerr 2004; Cloete, Maasen and Bailey 2015; Cloete, Bunting and Van Schalkwyk 2018), much commented on as part of the COVID response (Habib 2021; Kinyanjui,

Fonn, Kyobutungi et al. 2020). These orientations have been intertwined with concerns to widen participation (Allais, Unterhalter et al. 2020; Aarts et al. 2020) and lead the discussion around decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 2020). These different phases can be exemplified by particular kinds of institutions at particular moments, but these moments and the institutions that express this experience do not characterise the whole sector in every country on the continent. However, each facet of this history reflects a different way of understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good in the context of the histories of the countries of Africa.

One clear aspect of this relationship concerns the implications of the higher education sector for inequality. Obvious advantages are conferred on those who manage to go to university, but they still constitute a minority in all African countries. Students and graduates will experience many inequalities within institutions and in the status of their qualifications in the labour market. These experiences raise issues, not only of the public good relevance of higher education, but also of how higher education and its relationship with society may be conceptualised given overlapping fields of inequality (Lebeau and Milla 2008; Mamdani 2017; Habib 2019). Key overarching questions are: who is defining the public good, how and why, and what kinds of relationships with higher education are entailed? While these questions may be posed in relation to every country in the world, the relationship between higher education and the public good in Africa has some specific features, connections and disconnections to processes elsewhere in the world. This Special Issue reflects some of these specificities, engaging with, reflecting on and developing some of the debates about the relationship between higher education and the public good from an African perspective.

Two broad themes recur in this collection. Firstly, the contested nature of the concept of the public good, and how this is defined. Secondly, how the role of higher education in relation to the public good is shaped by the various contexts in which it operates, resulting in many complex enactments. Taken together, the papers provide a useful overview of the multiple ways of understanding the role of the public good and higher education in Africa today, how debates within Africa can shed light on these concepts, and how some of the sharp issues highlighted by the COVID conjuncture may be interpreted in the light of some of these experiences.

A major cross-cutting theme relates to the effect of context on higher education and the public good. This highlights not just the multiplicity of ways in which ideas about the public good are put into practice in

particular higher education institutions or systems, but also whether or not context (itself shaped by higher education experiences) is part of the concept of public good itself. Several papers in this Special Issue note the role of higher education in addressing the unjust legacies of colonialism and the specific formation of apartheid in South Africa. They draw out the need to expand access to higher education to those who have been and remain disadvantaged by these legacies. But concerns with expanding access are tempered by political-economic contexts in which doctrines of fiscal conservatism dominate. There is thus a context-related tension noted in the collection, between the need for higher education to play an instrumental role in supporting economic and social development, and its intrinsic value in supporting the deepening of democratic practice and social transformation. The papers highlight the significance of history, the role of place and lived relationships associated with teaching, learning and research, within actual higher education institutions. They suggest that these facets of context are as significant as abstract formulations in understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good in the context of the different African countries discussed here.

The ways in which these tensions around conceptualisation and enactment are contested and resolved has important implications for the development of the higher education sector in Africa. The pandemic has been associated with a general pivot to online learning, in some countries for the major part of two academic years. It has highlighted the interconnectedness of forms of inequality, different formations of the state, and the enormous need to respect human rights, planning well for the social protection that will be required for contemporary and anticipated economic, climate, health and education emergencies. Thus the pandemic has highlighted the many forms in which we need to think about public good and the many different kinds of relationships that higher education institutions need to be attuned to.

The articles in this Special Issue were all developed as part of the project 'Higher education, inequality and the public good: A study in four African countries', which we co-directed. The study was funded from 2017 to 2019 by an ESRC/Newton/NRF funding research partnership and subsequently supported with a grant from the UCL GCRF research funds. The project brought together researchers from the four countries and colleagues from the UK.[1] The project aimed at developing an analysis of how key constituencies – students, academic and non-academic staff working in higher education, members of university governance bodies, employers in the public and private sector, senior government officials, and leadership figures in civil

society – understand higher education and the public good within each country and across the region. The project team set out to examine the links that were made by individuals connected to the higher education sector and by analysts of that sector between higher education and a range of meanings of development. They gave particular attention to how notions of higher education and the public good have been formulated in societies with histories of colonisation that are marked by high levels of poverty and inequality.

Work also took place towards developing an indicator of higher education and the public good, and discussions were held regarding the ways an indicator might be useful to governments and higher education institutions to evaluate policy and practice. As part of a development and expansion of publications arising from the project, attention was subsequently given to the relationship between higher education and development in a range of developing countries (Howell, Unterhalter and Oketch 2020) and to how some of the harms associated with health, environmental and economic disasters have been addressed by higher education institutions (Unterhalter et al. 2021).

The investigation was conducted in the context of increasing international policy focus on higher education associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted in 2015, and the severe pressures on higher education in Africa associated with expanding provision under resource-constrained conditions (Aarts et al. 2020). The study and work that arose from it focused on the role of higher education in Africa in reproducing or redressing existing patterns of inequality and strategising for overcoming inequality in relation to the SDGs and COVID.

The views are divided on how the growth and shape of the higher education sector and its relation to other forms of post-school provision affect equalities and inequalities nationally and internationally. This theme is noted in a number of discussions on education and the public good (Marginson 2016; McCowan 2015, 2019; Unterhalter 2021); and the project aimed to deepen some of this analysis, drawing on conceptual review and empirical data. Four aspects of the public good and higher education were given particular attention in this project. These are:

1. Equity and social development;
2. Funding, employment and economic growth;
3. Pedagogy and curriculum;
4. The lived experience of space and work in universities.

These different facets are explored in the articles, which articulate different emphases and concerns.

The four countries chosen for the study were selected partly because they have been shaped by similar colonial histories, and all have recent experiences of higher education expansion. In each, the growth of the higher education sector has taken place within conditions of widespread poverty and unevenly distributed economic growth, with fault-lines along race, gender, ethnicity and region, producing an associated set of emerging tensions that require ongoing balancing and management, while eliciting much public discussion and debate. However, while these trends link the four countries, there are other distinctive factors that influence and shape higher education provision in each country, as the papers in this Special Issue show. The intention of the project was to draw on accounts of these differently located experiences to develop a nuanced understanding of how the relationship between higher education and the public good is articulated in the selected African countries and the implications of this for a more refined conceptualisation.

The overarching research question that guided the project was:

> 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?

Three sets of sub-questions were posed:

1. How has the idea of higher education and public good been understood and contested amongst different constituencies in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria since the emergence of new university governance structures from 1990? To what extent and in what ways do these views consider inequalities?

2. How do aspects of political economy and socio-cultural division within and beyond higher education shape perceptions of the meaning of public good? How do socio-economic differences shape the relationships between learners from different contexts, and between learners and teachers? How do pedagogies and curricula across disciplines and different forms of occupational knowledge contribute to this? What reproduces and what transforms experiences of poverty and inequalities, and how does this link to understanding of the public good?

3. What indicators are currently used to assess the relationship between higher education and public good, and to what extent is this data sensitive to a range of inequalities and forms of poverty in different countries? Is there sufficient cross-country data on how higher education connects with the public good to build an indicator that can be used in cross-country comparisons? What proxies could be used in the development of an indicator of higher education and the public good to compare countries?

The investigation, which took place between March 2017 and May 2019, used a mixed-methods approach, entailing the collection of new data and the analysis of existing data sets, and allowing for the collection and triangulation of data on the same theme and the exploration of a similar issue through different frameworks and contexts. The subsequent data analysis was built from a range of discussions in team meetings in 2019 and online dialogues between research team members during 2020 when travel was impossible. In briefly summarising the articles it can be seen that the significance of context, associated with histories and intersecting inequalities, emerges as highly salient in order to assess the relationship between higher education and the public good in the four countries.

The first paper, by Elaine Unterhalter and Stephanie Allais, provides an overview of conceptualisations of the public good role of higher education, and then considers whether, and how, these apply in the African context. It explores how the public good in higher education is substantive for those who experience it and how this can be expanded to address concerns of wider constituencies and develop some sense of solidarity with those who do not share the experience of higher education. The authors start with two key conceptualisations of the public good roles of higher education. Firstly, higher education has been portrayed as *instrumental* in shaping a version of the public good, where its qualifications, knowledge production, innovation, development of the professional classes and expertise are perceived to lead to particular manifestations of public good, delineated as economic, social, political or cultural (McMahon 2009; Stiglitz 1999). A contrasting set of arguments portrays the relationship between higher education and the public good as *intrinsic*. In this, the intellectual, physical and cultural experiences that are enabled through higher education express and enact the public good, associated, for example, with democratisation, critical thinking, active citizenship and reductions in prejudice – that is, they may prefigure forms of universalisation and connection across existing boundaries of inequalities (Singh 2001; Calhoun 2006; Leibowitz 2013; Marginson 2011; Locatelli 2017).

Unterhalter and Allais then draw on these conceptualisations in relation to the African context to argue that the roles and functions of higher education in any society are constrained and shaped by the histories of social, political and economic relations in that society and its connection with other national and global formations. They also point out that studies on the African context suggest that versions of the instrumental and intrinsic notions of the public good and higher education are quite distinct, but in some contexts may be seen to overlap. In addition, a number of studies of

widening participation, particularly in South Africa, have highlighted how the notions of the public and the private good of higher education need to be problematised. The challenge they confront is that there remains a need to distinguish a public good from a private goods . There is also a need to refine the analysis of the public good so that it identifies the state as a key provider of universal goods but also acknowledges that all states may not act in this way, which is illustrated in the histories of all four states in this study. Thus, the authors argue that we need a notion of how the public good connects with the public sphere, while acknowledging that different publics are involved.

The second paper, by Colleen Howell, is a metareview of the literature published since 2010 on higher education and the public good in Africa, with a focus on Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. It maps the conceptual and contextual foci of the literature on higher education in Africa and notes several important trends. Recognising the unequal geographies of knowledge that frame the global knowledge economy (Badat 2010), Howell explicitly aims to identify literature from a wide range of sources rather than relying on mainstream databases of journals and published work only. Importantly, she notes that the research on these issues is dominated by literature that focuses on South Africa, and that this inevitably skews the regional picture.

Her broad distinction between papers that focus on conceptual vs contextual issues is useful in providing a framework for thinking about the public good and higher education in Africa. She coded papers as conceptual for the rigorous review and further categorised them in terms of whether they approached the idea of the public good as an instrumental or intrinsic value. Papers coded as contextual focus on issues that are important to the functioning of higher education in specific countries, with further coding highlighting the specific issues she explores as aspects of the 'conditions of possibility' of higher education. In all the countries included in the study there is limited critical engagement around research and research development in universities. Finally, the review highlights the importance of context in understanding the relationship between higher education and the public good. Cross-cutting contextual issues include income and inequality; race and ethnicity, and gender. Higher education's enactment of the public good is constrained by social, economic and political forces at the national and global level, which constitute the 'underlying generative framework' that shapes the inequalities that persist across the continent.

Moses Oketch analyses the relation between higher education financing and the public good in Kenya, examining higher education as a 'public good' in terms of the debate around whether the benefits of higher education

primarily accrue to individuals or to society more broadly. Oketch uses this frame to interrogate the financing of higher education, noting the tensions between small-scale, free higher education with restricted access, and expanded access higher education based on cost recovery and cost-sharing models. Importantly, he observes that the extent to which higher education exists as a public good in any country is primarily a result of policy decisions. He uses the expansion of the Kenyan higher education system to illustrate the relationship between financing approaches and access, as well as noting the 'unintended' public good consequences of expanded higher education, such as a thriving civil society sector. This nuanced approach to understanding the tension between higher education funding and access to university education is important in terms of elucidating the challenges of providing/expanding access to higher education in contexts marked by restrictive fiscal policy.

Christine Adu-Yeboah explores the expansion of higher education for the public good in Ghana and stakeholders' perspectives on its quality. She notes that the higher education system has expanded since the 1990s and currently includes 72 private higher education institutions and 12 public universities. Although most students enrol in degrees in the humanities, increasing enrolment in STEM-based degrees is a national priority. Access to public institutions is limited by academic performance in secondary education, and is highly competitive. She adopts an explicitly instrumental approach to understanding the links between the quality of higher education and the impact of higher education on the public good. The public good is understood in primarily economic terms, with higher education viewed as important in improving productivity and producing effective labourers.

Adu-Yeboah uses a framework based on a model of the production function in human capital theory to examine the contexts, inputs, processes and products of higher education in Ghana. Drawing on qualitative research with Ghanaian stakeholders in higher education, including public and private universities, government officials, members of civil society and students, she concludes that it is necessary to improve the quality of higher education from the perspective of all these stakeholders in order to ensure that it contributes effectively to the public good.

Jibrin Ibrahim's account of the Nigerian university system focuses on corruption and the erosion of the public good. The paper discusses the relationship between higher education and the public good in Nigeria in terms of the declining quality of the higher education system since 1980. He attributes this decline to a combination of interrelated issues, which include: changes in economic policy that result from the implementation of

structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s; an increase in the numbers of tertiary institutions without adequate increases in funding, which has resulted in a large number of underfunded institutions; the academic union's narrow focus on members' remuneration, rather than a broader focus on academic freedom and the public good; high levels of corruption among university staff, both in the theft of funds and the inflation of academic output through the use of publications of dubious quality; and the sexual harassment and exploitation of students. Ibrahim argues that there is a need to re-establish the linkages between higher education and the public good in Nigeria to support the rebuilding of a state that can provide the 'prosperity, welfare and security of all its citizens'.

Public good as a lived experience of those who work in higher education is charted by Mthobisi Ndaba. He discusses the perspective of academics at two South African universities who actively work towards producing outcomes for the public good. Ndaba's micro-scale approach, which focuses on individual academics, complements the macro-scale views of the public good in other articles in this Special Issue. He highlights the complexities of trying to work for the public good in institutions that are increasingly corporatised and which do not necessarily recognise the importance of these contributions. There are several costs associated with working for the public good within the higher education system. These are: relational costs; personal resource costs; psychological costs; career-related costs; and identity contingencies. Ndaba concludes by arguing that it is important to understand the links between higher education and the public good at both the macro and micro scales in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of this complex relationship.

Palesa Molebatsi looks at meso-level relationships that have a bearing on the production of a connection between higher education and the public good. She focuses on South African universities and their spatially located communities, distinguishing between universities that were very connected to particular locales and their associated social relationships, and those that positioned themselves as detached from a specific local environment, with affiliations rather to wider epistemic or politically situated communities. She draws out how differently spatialised views of the public sphere can affect the way in which higher education for the public good is conceptualised and realised.

The ways in which higher education institutions or national education systems may seek to monitor or evaluate the public good relationships of higher education is explored by Tristan McCowan and Palesa Molebatsi. Based primarily on secondary data and a review of the relevant literature, their paper focuses on the role of indicators and rankings in higher education. McCowan and Molebatsi discuss the impacts that the choice of

indicators and approaches to ranking have on the sector and its ability to contribute to the public good. They provide a useful overview and critique of how indicators and rankings are used in global higher education, and how this process tends to exclude universities in the global South. They show that current approaches to measurements of global quality in higher education are problematic because they assume a universal definition of higher education and roles and functions in different types of universities that operate in diverse global contexts. They argue that the use of a standard set of indicators to assess institutional quality is inherently reductionist and narrows the conception of higher education's role by focusing on what can be measured, rather than what is meaningful to those who work and study in the institutions or engage with aspects of public good. In response to the limitations of the existing measures, they propose instead a dashboard approach to constructing indicators of universities' contributions to the public good, in terms of instrumental and intrinsic values.

The dashboard includes six broad themes in respect to the intrinsic and instrumental dimensions of universities impact on the public good. Themes in the intrinsic dimension include: solidarities in the public sphere; equity of access; and deliberative space (including measures of academic freedom, representation, student participation and dialogical pedagogy). Instrumental themes include: graduate destinations; knowledge production; and community engagement.

This approach avoids conflating the distinct elements of higher education and the public good, and allows users to observe strengths and weaknesses in different areas. It also enables the use of qualitative and quantitative measures across the various dimensions. The dashboard presents a starting point for challenging the extensive limitations of international rankings in their narrow understanding of quality, their fostering of unhealthy competition, and their impetus to performativity.

The final paper in this collection, by Siphelo Ngcwangu, reflects on experiences of doing research on higher education and the public good in South Africa. Ngcwangu studies the process of participating in a multinational research project on higher education and its role with regard to the public good, from the perspective of a research team working in South Africa. The paper explores the complexity of researching in this field and the multiple perspectives from which the sector can be studied. It explicitly positions higher education in terms of the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in which it operates. He highlights how the public good is understood by research participants in terms of higher education's role in addressing socioeconomic inequalities, and identifies various

tensions that affect this role. Ngcwangu's central argument focuses on the importance of understanding higher education and its conception in terms of the public good as contested reflections of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which it operates. He synthesises the contestations using categories identified by Louise Morley (2021) in terms of: lack and the need to catch up, which acknowledges the pressure on universities of the global South to focus on attaining global prestige as a result of the commodification of higher education globally; voice theory and the university's role in reproducing inequalities and reinforcing marginalisation; and the challenges presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and an associated shift to 'blended learning'.

Across the papers, there is no single approach to a definition of the relationship between higher education and the public good. Some writers formulate a notion of a single public good nurtured by higher education, or, alternatively, many goods from which individuals benefit. Some see this as a heterodox process, in which the public good may link with the public bad, with crucial implications for thinking carefully about social policy and education. The papers demonstrate that these contestations need to be read contextually. We cannot think of higher education and the public good without thinking about particular formations of higher education, in particular socio-economic and political settings, and how particular histories and lived relationships problematise and animate the idea of the relationship between higher education and the public good. Appreciating these contextual factors in shaping the role and functioning of higher education, and thus its relationship to the public good, is a central theme in this special issue.

Comparisons between and within countries have allowed for more nuance and depth to be built into the conceptual framing and in considering the forms of enactment by individuals and institutions in particular contexts. Collectively, the papers demonstrate that mainstream conceptualisations of higher education and the public good are underpinned by particular understandings of the nature and form of higher education and how knowledge is acquired, developed and disseminated. These abstract orientations may be very far from the reality of highly unequal, socially stratified and politically complex societies, such as those documented by the authors in this Special Issue. Thus, a reconceptualisation of the public is required for these contexts. This requires some challenge to conceptualisations of the private, given the strong obligations of individuals who come from low-income backgrounds to extended families, and the sharing of the benefits of higher education amongst their communities of origin.

A key issue is how to understand inequalities and elites. In a hypothetical globalised knowledge economy, widening participation in higher education could be a force for public and private transformation, including democratisation, and personal and economic growth. In an equally hypothetical state concerned with social services and improving the well-being of all in the society, even a small higher education system could serve the public through the graduates it produces and the research it conducts. However, such a higher education sector can also map on to elite practices and contribute to further differentiation and subjection, and indeed, objectification, of excluded social groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown both processes at work, with life-saving health research taking place in some of the universities in Kenya, South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria, accompanied by the many tensions of trying to deal with multiple inequalities and uneven distance-learning provision. These are all issues for further research and reflection as the massification and privatisation of higher education in most African countries continues, and as the process of dealing with and attempting to recover from the pandemic unfolds.

Note

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