

ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the highly contested concept of ‘the public good’ has been at the centre of debates about the purpose of higher education. In this thesis, I explore how academics from two universities in South Africa understand this concept as it relates to higher education, their perception of academics’ role in higher education’s contribution to the public good and the conditions under which this contribution is possible. I adopted a qualitative approach to carrying out this study. I used a semi-structured interview schedule to conduct 15 in-depth, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with academics in different disciplines at a historically black and historically white university. I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to select participants for this study. I analysed the data using thematic analysis.

I found that academics’ understanding of the public good in higher education is strongly influenced by the transformation imperative of the democratic dispensation in South Africa, which emphasises addressing the injustices of the country’s colonial and apartheid pasts through redress, social justice, inclusivity, reduction of inequality, and alleviating poverty and unemployment, among other things. In terms of the role of academics, I found that academics are seen as playing multiple roles that can either be in conflict or complement each other. These include teaching, research and supervision, community engagement, activism, public intellectualism, mentoring and role modelling. These roles are not equally valued by the university, which influences academics’ decisions about which role to prioritise. Finally, I found that, in participants’ view, the transformation of higher education institutions, funding, collaboration, and academics’ personal attributes that are aligned with the vision of higher education for the public good.

These findings give us an insight into the micro-level perspective of the relationship between higher education and the public good. Moreover, this has implications for future research and transformation of higher education in South Africa. Firstly, the findings of this study imply that our understanding of how higher education and the public good connect has to be grounded in people’s real experiences, and for this to happen, researchers have to initiate a dialogue between the experiences of people on the ground and the abstract concepts in literature. Secondly, the personal qualities of academics do matter in higher education’s contribution to the public good, which is crucial for thinking about the transformation of the academic staff as not just about their racial and gender identities.