

Taking up the challenge of implementing higher education *for the public good*

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Taking up the challenge of implementing higher education for the public good

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Is higher education for the public good still relevant in our global context where rankings, marketisation and an increasing focus on the instrumental value of higher education for economic growth often dominate at the levels of policy and practice? This timely book presents a good case for why it remains essential that all working in the higher education sector continue to interrogate the public good roles of our universities and our own practice. The purposes of higher education have been hotly debated for many years¹, and the extent to which we can and should view higher education as a public good is a central theme in these debates². Brenda Leibowitz's edited collection is refreshing in its attempt to both theoretically and practically unpack the notion of what it means for higher education to work *for the public good*. In the introduction Leibowitz explains an important nuance of the title – a nuance that places the debates raised in the book somewhat outside of the contested distinction about the extent to which higher education is indeed a public good. Instead, this book is premised on the normative assumption that universities should work *for the public good*, and particularly so in the global South. The title seeks to

convey something more intentional and deliberate. It is the idea that we can conduct the three roles of higher education – research, teaching and community interaction – in such a way that we reflect on who higher education is for, who it can serve, and how. (p.xxiii)

As such, the notion of the public good put forward in this book is 'associated with how people or groups behave' (p.xxii). In this case, people or groups refer to students and lecturers.

The book has its roots in a project run at Stellenbosch University, entitled 'Critical Professionalism' (Chapter 13) and as such, most of the authors hail from this university. Despite this apparent bias, a diverse selection of authors has contributed chapters, with perspectives from universities in the UK, Spain and the USA, as well as voices from three different South African universities. Several chapters draw on the work of Martha Nussbaum who has argued cogently for the importance of higher education – the humanities in particular – in the formation of democratic citizens.^{3,4} However, the rich traditions of several important social theorists, from different disciplines, underpin the various chapters making the book theoretically engaging. In particular, the chapters included in this collection draw on the ideas of bell hooks, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Nancy Fraser, Joan Tronto, Paulo Freire and Jurgen Habermas. Also important is the inclusion of research covering multiple disciplines, such as teacher education, social work, engineering, theology, visual arts, occupational therapy, psychology and mathematics education, as well as academic development. This multidisciplinary focus is a particular strength of the book as it provides a means for academics across disciplines to engage with the material presented and to reflect on what higher education for the public good might mean for their own practice.

The collection is presented in four parts. The first part (Chapters 1–4) tackles theoretical and policy-oriented arguments about higher education and the public good including the tensions between market responsiveness and social responsiveness; the second (Chapters 5–7) turns to the public good within an institutional context; the third (Chapters 8–12) considers teaching and learning or public good debates within the disciplines and the classroom; and the final section (Chapters 13–16) draws attention to the role of academics in fostering higher education for the public good. It is not possible to provide an overview of all 16 chapters in one review, although each has an important contribution to make to the whole. Instead, I would like to draw attention to a specific theme that runs across most chapters and which I think is of particular importance in the South African context – the role of teaching and curriculum in support of transformation and public good outcomes. It is to this theme that the remainder of this review turns.

In Chapter 4, Lange shows how the purpose of higher education 'to contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens' that is listed as one of the four purposes in the 1997 White Paper (and echoed in slightly different wording in the newly released 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training⁵) has received relatively little attention to date. She notes further that evidence shows that universities in the country have not made sufficient progress in preparing students for a democratic society, within curricular and extracurricular spaces. This challenge is taken up by several contributors who demonstrate how curriculum and teaching and learning can be used for this purpose. Walker (Chapter 6) proposes an approach to curriculum that is grounded in the human development and capabilities approaches. Drawing on research focused on the role of professionals in reducing poverty, Walker outlines an approach to curriculum that would ensure that

students would then learn not only a curriculum of knowledge and skills, but the difference between simply having knowledge and skills on the one hand and, on the other, having the commitment and values to use these to the benefit of others. (p.84–85)

A rich concrete example of the use of curriculum to encourage health sciences students to reflect on and understand their pasts and the implications thereof is shared by Nicholls and Rohleder in Chapter 9. These authors used a pedagogy of hope (also applied in Chapter 8 in the context of teacher education) to construct a curriculum that brought together final-year occupational therapy, psychology and social work students from Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape. With their vastly different histories and current contexts the selection of these two universities was intentional in an effort to bring together students who might otherwise have little knowledge of each other's contexts and experiences. The programme leaders' concern that the students' future

professional work would include interaction with clients from all racial groups and contextual backgrounds, yet their university experiences were not providing the skills needed, was the reason for constructing the course across these two different universities. The chapter presents in detail the curriculum as well as the pedagogies used and so provides a very useful case study for other academics wishing to embark on similar courses. It also demonstrates the power of participatory forms of pedagogy. Similarly, Boni et al. (Chapter 11) emphasise that *how* students learn can be more important than *what* they learn when seeking to foster cosmopolitan abilities and so also highlight the importance of participatory developmental pedagogies. Working on a global citizenship course offered to engineering students, these authors make use of the technique of moral dilemma and respectful dialogue as a means of requiring students to reflect on controversial topics within the field of development. On the basis of data collected from their students during an explorative study, Boni et al. conclude:

[M]any students showed clear indications of becoming empowered, being made aware of their capabilities and knowing they can influence what is happening, not only at the present time but also when they finish their studies and have an opportunity to put these cosmopolitan abilities into practice in their professional lives. (p.148)

Despite inspiring examples of what is possible, the reader is also provided with a realistic sense of how difficult teaching for the public good can be. Particularly vivid is the chapter by Costandius (Chapter 15) in which she presents an extremely honest personal reflection on her 'embodied and emotional' (p.199) experiences of facilitating a course on citizenship in the visual arts. In my view, this realism and willingness to recognise the tensions and difficulties faced when teaching for the public good is an important contribution that this book makes, as common reasons given for not adopting such practices are, at least to some extent, pre-empted and addressed through their explicit recognition. As Nicolls and Rohleder remind us in Chapter 9:

[T]here is no quick fix, and everyone involved (educators and learners) is required to explore their identity markers (given and chosen) in an emotionally authentic manner. There can be many conscious reasons given for not doing this type of work (e.g. timetable issues, the high staff-student ratio required), but these reasons may hide a deeper unconscious denial of the painful past. (p.125)

While recognising that it is not easy, this book calls on the university community, and particularly academics, to honestly and openly reflect on their roles in building a democratic society, through their work within universities. In support of those seeking to become critical professionals, Leibowitz and Holgate (Chapter 13) present seven aspects to take into account in building critical professionalism. In the Afterword, Leibowitz emphasises the need for safe spaces in which such work can take place because 'teaching for the public good can entail long and difficult work, and requires individuals to be prepared to experience moments of extreme vulnerability' (p.218). I strongly recommend this book and hope that more academics across disciplines will be inspired to embrace their vulnerability and take up the challenge of implementing higher education for the public good within their own contexts.

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