Universities, the public good and professional education in the UK

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In times of economic uncertainty, questions of the purpose and value of higher education come to the fore. Such questions have particular relevance when directed towards the preparation of professionally qualified graduates who might be expected to contribute to the public good. However, definitions of the public good are contested and the role of higher education is unclear. This interview-based study contributes to the debate by taking a professional capabilities index (PCI) generated in South Africa and interrogating it in the UK context. The PCI is oriented towards poverty reduction and is grounded in the human development and capabilities approach, an agenda to which UK respondents were broadly sympathetic although with differences in emphasis. This article argues that, if we are to move beyond a narrow economic understanding of the public good and a purely instrumental understanding of graduate 'attributes', the human development and capabilities approach has much to offer.

Keywords: higher education; public good; professional education; human development; critical pedagogy; purposes of education; qualitative research

Introduction

The study reported in this article set out to explore how a professional 'capabilities' index (PCI), first produced in South Africa (Walker et al. 2010), could be understood in the UK context and potentially applied to professional education. Behind the question is a wider set of concerns relating to the role of the university in promoting the public good (Fisher 2005; Calhoun 2006), and the preparation of professional graduates as a specific contribution. The PCI was generated through empirical research conducted in South Africa from 2008 to 2009, grounded in a concern for inequality and poverty reduction (Walker et al. 2010; McLean and Walker 2012). Theoretical perspectives are derived from the work of Amartya Sen (1992, 1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011) on human capabilities expansion and human development. An interesting question arose from Walker et al.'s (2010) research concerning the transferability of the PCI to other settings. To this end, this study takes the Index and interrogates its relevance and applicability in relation to a UK university.

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Following Nussbaum (2000, 2011) and Sen (1992, 1999), Walker et al. (2010) argue that the formation of professional capabilities (opportunities for development) and functionings (professional development achievements) contributes to the formation of professionals who are able to function in the service of people living in poverty and/or experiencing social exclusion, vulnerability and forms of disadvantage, whether in developing or developed countries. Professionals exercise agency in their work, and can strongly influence the experience of people who use health, welfare and other public services (Greener 2002). As a professional capability, an orientation to social justice may predispose professionals to act for social transformation in the direction of human development: 'For many practitioners it is this lived reality of suffering that fuels their anger at injustice and sustains their commitment to their work' (Frost and Hoggett 2008).

Walker et al. (2010) argue that professional capabilities develop as a result of a number of different factors, including family background and objective social arrangements but also, and importantly, through graduates' experiences of university teaching and learning. In the context of the commitment of South African higher education to a social transformation agenda, their work had three foci: the education of public-good professionals in South African universities; the contribution of those public-good professionals to the reduction of poverty; and the development of a PCI. Their research did not seek only to evaluate existing professional education, but also employed a future-directed application of the capability approach. Professional education was selected as the focus of investigation because it pointed inwards to institutional transformation, and outwards to social transformation. Professional education is then the 'space' in which academic research, knowledge and professionalism interface with the users and recipients of public services.

The public good and university education

We now want to consider what is meant by the 'public good' in relation to higher education. This is foregrounded in the UK research, having emerged through the South African project, which had started with a notion of 'pro-poor professionalism', shifting over the life of the project to the less paternalistic idea of public good. The 'public good' is generally conceived of in two ways. First, the term is used by economists to contrast a public good with a private good. Unlike private goods, public goods are freely and universally available. They cannot be bought or sold, no one can be excluded from using them, and the use of a public good by one person does not deplete its availability to another. A classic example of a public good in this sense is fresh air, as elaborated in Samuelson's classic 1954 paper, 'The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure'. However, the public good can be understood in a broader sense, and is infused with normative overtones. In this sense, a public good is often collective in its provision and considered a 'good thing' for society as a whole. In some cases, it can also be bought or sold and potential users can be excluded. An example of such a public good is health care. Health care services contribute to the greater good of society by raising standards of health within the general population, which in turn benefits production by improving the health of workers. However, there are also extensive and lucrative markets in private health care, while collectively funded health care often requires a system (explicit or implicit) of rationing. Education, including higher education, is similar to health care in that it is seen to be invaluable for society as a whole, yet is also a limited and sometimes costly commodity.

Calhoun (2006, 10) suggests that the public mission of universities includes: (i) offering an education that equips students for the public service professions;

(ii) directly informing debate in the public sphere and preparing citizens to participate in it; (iii) producing new technologies and other innovations; and (iv) advancing social mobility. However, recent years have seen a questioning of the balance between higher education as a public and private good in the UK, with reference to the superior earning power and life chances of graduates. The debate over whether a university education should be seen as a public or private good has been highlighted in the debate over raising university fees in English universities. On the other hand, a well-educated workforce that includes a high number of skilled graduates is considered to offer public good benefits to society as a whole, promoting economic growth. However, in recent times, whether higher education is understood primarily as a route to private advancement or to broader economic growth, it has increasingly been seen as an instrumental means to an economic end (Walker 2010).

Public or private-good professionals?

The debate over the role of higher education in relation to the public good overlaps with an increasing scrutiny of professionalism in contemporary society. Traditionally, professionals have commanded a position of high status, substantial remuneration and public respect. The professional's skills were seen as an essential contribution to the public good, to the extent that a profession was, and still is, a 'vocation' with the main *raison d'être* being to serve the public. The claim to professional practice rests on an extended education/apprenticeship resulting in a set of specialized skills and knowledge. However, the role and conduct of professionals has been questioned in recent years (Sullivan 2004). First, the professions have been scrutinized by sociologists, suggesting that professionals have been oriented to private gain as much as the public good by carving out a privileged location for themselves within the division of labour. In addition, feminist and anti-racist academics have drawn attention to the 'ways in which professionalism represents a part of societal processes that construct and sustain gender and social inequalities' (Martimianakis et al. 2009, 833). Becoming a qualified professional brings power, but a power which is questioned both by academic scholars and an increasingly well-informed lay public.

Second, the unquestioned orientation of the vocational professions to the public good is no longer taken for granted. Professional self-regulation has been proved inadequate, for example, in the failures in paediatric cardiac surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, where there was a failure to disclose the poor performance of surgeons. A key finding concerning what went wrong in Bristol was that there was a lack of teamwork between professional groups, along with strong hierarchies and occupational defensiveness (Braithwaite 2005). Sullivan (2004, 2) suggests that the public are 'worried about professionals, suspicious that they have broken faith' and have become 'self-protective and aloof from the significance of what they do'.

Public-good professional education

This situation, dubbed a 'crisis in professional responsibility' by McDowell (2000), has also called into question the contribution of universities in educating professionals who are orientated to the public good. The university's role is to produce skilled workers for the knowledge economy, so general graduate attributes are important. However, the university must also produce skilled professionals with a commitment to professional standards and codes of conduct. In the context of this debate, a number of scholars

have suggested that the university's contribution to the public good goes beyond the four functions outlined by Calhoun (2006). For example, Fisher (2005) argues that for the university to promote social mobility only through widening access policies is insufficient. Graduates are likely to become the 'advantaged' in society even if they come from a 'disadvantaged' background, and thus the university, if it is serving the public good, should be equipping graduates to advance social justice.

This argument finds its fullest expression, perhaps, in the growing literature exploring the purposes of higher education and professional behaviour in relation to the human development paradigm. As Walker (2010) argues, if professionals 'are oriented to human and social development, and in particular to develop their public or social good professional capabilities, this would be a significant contribution to poverty reduction and a more fair society' (487). It is to this area of debate and scholarship that this article now turns.

Sen's capability approach

Sen argues that:

> Development can be seen … as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focussing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with social modernisation. (1999, 3)

His capability approach to human development contrasts with previous theories of welfare economics, namely utilitarianism and subjective preferences-based approaches (see Sen 1999) in terms of how to reach decisions about what is fair regarding the distribution of scarce resources. Sen argues that there is a case for including income, commodities and resources in judging a person's advantage, but also that the procedure can be improved further by taking interpersonal differences in converting these resources into the 'capability' to live well. Individual advantage should be judged in terms of the respective capabilities which the person has, to live the way he or she has reason to value. The approach focuses on the substantive freedoms that people have, rather than on the outcomes (gross national product [GNP], rise in personal incomes, industrialization or technological advances); the concentration is upon 'freedom' (*opportunities*) and not only 'achievement' (*functionings*).

The growth of GNP is considered important as a means of expanding the freedoms enjoyed by the members of society, but other determinants, for example, social and economic arrangements, and political and civil rights, are also important. In addition to 'freedoms', Sen (1999) also asserts that development requires the removal of major sources of 'unfreedom'; for example, poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities; systematic social deprivation; over-activity of repressive states. He lists five distinct types of instrumental freedoms: political freedoms; economic facilities; social opportunities; transparency guarantees; and protective security. He stresses that these five elements interlink and add value to each other, and thus the total value of these freedoms is greater than the sum of each individual part. Each helps to advance the general capability of a person and they serve to complement each other.

His freedom-centred understanding of economics and the process of development is an agent-oriented view. With opportunities, people can effectively shape their own destiny, rather than being reliant, as passive recipients, on development programmes. Nussbaum

(2000, 2011) adds to this a list of 10 universal human capabilities and a concern above all for human dignity, whatever else a society decides it values. For both, education is central to the capability approach, and affects the development and expansion of opportunities. In terms of the education of public good professionals, individuals ought to use the benefits of education to help others, and therefore to contribute to the public good and the expansion of well-being, agency and democratic freedoms. Walker et al. (2010, 1) refer to professional capabilities formation as a 'response to the future' by producing professionals who can 'lead and change people's lives and their flourishing'.

A South African PCI

In terms of operationalizing this theoretical approach, Walker et al. (2010) interviewed students, university staff, alumni and other stakeholders and built up accounts to identify which changes to educational and social arrangements would expand professional capabilities, and which professional capabilities are valued by diverse individuals and groups. Their process of data analysis generated descriptive functionings (valuable beings and doings) which were identified by diverse actors across five professional groups (social work, engineering, public health, theology and law) in three different South African universities. From these functionings, a set of eight professional capabilities was extrapolated, which through their professional education at university graduates ought to be able to do and to choose to do whilst operating as public good professionals. In addition, the research explored the objective constraints on such professional education in the legacy of apartheid, the neo-liberal globalization of universities (Walker 2010), and the worldwide crisis of professionalism (Sullivan 2004). The South African project reviewed the education arrangements in departments, and also the wider university culture and ethos contributing to professional education oriented to transforming society and empowering professional agents. This led to the development of the PCI (Table 1).

Table 1.   List of professional capabilities, South Africa (Walker et al, 2010).

Professional capabilities	Examples of functionings
1. Informed vision	Understanding how the profession is shaped by historical and current socio-economic-political context; Able to imagine alternative social arrangements.
2. Affiliation	Care and respect for diverse people; Developing relationships and rapport across status hierarchies.
3. Resilience	Perseverance in difficult circumstances; Hopeful/fostering hope.
4. Social & collective struggle	Community empowerment approach/promoting human rights; Leading and managing social change to reduce injustice and participating in public reasoning.
5. Emotional awareness	Empathy/discernment; Self care; Integrating rationality and emotions.
6. Integrity	Acting ethically; Striving to provide high-quality public service.
7. Assurance and confidence	Having confidence to act for change.
8. Knowledge, imagination & practical skills	Being enquiring, critical, evaluative, creative and flexible; Integrating theory and practice.

What concerned us was whether or how the grounding of professional capabilities in human development as a universal concern, and capability expansion as the realization of human development in actual lives, had the potential to be relevant and useful outside the South African context.

The UK research study

This study set out to answer the following questions:

- How is the role of a UK university understood in relation to the public good, and what are the implications for professional education?
- How applicable is the professional 'capabilities' index (PCI), derived from research into professional education in South Africa, in a UK context?

The method of data collection was that of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with university staff and external stakeholders. This approach reflects the methods employed in the South Africa study, creating an opportunity for debate and discussion within a different context. As Miller and Glassner (2011, 136) write of qualitative interviews:

Table 2.   Semi-structured interview schedule.

What is your understanding of the public good?

What in your view, then, is the role of this university and its graduates in contributing to the public good?

What are the opportunities in this role for the university and its graduates?

What are the barriers to this role for the university and its graduates?

Which professional capabilities (skills, knowledge, competences and so on) are therefore most important for a professional to have in order to be able to contribute to the public good (especially to improving the lives of the vulnerable and disadvantaged in society)? In other words, what does a public-good professional need to know and to be able to do, and why? Could you reflect on each you consider important, and your reasons?

[*Then show list of 8 professional capabilities from the South Africa project*.] Please take your time and comment on this list of professional capabilities.

Are there professional capabilities which you would remove from the list (and why)?
Are there professional capabilities that are missing?

At this point, which three professional capabilities do you think are the most important and why?

In the face of budget or other constraints, which would you prioritize and why?

Additional question for lecturers:

In the light of your most important three capabilities, how does professional education in your department contribute through its educational arrangements (ethos, curriculum and pedagogy) to the formation/education of such public good professionals?

'in our experience, interviewees will tell us, if given the chance, which of our interests and formulations make sense and non-sense to them'. The interview schedule was derived from the questions asked in the South Africa project, with adaptations to the UK context (Table 2).

It is acknowledged that this was a small-scale, exploratory study, with data collection taking place in a single UK university, but this does not detract from its value as a contribution to significant debates about what universities ought to do. The university in question is a member of the UK 'Russell Group', ranking highly in national and international education league tables. The city in which the main university campus is located, on the other hand, ranks among the top third of the most deprived local authority areas in Britain. This situation is not unusual for Russell Group universities, and created an interesting context within which to address the research questions.

All three researchers were employed by the university at the time of the study, sharing the design, data collection and analysis process and the drafting of this article. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the university's research governance procedures, following the guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011). Participants were provided with full information about the study and gave written consent for the interviews to be recorded and transcribed.

Given the 'insider' status of the researchers, a reflexive approach to analysis and interpretation was essential. On the one hand, being insiders assisted with gaining access to the interview participants and establishing rapport. On the other hand, it is possible that the shared institutional context could have rendered us less probing in our questions and the analysis more prone to bias or the desire for solidarity with colleagues. As Mercer (2007) states, insider research in an educational institution is a 'double edged sword', presenting both benefits and challenges in equal measure. Acknowledging our own positioning helped us to maintain self-awareness and a critical stance.

Participants were purposively selected via the researchers' professional networks on the grounds that they would provide a varied contribution. The idea was not to generate an extensive database but rather to interrogate the professional capabilities list through a sample of relevant 'voices'. Thus, four lecturers were approached from a variety of disciplines, reflecting a range of professional identities (nursing, engineering, business and veterinary medicine). Three senior university managers (two Deans and the Director of Teaching and Learning) also accepted the invitation to participate in the study, bringing with them a further range of professional backgrounds (medicine, economics and geography). Finally, two elected councillors of the city in which the university is located were approached and asked to participate. The rationale for their inclusion was that the council has a close working relationship with the university in a number of areas relevant to the public good, and is an employer of its graduates.

In all cases, initial contact was made by telephone to explain the context of our request, followed by a more formal email with an information and consent sheet attached. The nine interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out, following the stages recommended by Charmaz (2002):

(1) Analysis (initial coding): transcripts were read closely (line by line) to explore the question 'what is happening here?'

(2) Analysis and interpretation (focused coding): frequently reappearing initial codes were grouped together in order to sort and synthesise the large amounts of data;

(3) Interpretation: overarching themes were developed from the focused codes.

While the semi-structured interview schedule used in the study did, inevitably, shape the content of the themes, we allowed space for research participants' own voices to emerge, paying particular attention to any unexpected insights that might challenge our assumptions (Boyatzis 1998). Importantly, we did not select for 'best cases', or people whom we assumed would be favourable to the public good, but rather a cross-section of respondents who might hold a view, whether positive or negative.

Respondent validity was secured by inviting feedback on the emerging analysis and list of professional capabilities from the participants, which was circulated electronically following an initial draft of this article. While respondents were generally happy with the list and the overall analysis, feedback resulted in some ongoing discussion. For example, one of the city councillors and one of the lecturers felt that a commitment to 'sustainability' should be made explicit alongside a commitment to global citizenship. However, the other councillor was strongly opposed to this as he considered that sustainability had unacceptable 'political' connotations, so the list was not changed at this stage. This debate would be interesting to explore in further studies, but the key point here is that we did not unproblematically assume support for the list of professional capabilities.

Findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts led to the development of four key themes:

- Defining the public good
- The university's role in promoting the public good
- What does a professional need and how is a professional taught?
- Respondents' views on the PCI

The first three themes relate to participants' general views on the public good, the role of the university and professional education. The final theme draws on specific comments on Walker et al.'s (2010) professional capabilities index, as developed in the South African context. Each theme is discussed in turn in the following sections, with associated illustrative quotes.

Defining the public good

Unlike the South African project, this study asked directly for perspectives on the public good, rather than developing this theme at the analysis and interpretation stage. We found that, despite a general consensus that the public good equals the greater good, there were differences in emphasis between the different groups of respondents. University staff tended to use fairly lofty examples; for example, 'I would say the public good is something that benefits mankind'. In contrast, one of the city councillors expressed a more practical understanding of the public good, grounded in the way people live together in their neighbourhoods:

> Do your garden, get your wheelie bins in, be good citizens. Know something about the area you're in and make some effort to be civilised. Don't throw too many late night parties without telling the neighbours.

This councillor shared the view that the public good is oriented towards a common good, as applied across all income groups, but should also be oriented towards addressing deprivation: 'There's a very pragmatic reason, not just a moral reason … The more unequal a society, the more dysfunctional it becomes'. Although the university staff did refer to social inequalities at various points during the interviews, none explicitly raised the issue of social deprivation when attempting to define the public good. However, there was a sense that a university education promotes wider social responsibilities:

> Within a business school the public good might be to encourage greater enterprise or greater innovation or greater profits, but it might also be to encourage greater responsibility and sustainability – both environmental sustainability and social sustainability. (University Lecturer)

The university's role in promoting the public good

Having provided their own definition of the public good, respondents were then asked to reflect upon the university's role. Several expressed an affinity with the view that the role of education is to promote human capital for economic growth: 'clearly you can't have an effective UK PLC without an educated workforce' (Director of Teaching and Learning). The majority of the staff saw the key contribution of the university as relating to knowledge generation and dissemination:

> So in terms of the greater good in our role, I think part of our role is to come up with reliable and valid knowledge that isn't opinion or hearsay. (University Lecturer)

The university should also provide an independent and critical contribution to public debate at the local, national and international levels: 'it's providing knowledge for the world' (Director of Teaching and Learning).

In addition to the role of the university in knowledge generation, several university respondents mentioned the more immediate contribution students and staff make to the local community through voluntary work. One lecturer, in particular, focused on the importance of community outreach events and a partnership with a local secondary school:

> The university is to be seen as a place where anyone is welcome to come in and study and get involved. A place where the public can come and use the facilities like sports and also the theatres and the music, the cafes – things like that. (University Lecturer)

For this particular lecturer, who came from a working-class background with no family tradition of attending university, work with local schools was very important in helping children to see 'that the background that they come from is not that different to the background I came from, and yet I've gone to university, I've got a PhD, and the barriers that they have were probably similar to the ones that I had'.

One of the city councillors also emphasized the public good role of the university in raising aspirations among local children:

> There's a lot of good work going on between universities and the communities in which, until fairly recently, very, very few people had thought about going on to higher

education. I think it has that aspirational effect on the City because we are fairly deprived … Our record, particularly in the north of the City, of people going on to higher education is very small.

Both of the city councillors commended the local universities for their community outreach work, supported by research and evaluation to support decision making within the City Council: 'there's been projects about school absence and teenage pregnancy'. The public good role of the university in relation to the local economy was emphasised by one of the councillors: 'within the City … the most important thing it can do is help create jobs in the area'. However, it was noted that jobs created by the university often went to those from outside the city, and that innovations from institutions such as the university's science park did not have 'local roll out'.

When considering the university's role in promoting the public good, the discussion sometimes turned to a consideration of the motivation of students. One of the university managers felt that students are less 'self-centred' than they were in the 1980s when she was a student:

There's still a thing of getting a good job and doing as well as you can, but there is a sense of, I think, social responsibility that has come into the way students think. There'll still be a group that want to go out and get the biggest salary they could possibly ever get, but I think there's a significant group who say 'Well, actually what I want to do is use these skills to go and help other people. If it means I don't earn mega bucks, well that's fine, because that's not what I am. That's not what my ideal in life is about. (University Dean)

In contrast, one of the lecturers took the opposite view: 'Nowadays I think the students want a degree in order to get them a better job, which wasn't what I was saying the university was fundamentally for'. In this context, it was interesting to note the comment of the lecturer who volunteered to speak with pupils at a local secondary school: the first question the pupils asked of her was 'Do you earn loads of money? How much do you earn?'

The significance of the university in educating professionals was noted by a number of the university staff, perhaps not surprisingly as the majority of respondents had a professional background themselves (for example, medicine, nursing and engineering) and/or were working in vocational schools (for example, veterinary medicine or business). Professional education was seen as an important contribution to the public good at the local and regional level:

We indirectly benefit health in the region by driving up the standard of the profession locally. The reason the Medical School was set up was because of the perceived black hole in terms of mortality and morbidity in the region. It was felt that having the School would result in a bigger pool of trained doctors who were likely, at least a reasonable number, to stay in the locality. There would be health gains from that, and that has happened. (University Dean)

Promoting ethical conduct among future professionals was also seen as a significant contribution to the public good:

Training the business people of tomorrow in ways that say 'Actually, it's not acceptable to use children or young people in your factory as slave labour …' That, to me, is a good thing. (University Dean)

Although one of the lecturers, in particular, stressed the importance of examining the construct of the 'public good' critically, there was a general consensus that 'what graduates do is go out in the world and make things a better place' (Director of Teaching and Learning).

What does a professional need and how is a profession taught?

Turning now to the specificity of professional education, when asked about the most important set of qualities or attributes needed by a professional graduate, respondents stressed above all the importance of disciplinary knowledge and skills. In addition, general attributes were identified, including critical thinking, problem solving, integrity, empathy and communication skills. Both city councillors, but none of the university staff, spoke of the importance of graduates understanding the local context:

> and the feel of the city … in terms of equipping you to work in the city, to get some of that idea about cultural diversity, about poverty, about fear of crime and families that live on the edge of crime. Having more than a book knowledge of those things is helpful.

However, one of the university respondents felt that it was difficult for both academics and students to understand what it means to live amidst crime and poverty, due to their generally more privileged positions:

> I think there are very few people on this campus that have any idea of what it's like to be poor, or indeed to be vulnerable, in a really true sense. There are people who feel vulnerable, but actually on the scale of things staff, students here, are pretty well looked after and I don't think they even know that. (University Dean)

However, while specific references to deprivation were rare among the university respondents, there was still an emphasis on understanding the needs of the people graduates would serve:

> You've got to be professional with the people in society. You've got to balance the desirability for, say, a new road which would open up industry, like the Channel Tunnel itself, and then the rail links to the Channel Tunnel. It opens up prosperity for the nation, but the people living near it are going to have a motorway pass their door. Engineers work on both sides. (University Lecturer)

University staff described a range of teaching and learning approaches designed to develop the public-good professional capacities which they saw as important. Several lecturers stressed the importance of modules which teach professional standards and the role of the profession within the wider societal context, with reference to social inequality and social responsibility. Methods employed include traditional lectures, small group learning, problem-based learning, opportunities for study abroad and practice placements.

Respondents' views of the PCI

Following the questions designed to elicit general views on universities, professional education and the public good, respondents were asked to comment on the capabilities generated by Walker et al. (2010) (see Table 1). Initially, respondents found the idea of professional capabilities quite difficult to grasp. However, once they began to read

through the functionings of each capability, most found the list to be an interesting account of what might be expected of a professional graduate. This was reflected by the relatively low number of suggestions to remove particular capabilities. In a number of cases, it was noted that it was clear that the list had been developed in a South African context, and that there were some capabilities that were clearly more relevant in that setting, or could be interpreted differently in the UK. The capability 'social and collective struggle' was not always seen as transferable to the UK context:

> Whether that has a kind of generic universal appeal, that particular terminology, I'm not sure. I would perhaps look at it in terms of social and collective action. Our graduates aren't always going to be in context of struggle necessarily – or perhaps they will be increasingly? (University Lecturer)

On the other hand, one of the city councillors saw 'social and collective struggle' as a key capability, with higher education itself contributing to the struggle: 'for people who have had disadvantaged backgrounds, education is clearly the way out'.

'Informed vision' (number 1), 'knowledge imagination and practical skills' (number 8) and 'integrity' (number 6) were regarded as the most important capabilities by the majority of respondents. These were seen as architectonic, or forming a basis upon which the other five capabilities may be built. To an extent they were seen as obvious, or taken for granted, with the first two seen as closely linked or interdependent. In particular, interviewees felt that without specific disciplinary knowledge and skills to understand the problem, a graduate would be unable to function effectively in their chosen profession, and certainly would not be effective in improving the public good. With respect to 'informed vision', there was broad agreement from respondents that, whilst graduates require in-depth knowledge about their own domain, they also need an understanding of context, and 'how societies work' (University Lecturer). Respondents highlighted the importance of understanding how a profession has been shaped, in order to 'have a critical and social and economic and political understanding of your domain' (University Lecturer).

Of the generic and practical skills referred to by university staff, greatest emphasis was put upon the development of critical thinking skills. It was noted that graduates who are enquiring, critical, evaluative, flexible and effective problem solvers are able to make a bigger contribution to society, 'to recognise that there's always a different way of doing something, so problem solving and critical thinking' (University Lecturer). An additional observation was that a graduate does not leave university as the 'finished article', and will continue to develop within a professional setting. Upon graduation, they may be unlikely to be in a position to make a large contribution to the public good, and it is only once they put their knowledge and skills into practice over a period of time that they will be in a position to fulfil their potential. This point was clearly made by one of the councillors, who doubted the ability of a young graduate to contribute to the complex processes of community empowerment (an element of Capability 4) because this is 'bloody complex stuff'.

All those interviewed saw integrity as a critical capability in order for graduates to be able to have a positive impact upon the public good: 'you need to be credible through the integrity' (University Dean). Interviewees raised issues of personal integrity and honesty (asking whether this can be taught), as well as broader responsibility and accountability to communities, colleagues and customers:

> We don't want to send them out in a moral vacuum. They have these skills and these abilities and these capabilities to actually manage, but we want them to be aware of the consequences of their decisions, and how they think about those things. (University Lecturer)

Within the faculties of medicine, engineering and social science, interviewees highlighted specific courses and modules which tackle issues of integrity. However, respondents noted that, even with an emphasis on integrity within degree courses, there are graduates who do not buy into these ideals. In very well-paid professions, it was acknowledged that there will be graduates whose main motivation is private benefit, rather than the public good.

Some additions or changes in emphasis to the South African list were suggested. One of the lecturers, whose responsibilities included overseeing the international activities within her school, emphasised the importance of a global perspective: 'I suppose it's around developing a sense of global citizenship. I think that sense of wider, global perspective is the key capability, actually'. Rather than suggesting additional capabilities, two lecturers stated that they would change the wording and significance attached to particular areas; for example:

> If I was drawing up this list myself, I would play up a sociological and ethical understanding of the societies around us. Some of these individual points are certainly coming from that, but I would emphasise them more. (University Lecturer)

Finally, one of the respondents noted that the list of capabilities, although based upon the values of human development, could be interpreted in different ways:

> Somebody who is a member of the BNP would have confidence and would believe in what they're saying and can argue it quite effectively. It doesn't mean to say they're right, or they're necessarily doing public good, but they might have in their mind an informed vision. They've got an affiliation, they will often have resilience, it is to them a social and collective struggle. (University Dean)

This response emphasizes that the capabilities, while valuable, should be examined and applied critically; the rooting in human development values is critical. The PCI is not just any list of professional attributes, but one of multidimensional professional *capabilities* based on the human development values of well-being, agency and participation.

Discussion

Overall, the professional capabilities list was received with interest by the UK respondents. Indeed, one of the lecturers suggested he might use the PCI in a module designed to educate engineering students on their professional responsibilities. Nonetheless, there is a clear possibility for slippage as well. It was surprising that the value of 'knowledge' was accepted more or less uncritically, given the contemporary critique of hegemonic professional knowledge (Sullivan 2004) and the fact that knowledge (or 'science') is not value-free. Knowledge can be harnessed to the 'public bad', such as the construction of weapons of mass destruction, as well as to the public good.

The ease with which respondents discussed the PCI suggests that this approach to thinking about professional 'beings and doings' is not something completely new. Indeed, all UK university courses are required to prepare graduates according to the

descriptors – a form of list – outlined in the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's framework for higher education qualifications (QAA 2008). Arguably, however, a Sen and Nussbaum language of 'capabilities' was not necessarily what was understood in a deep and rich way as respondents considered the PCI. As Sen (1999) himself has remarked, the notion of 'capability' has an everyday meaning, which can open it to easy domestication if the idea is not situated in clear values and university public good purposes.

It is interesting, and perhaps not surprising, that the emphasis UK respondents place on knowledge and critical thinking is completely in tune with the QAA's emphasis on these descriptors of 'graduate-ness'. However, Walker et al.'s (2010) PCI goes beyond the descriptors of the QAA with respect to its orientation to the public good and core human development values. Nonetheless, what is encouraging is the willingness of the UK respondents to consider this approach, despite a higher education policy context in the UK where neo-liberal policy pressures to form human capital are strong (Walker 2012). In South Africa, in contrast, a public good and equity discourse survives, albeit now under some pressure. Moreover, the project asked an explicit question about the public good, which may have encouraged respondents to want to acknowledge more altruistic motivations. On the other hand, there is the argument that we should respect the accounts people give of themselves, assume that respondents are able to think for themselves rather than be influenced by an interviewer to say what she may want to hear, and recognize the persistence in universities of public good commitments even in the teeth of policy which drives in the opposite direction. In this light, it is perhaps less surprising that university staff seemed to embrace an ethical discourse of the public good, positioning themselves as champions despite the financial and other constraints to which universities are subjected.

This discourse was, to some extent, challenged in the responses of the city councillors, who conceptualised the public good as something much more local and grounded in the daily life of the city. Although the university staff did refer to social inequalities during the interviews, none explicitly raised the issue of social deprivation when attempting to define the public good, unlike the city councillors. Deprivation is, perhaps, less visible in the UK than in South Africa, where absolute poverty sits side by side with great wealth. However, social inequality is no less corrosive in the UK context (Dorling 2011). With the exception of one lecturer who volunteered at a local secondary school, the university staff had little to say on disadvantaged local conditions. In contrast to the South African respondents, who often undertook outreach projects in the townships, the UK university staff spoke more of students travelling abroad to work with deprived populations than venturing into their local city to work with its disadvantaged communities. There was a concern that the life experience of most of the university's undergraduates would not enable them to understand poverty and deprivation.

Walker et al. (2010) suggest that a public-good professional capabilities approach is helpful for situational analysis, curriculum development and curriculum and programme evaluation. Such an approach, or evaluation framework, would allow the principles of human development to be embedded in programme outcomes, arguably extending both the professional standards set by the regulatory bodies and the general descriptors established by the QAA. Good professional codes can provide an opening to debate, but attention to capabilities and functionings embeds any such code in struggles against inequality and injustice which is often lost or obscured in professional regulation. Our approach might provide UK academics with a more critical

Table 3.   Draft professional capabilities list, UK.

1.	Knowledge, imagination and practical skills
2.	Informed vision
3.	Integrity and ethical awareness
4.	Commitment to global citizenship
5.	Orientation to social and collective action
6.	Skills to communicate with people from all walks of life
7.	Resilience, emotional awareness, assurance and confidence

and theoretically grounded orientation to the public good, in keeping with their professional world-view and in defence of progressive higher education policy. This may become increasingly important in the light of the publication of the UK White Paper, 'Higher Education: students at the heart of the system' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011), which further strengthens an instrumental human capital purpose for university education; universities effectively become the means for knowledge economies to grow, without asking what such growth is for and who benefits.

Overall, there were indications that a change in emphasis might be appropriate for the UK context. Extrapolating from the desirable functionings noted by our respondents, a revised UK version of the public-good professional capabilities list for further debate might look something like the one outlined in Table 3.

Of course, given the small-scale nature of this study, we do not suggest this is prescriptive in any way; indeed we would be disappointed if the table were to be read in this way. Rather, it is a tool to open up a wider and, we think, richer discussion about professional education. Our exploratory study further raises questions of reliability and validity. The research is undoubtedly limited by its confinement to one UK university, as different accounts of the role of universities in relation to the public good may be generated from diverse institutions. Perakyla (2011) makes the point that validity is particularly difficult to ascertain in qualitative interviews because people may produce different accounts depending on the situational context, and may indeed provide accounts that are specific to the interview situation itself. This could have happened in the research project under consideration, as university employees (arguably) have a vested interest in presenting a public account of themselves and their institution as champions of the public good. Nevertheless, the research has resulted in a tentative adjustment and realignment of the Index as generated in South Africa, and offers a starting point for further, more extensive research in the UK. Future research should involve a broader range of stakeholders, including students and alumni, and might also include the analysis of documents and policies.

Conclusion

We have not produced a fully fleshed out list of capabilities as in Walker et al.'s study (see Walker 2011). However, our findings offer a useful starting point for dialogue about human development values and principles and capability expansion as an approach to pedagogy, curriculum and graduate learning outcomes. Such an approach offers a timely alternative to the direction of much higher education policy. As there is

little sense of an orientation to the public good beyond the narrow human capital perspective in current UK policy, this is the moment for those in higher education who are broadly in sympathy with Sen and Nussbaum's vision of the public good to marshal their arguments.

In conclusion, this illustrative and 'dialogic' study has found that the professional capabilities approach has a potential application in the UK context. The limitations of the study are acknowledged, in that the number of respondents is small, and the opinion of staff of only one institution has been canvassed. In selecting respondents, a distinction was made between university managers (senior academics with university-wide roles) and lecturers working in individual schools. However, little difference has been found in the tone and scope of their responses, suggesting that there might be a university-wide academic discourse oriented to the public good. The choice of elected city councillors to represent a 'stakeholder' voice has proved fruitful, with subtle but illuminating differences in responses. The findings of this study are sufficiently promising to support an argument for further research on this topic in the UK higher education context, involving a larger number of higher education institutions and a larger and more diverse group of stakeholders, including students and graduates themselves.

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