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Capabilities That Matter Most for Disadvantaged Students in South African Universities

Abstract

Inequality and inequity of outcomes persist in South African higher education despite policies to redress the effects of apartheid, which segregated black people from accessing good quality education. Policy in higher education uses the concept 'historically disadvantaged' in its interventions aimed to address inequality but the desired outcomes have not been achieved as higher education institutions particularly universities seem to struggle to create conducive environments for all students to participate successfully. Lack of clarity on what needs to be addressed and prioritised could be blamed for the ineffective interventions. Using the capability approach as advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the paper identifies the most significant capabilities for student disadvantage, which universities should focus on in their interventions. This paper draws from semi-structured qualitative interviews from 26 diverse students from one South African university to argue that when students lack the financial income, affiliation and personal tenacity and hard work capabilities, their lives were affected the most. To that end, it is recommended that higher education institutions should prioritise to address these capabilities to ensure equal access, participation and success for all students.

Keywords: capabilities, disadvantage, higher education, equality, social justice, South Africa

Introduction

The South African higher education experiences persistent inequalities despite policy interventions aimed to create equal access, participation and success of students. The post-1994 democratic governments introduced reforms to redress the effects of apartheid's policies that segregated the non-white races from accessing good quality education and participating in the economy. In doing so, higher education policy uses the concept 'historically disadvantaged', a term that has never been defined in policy documents, in its interventions to address these disparities. This is through widening participation of black students in universities, offering academic support programmes to underprepared black students and providing financial support to deserving but financially disadvantaged black students (Department of Education, 1997). While such strategies have been adopted, the interventions have not achieved the desired results. Participation and success of students is skewed in favour of white students, for example participation rate is at 16% for African compared to 50% of white students while completion rates stood at 55% for African and 65% for white students in the three-year degree programmes in 2016 (Council on Higher Education, 2018). This raises questions on the appropriateness of the strategies adopted, especially those seeking to redress historical 'disadvantage' by policy. Despite the frequent use of 'disadvantage' by policy, there is lack of clarity on the meaning of the term. As a result, some

universities prioritise addressing what policy did not intend to focus on when others and faculties within same universities adopt different definitions of the term (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015). This contributes to ineffective interventions in universities and hence perpetuates the existing inequality and social injustices in higher education.

The capability approach

This paper adopts the capability approach as advanced by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) to understand disadvantage in higher education and identifies the critical dimensions that interventions need to concentrate on. Central to the capability approach is that when measuring interpersonal advantage, we do so using the opportunities individuals have to achieve in higher education and not through their income. This is due to the fact that the income is a means to an end, which is wellbeing; and therefore does not show the quality of life one has (Sen, 1999). Key to the capability framework are 'capabilities' which are the 'freedoms' or 'effective opportunities' students have, and 'functionings, the achievements made from the opportunities' (Robeyns, 2017, p. 39). The individuals' abilities to turn the resources into accomplishment is influenced by the conversion factors, that is the personal and environmental factors enabling or constraining individuals from achieving what they have a reason to value (Robeyns, 2017).

Another aspect of the capability approach is agency which refers to one's ability to make autonomous decisions to act and effect change (or not act) to achieve certain goals (Sen, 1999). Advantage is when students have a wider set of capabilities and agency to convert resources into functionings, and the converse is true. The capability approach has been adopted in this paper for it focusing on individual students' wellbeing and not their income, recognising student diversity such as race, gender and socio-economic status and how these interact together; and paying attention to constraining or enabling factors affecting students' lives (Robeyns, 2017). The approach enables us to have a multidimensional and complex understanding of disadvantage through showing how students' lives are affected through lacking certain effective opportunities.

Literature review

Using the capability approach, studies have investigated students' experiences in higher education to promote equity and social justice in South Africa. For example, in her study on student transition from schooling and access to university Wilson-Strydom (2015) establishes the following capabilities that students value: being able to think reasonably and critically in one's studies; being able to learn and apply knowledge to different situations; having educational resilience; having social relations and networks; treating others with respect and dignity and recognition, language competence and confidence; and having emotional health. Mutanga (2019) reveals that students with disabilities value being able to move freely in the classrooms, being treated with dignity and recognition, and having their identity, culture and voice recognised. Although these studies use the capability approach in understanding students' experiences, they do not focus specifically on defining disadvantage. In his study Gore (2018) demonstrates that disadvantage is complex

and multidimensional and constitutes the following capability dimensions: financial income; being able to think critically about knowledge, being able to participate in class and having ones' voice heard, having mental and emotional health, having self determination to work hard and rebounding despite the hardships, being able to get employment after graduating, having empathy and appreciating diversity, and being able to move safely to and from the campus. These capabilities are important for student disadvantage and what needs to be emphasised is that they intersect to improve or worsen students' lives at the university.

While Gore's (2018) study presents a general list of capabilities that disadvantage students, these capabilities are not weighted and do not tell us which capabilities do matter most for students to have equal opportunities to succeed at the university. This paper fills this gap and attempts to identify the most significant capabilities for student disadvantage, which universities ought to prioritise and promote to ensure equal participation and success of students. The argument presented in this paper is that it might be difficult for universities to provide all the capabilities that students value at the same time. This is especially true considering the context of South Africa which has high inequality in its society but limited resources. Identifying the most important capabilities for student disadvantage is therefore pertinent for targerted and effective interventions to promote equal participation and fairer outcomes among diverse students.

Methodolody

The findings in this paper are based on empirical data from semi-structured qualitative interviews obtained from 26 honours and final years students from diverse backgrounds in one South African middle ranked and historically white university. The study drew students from four university departments which were selected to ensure diversity. The semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed before coding, thematic and conceptual analysis and identification of all the capabilities that students valued and these have been listed above (Gore, 2018). The weighting of the capabilities in this paper is based on what participants indicated that they valued in higher education, that is, all the capabilities that emerged from students experiences. A further evaluation of these capabilities was done to establish the most significant ones, which when not present, students lives are affected the most.

The most significant capabilities for student disadvantage

The financial income, affiliation, and personal tenacity and hard work emerged as the most significant capabilities that students value for equal participation and success.

Financial income capability

The evidence from the data shows that without the capability of financial income, students cannot access and participate effectively in university activities. Botle, who is an orphan explains:

> I struggled to register at the university because my grandparents [who took care of me] did not have money. I got accepted by the university in 2010 soon after my matric but I could not enroll because I did not have the tuition money. So instead, I

got a job until 2012 when I was awarded a bursary by the Department of Education.
(Botle, black, female, Honours in Education)

Botle's case, shows us how disadvantage plays out when students do not have sufficient finances for their studies. Given that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme bursary was not adequately funding all deserving students at that time, Botle could not access university when she completed her schooling in 2010, and only managed to secure funding two years later. This means that without this capability she would not have accessed the university at all, since her family could not afford to pay for her to attend university. Her case represents that of many black students from low-income backgrounds who meet the entry requirements for university but fail to enrol due to lack of funding. The point to be emphasised here is that without the capability, students cannot access the university environment to develop other capabilities. Even when they accessed university, most students from low-income and the emerging black middle class experienced financial hardships when their parents could not afford basic needs such as accommodation, transport fees, food, clothing, textbooks, airtime and toiletries. During their undergraduate studies, the findings show that some students also dropped out of university because they could not afford university tuition, meaning that lacking the capability of adequate finance disadvantages students.

Although the new policy on free university education introduced in South Africa in 2018 exempts low-income students whose families earn below R350 000 per annum from paying university tuition, the funding only benefits those who enrolled since the beginning of that year, to the exclusion of those who had already registered. Finally, financial income is a meta-capability because it also fosters the capability of socio-psychosocial and mental health. The results reveal that students tended to be stress free when the financial income capability was present but were often worried during its absence, which diminished their opportunities to succeed.

Affiliation capability

In addition to the above, affiliation seems to be vital to students' success. The evidence suggests that the capability helps students to develop other capabilities. Students tended to perform better when they were affiliated with social and religious groups and when they had open relationships with their lecturers. These social interactions created conditions for students to receive academic, emotional and psychological support, along with enhancement of their confidence. Hendrick felt comfortable to approach lecturers and peers, which helped him to perform better in his studies:

I had good relationships with my lecturers and I visited them especially when I needed information on assignments and what to expect on the oncoming tests. I approached lecturers to ask them what they thought were important areas for the module and they indeed helped me. (Henrick, white, male, Honours in Agricultural Economics)

The point to make here is that when students have social and academic support from family, peers, and lecturers, they are better prepared to overcome the conversion factors that make them vulnerable to poor academic performance and dropping out. The capability remains crucial in their learning, consequently positioning it as one of the essential capabilities. As social interactions inherently

characterise teaching, universities should foster the development of this capability amongst the students. To be lacking in the affiliation capability implies that students cannot achieve the primary goal of attending university, which is to acquire knowledge and develop critical thinking skills. This positions the affiliation capability as architectonic in higher education and in our understanding of disadvantage.

Personal tenacity and hard work capability

The data from the interviews demonstrate that most of the low-income black students experienced the clustering of disadvantages. What makes the capability critical for disadvantage is that these students overcame the difficulties that threatened their opportunities to progress and graduate. Additionally, it matters most because of its emphasis on students' abilities to recover and complete their studies after failing some of their first and second-year modules. Unarine who attended a township school that offers poor quality education accounts:

> *My first year was a bad one. I wasn't performing well. At some point I thought that I should just quit varsity because I was failing my modules. I repeated two or three modules before passing them. I didn't know much about lecture consultation hours and the importance of tutorials. I slowly got used to the system in my department and received the second-year best student award in my second year.* (Unarine, black, female, Honours in Education)

This is related to the agency students had, that is the self-efficacy and beliefs they had in accomplishing the things thay have a reason to value. Bandura (1994) asserts that individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy are likely to accomplish the things they have a reason to value because they attribute their failure to insufficient effort and lack of knowledge. This results in them working hard as personal accomplishments reduce their stress and contribute to their greater wellbeing. This means that after failing their modules, these students rebounded and worked harder, resulting in them passing their modules.

The low-income (black) students' success is attributed surprisingly partly to their low-income backgrounds, responsibilities to take care of siblings, and the need to improve their situations and future lives. Palesa observes:

> *The hardships from my family background helped me to become strong and I knew that I had to work hard. I knew that I had a brother and a sister to take care of. So, I wanted to graduate so that I can change their lives too. When I was growing up, I learnt that things are not going to come to me but I had to fetch them. So far, I have reached the level that I wanted to be.* (Palesa, black, female, Honours in Psychology)

Students' determination to succeed can be formidable and is certainly admirable. The capability is closely related to being able to aspire when students envisage better lives in their futures. Bandura (1994) explains this through role modelling, that is when one sees other people with similar backgrounds succeeding through their efforts. For example, Katleho a black male student enrolled for the BEd programme because teachers were respected in his community. He believed that it was through working hard and graduating that he would attain the same level of respect as his teachers.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that universities should foster the capability of personal tanacity among the low-income groups so that they can overcome the challenges they face in the university environment they are unfamilar with. Lessons can therefore be drawn from the experiences of low-income black students who successfully completed their degree programmes, and these skills can be enhanced to other low-income students in their first year of university. Equally important, universities should enhance the economic capability for students to access, participate and succeed in their studies through financial support to the needy students. Finally, the affiliation capability should be fostered through universities promoting students to participate in university social events such as sporting activities and religious groups so that they establish social network for support. Pedagogical practices that promote interactions between the students themselves and with lecturers are also key aspects of affiliation which universities should promote. This can be accomplished through encouraging students to be open-minded and value different views; employing teaching practices that promote peer learning and group work amongst diverse students; and promoting interactive learning.

In conclusion, this paper has identified the effective freedoms students valued, which the university ought to address for equal participation namely; economic stability, affiliation and personal tenacity. Although other capabilities are important as reflected in the literature, this paper highlighted the capabilities that when students do not have them, they are most affected and are unlikely to graduate and achieve what they have a reason to value in higher education. It has also recommended on how the universities should foster these most significant capabilities among all students. In this paper, the capability approach has allowed us to examine disadvantage beneath the surface, and more particularly to establishing which areas should university prioritise for interventions. The paper also shows that the capability approach deviates from the deficit approach, which conceptualises students as lacking, through recognising the role of students' agency to make decisions and employ strategies to overcome the clustered disadvantages.

Acknowledgements

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