

University access for social justice: a capabilities perspective

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The closely related, but often contradictory, issues of increasing access to university and improving students' chances of success in their university studies have been and continue to be an important research focus within higher education studies and policy in South Africa and beyond. More recently, the challenge of under-preparedness of students entering university has gained prominence as universities struggle to increase their throughput rates. It can be argued that increasing access, without increasing chances of success, is becoming a new form of social exclusion within higher education. This paper proposes that approaching issues of access from a capabilities perspective (as developed by Amartya Sen) provides a means of fostering access for social justice and countering access that leads to social exclusion. As such, this is a theoretical paper building on existing work on the capabilities approach within education to argue that the notion of capabilities provides a useful theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding the complexities of meaningful access to university in a deeply divided society like South Africa.

Keywords: access; capabilities; higher education; social justice

“The power to do good almost always goes with the possibility to do the opposite”

(Sen, 1999:xiii)

Setting the scene

The South African higher education policy context, since the early 1990s, has supported increasing and broadening access to university study as well as the promotion of social justice in the system. This commitment is reflected in a range of policy and legislative reforms such as the National Plan for Higher Education and the Education White Paper 3 that presented a Programme for Higher Education Transformation (Ministry of Education 2001; Ministry of Education, 2007). The policy and legislative environment has translated into many visible changes in the sector. For example, in terms of increasing access (massification) the system in 2007 enrolled 761,090 students compared to 525,000 in 1994 and 394,700 in 1990 (Council on Higher Education, 2004: 61; Council on Higher Education, 2009:19). Thus, the headcount enrolment in higher education has almost doubled between 1990 and 2007. From an equity perspective, there has been an increase in the proportion of African students enrolling in higher education from 40% of enrolment in 1993 to 63% in 2007 (Council on Higher Education, 2004: 62; Council on Higher Education, 2009:18). Given statistics such as this, it is tempting to assume that the sector is performing well in terms of both increasing and broadening university access and that social justice gains have been made.

Yet, nationally, the participation rate in higher education remains at 16.3% which is somewhat below the national target of 20% (Council on Higher Education, 2010:3). Further, in the national cohort study of the year 2000, it was shown that of the group of first-time entering students only about 30% had graduated within five years, 14% of students were still

registered and 56% had ‘dropped out’ or were no longer active in the system (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). The picture is even bleaker when broken down by ‘race’¹ groupings. While the overall higher education participation rate is 16.3%, the participation rate for white young people between the ages of 20 and 24 years is 60% compared to only 12% for black young people in the same age range (Council on Higher Education, 2009:19). A consideration of graduation trends shows that the percentage of students graduating within five years is approximately double for white students compared to black students (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007:17).

These challenges are not only a ‘race’ issue, but reflect the complex web of social injustices related to students’ socio-economic contexts. The recent review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) highlighted that of the NSFAS students who were not currently studying, a total of 72% have dropped out and only 28% have graduated (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010:xiv). The debt recovery rate for NSFAS loans is low and it was reported that by 2009 the number of blacklisted NSFAS borrowers had reached 10,000 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010:xviii). Research has shown that even when students qualify for NSFAS loans that many are still not able to cover basic living costs once their student fees have been paid (Jones *et al.*, 2008:31). In the words of the current Minister of Higher Education and Training, “[T]his represents not only a deep disappointment and a tragic lost opportunity for individual students and their families, but it is also a loss for our national development potential and a waste of talent and scarce resources” (Nzimande, 2010:5).

Given this deeply divided context, the author embarked on a research project to understand the experience of transition to university (access) from the perspective of school learners and first-year university students. Emerging empirical results have been reported elsewhere (see Wilson-Strydom, 2010; Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to advance a theoretical argument for considering access to university as an issue of social justice, as articulated in Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach. As such, the paper reflects theoretically on the following three questions:

1. Has social justice in higher education been enhanced through an increase in access?
2. To what extent are new forms of social exclusion and injustices in higher education being created in the name of access?
3. Does the capabilities approach provide a useful theoretical and conceptual basis for understanding this access dilemma and working towards access for social justice?

While much has been written about access to higher education in South Africa, “the issues we are grappling with in the field of access and performance are ideologically problematic, conceptually complex and deeply embedded in the struggle for social justice and global competitiveness. They will probably dominate educational debates for some years to come” (Council on Higher Education, 2010:53). Although the capabilities framework has been widely applied in a variety of education and development contexts, to date, this powerful theoretical approach has not been used as a means of conceptualising the complexities of access to South African higher education. This paper seeks to address this gap, and hopefully, open up new spaces for debate and practice in this difficult terrain.

The capability approach explained

The capability approach is not a theory of social justice, but rather a normative framework that can be used to guide understandings of individual well-being and social arrangements in a

manner that explicitly supports a striving for just outcomes (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Alkire & Deneulin, 2009b). It is also not a theory that seeks to explain inequality or well-being, but rather a “tool and a framework within which to conceptualise and evaluate these phenomena” (Robeyns, 2009:94). At its core, the approach is about focusing on what people are effectively able to do and to be, i.e. their capabilities (Sen, 1979; Sen, 1985a; Sen, 1999).

The capability approach was pioneered during the 1980s and 1990s by Amartya Sen, and further developed by Martha Nussbaum. Sen, a Nobel Prize winning economist and philosopher, sought to provide an alternative to the dominant utilitarian and neo-liberal approaches to development and well-being. One of the practical outcomes of his work has been the Human Development Index (HDI) that is widely used in development studies and in comparing relative human development levels of countries. The capability approach has a wide disciplinary audience and application, or in Sen’s words “[there are a] plurality of purposes for which the capability approach can have relevance” (Sen, 1993:49). In providing an introduction to the capability approach, it is useful to begin with two of the key concepts on which the framework is built, namely (1) functionings and (2) capabilities (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Hart, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1993; Sen, 1999). It is recognised that the capability approach terminology (with its roots in economics and philosophy) employs terms that are not always intuitively clear to a multidisciplinary audience. For this reason, specific examples related to education and higher education have been included in order to ground the concepts in the practical context of an educational setting.

The first key concept to explore is that of *functionings* which can be defined as achieved outcomes, the things that a person is able to be or to do. At a broad level, functionings encompass, for example, being adequately nourished, being employed, being literate, doing a job that is meaningful and fulfilling. If we consider education or higher education more specifically, functionings would include, for example, being able to read, being able to take part in university life, or being able to pass an examination and being awarded a qualification. Another important element of the concept of functionings is that it refers to outcomes that a person values or has reason to value; i.e. individual choice (agency) and the need for this to be explicitly recognised. An achievement or outcome is not a functioning if it is not something that is valued by the person concerned (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009:32). For example, a young man who has just completed an accounting qualification at the instruction of his father, despite the fact that he is a passionate and talented painter who wished to study fine arts, would not necessarily view his accounting qualification as a functioning or an achievement that he as reason to value. The second key concept, the notion of *capabilities*, combines the concept of functionings with opportunity freedom. Capabilities are the freedom a person has to enjoy valuable functionings (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Deneulin, Nebel & Sagovsky, 2006; Sen, 1979; Sen, 1999). Put very simply, “A functioning is an achievement [outcome], whereas a capability is the ability to achieve [potential]” (Sen, 1985b:48; see also Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:4).

The distinction between capabilities and functionings is critical, because understanding outcomes/achievements only does not necessarily provide sufficient information to understand how well someone is really doing in terms of their personal wellbeing. Consider the following fictional example of two young women who both achieve a second class pass in their undergraduate commerce programme (adapted from Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:4-5, and drawing on the author’s experience working with students). The first young woman, Judy, attended a middle-class suburban high school and came from a reasonably affluent home. Her father had

not been to university as he took over the family business when he completed school. Her mother was a high school teacher. Although Judy had a trainee manager job available at her father's company on completing school, she decided that she wished to experience university before commencing her working life. She did not need to achieve high marks as her future was secure in the family business, so she made the most of all the social opportunities available at university. Her schooling had also equipped her relatively well for the demands of university and she enjoyed the discussions and debates in class, but she spent only the minimum time possible on her studies due to her social commitments. The second young woman, Bernita, grew up in a semi-urban township area. Her family was very poor; her father was unemployed and her mother worked as a domestic worker. The township school she attended was very poorly resourced and there was little commitment to teaching and learning. None the less, Bernita was strong academically and with a lot of hard work and studying until late at night she managed to meet the entrance criteria to university on completion of her Grade 12. She was the only learner from her school to go to university. Once at university, she found it difficult to fit in with many peers coming from a different social class to hers. The poor quality of teaching at her school did not prepare her well for discussions in class nor for her written work. At school she was mostly able to talk in Sesotho, her mother tongue, (although she learned in English) so she was anxious about speaking English at university and was unwilling to venture an opinion in class or when doing group work. Bernita worked very hard while at university, but lacked confidence in her abilities and tended to blame herself for poor performance. As a result she was anxious to ask her lecturers for additional support. Despite these very different experiences and learning trajectories, both young women obtained a commerce degree.

Although the educational outcome is the same (a commerce degree), the capability sets of Judy and Bernita differ tremendously. Considering only the educational outcome thus masks areas of injustice and inequality that should be tackled. Understanding differences in capabilities such as those highlighted in this fictional example are of particular importance in seeking to increase access to university in a manner that builds a socially just university environment. "The capability approach requires that we do not simply evaluate functionings [outcomes] but the real freedom or opportunities each student had available to choose and to achieve what she valued. Our evaluation of equality must then take account of freedom in opportunities as much as observed choices. The capability approach, therefore, offers a method to evaluate real educational advantage, and equally to identify disadvantage, marginalisation, and exclusion" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:5).

This identification of educational disadvantages, marginalisation and exclusion opens up a space for action towards the overall aim of social justice within higher education, and in the context of this paper, is specifically related to creating meaningful opportunities for access with success. "The quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what he or she achieves, but also of what options the person has had the opportunity to choose from." (Hart, 2009:392, quoting Sen, 1999:45).

The capability approach and educational research

The potential of the capability framework within the field of education has been noted by an increasing number of authors in recent years. Unterhalter and Walker (2007:251) conclude their book on the capability approach and education with the following statement: "it is important to acknowledge the genuinely radical ideas for education in the capability approach — not only its concern with heterogeneity and actual living out of valued lives, but also its call

for both redistribution of resources and opportunities and recognition and equal valuing of diversity along intersecting axes of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, disability, age and so on. It thus integrates distributional, recognitional and process elements of justice”.

Several authors have made use of the capability framework for researching education and these studies have demonstrated the conceptual depth that this approach provides (for some examples see Hart, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006; Saito, 2003; Lanzi, 2007; Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Terzi presents an argument for why the capability to be educated should be seen as a fundamental entitlement and thus that the provision of quality education for diverse learners is a matter of social justice (Terzi, 2007). She also presents a possible list of basic capabilities required to ensure the achievement of educational functionings or outcomes. These include, amongst others, literacy, numeracy, learning dispositions, and practical reasoning (Terzi, 2007:37). The capabilities approach has been used in critical considerations of the injustices present in the widening participation discourse and policy in the United Kingdom (Watts & Bridges, 2006) and to advance an argument for why post-secondary education is critical for low-income women with children because of what it enables them to be and to do (Deprez & Butler, 2007). Walker presents the capabilities approach as a framework for evaluating higher education pedagogy and student learning within the context of the social and pedagogical arrangements which influence the possibilities for equality in learning opportunity (Walker, 2006; Walker, 2008). Hart (2009) explores the spaces and new directions that the capability approach potentially opens up for philosophy of education research. She also makes specific reference to understanding higher education from a capabilities point of view noting that:

“when looking at what a person is able to be or do this encompasses (but is not restricted to) looking at what a person has. For example, a young person may be able to gain a university place providing they achieve certain qualifications (having). However, their capability to achieve the functioning of ‘doing’ going to university is contingent on the individual being able to operate effectively in that environment socially, psychologically and from a practical point of view. For example, an individual may risk being alienated from family and friends if they come from a social milieu in which participating in higher education is not the norm. This in turn may affect whether they take up and maintain their university place. The capability approach draws our attention to the myriad of complex social, personal and environmental factors which affect what a person is able to (and chooses to) do and be” (Hart, 2009:395) .

Structure, agency and capability: implications for understanding access

As noted above, the concept of agency, which is the ability of a person to realise the goals they value and have reason to value, also plays a key role in the capability approach. Sen (1999:19) defines an agent as follows: “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well.” He then continues by noting that his “work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions” (Sen, 1999:19).

The capability approach argues that in a just world social structures or social organisations should expand people’s capabilities — their freedom to achieve what they value doing and being. Capabilities (opportunity freedoms) and functionings (achievements) are influenced by individual circumstances, relationships with others, social conditions and contexts which create

spaces for opportunities to be realised. The capability approach emphasises the basic heterogeneity of individuals as a key aspect of educational equality and provides a conceptual framework for connecting individual life histories with social and collective arrangements (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Social norms and opportunities can expand or diminish one's agency. Often social norms construct disadvantages, even where public resources are equally distributed (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:9). Inequality is evident when people have different capability sets (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Thus while agency is an important element of the approach, it is recognised that individual functionings are influenced by one's relative advantages or disadvantages in society. For example, a learner's opportunities will be helped or hindered by the choices and actions of others such as the quality of teachers' teaching, productive peer relationships or policy that enables their learning. "Sen, therefore, integrates the personal [agency] and the macrosocial in securing and expanding intrapersonal and interpersonal freedoms" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:9) and his work is "underpinned by seeing each person and each life as valuable and of moral concern and not a means to some other end" (Walker, 2010:491) such as the achievement of enrolment or equity targets.

Within the capabilities framework, the concept of conversion factors plays an important role in bringing together agency and social contexts. People differ in many ways and these differences affect the extent to which they can convert opportunities (capabilities) into achievements (functionings). While differences do not inherently imply inequality, differences become inequalities when they impact on capabilities. Sen reminds us that "there is evidence that the conversion of goods [resources] to capabilities varies from person to person substantially, and the equality of the former may still be far from the equality of the latter" (Sen, 1979:219). For example, a learner who is blind is different from a learner who can see. This difference is not inherently a form of inequality, but if Braille text books and other learning support needed for blind learners is not provided, then the educational capability set of the blind learner will be limited compared to the learner who is not blind (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:10 citing Terzi, 2005). Paying attention to conversion factors provides a mechanism for understanding what is needed to realise potential outcomes (functionings) (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:10). Robeyns (2005:99) draws our attention to three groups of conversion factors: personal conversion factors such as metabolism, physical condition, reading ability, intelligence, and health; social conversion factors such as policies, social norms, practices of discrimination, gender roles, patriarchy, and power relations; and environmental conversion factors such as geographical locations, rural versus urban, and climatic conditions. These conversion factors impact on the extent to which a person is able to make use of the resources available to them to create capabilities or opportunities.

This understanding of the relationship between social structures (or contexts), agency and capabilities can be presented diagrammatically. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of a person's capabilities and his/her social and personal context, while Figure 2 shows how this framework may be applied to guide a conceptualisation of conversion factors and individual capability sets required to ensure just outcomes of increasing access to university.

The capability approach to the understanding of inequality is particularly useful in the context of an unequal education system, and in seeking to formulate ways in which to enhance the capabilities of those who currently have limited options, often due to the social context (structure) in which they find themselves. The provision of educational resources alone, such as a place at university, NSFAS funding, and accommodation in residence, is not sufficient to

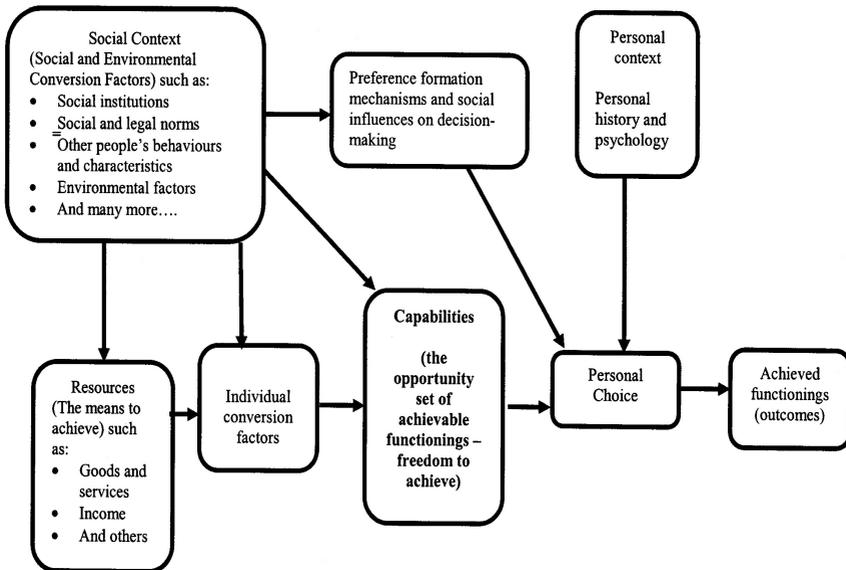


Figure 1 Visual representation of a person's capabilities and social and personal context (Robeyns, 2005:98)

ensure a just higher education system. It is the relationship between the available resources and the ability of each student to convert these into valued capabilities and then make choices which will inform their actual functionings (outcomes) to which we should turn our attention (Walker, 2006:32-33). "Evaluating capabilities, rather than resources or outcomes, shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions that enable individuals to take decisions based on what they have reason to value. These conditions will vary in different contexts, but the approach sets out to be sensitive to human diversity; complex social relations; a sense of reciprocity between people; appreciation that people can reflect reasonably on what they value for themselves and others; and a concern to equalise, not opportunities or outcomes, but rather capabilities" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007:3).

Thus, the capability approach emphasises the role of individual agency and choice, but reminds us that the freedom of agency which individuals have is qualified and constrained by social, political and economic factors and opportunities. "There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the forces of social influences on the extent and reach of freedom" (Sen, 1999:xi-xii). In a higher education context, Walker (2006: 36) makes reference to the need to understand social arrangements and institutional conditions of possibility. In this way, the capability framework provides a means for exploring the processes underlying various outcomes (functionings) in a manner that exposes injustices that

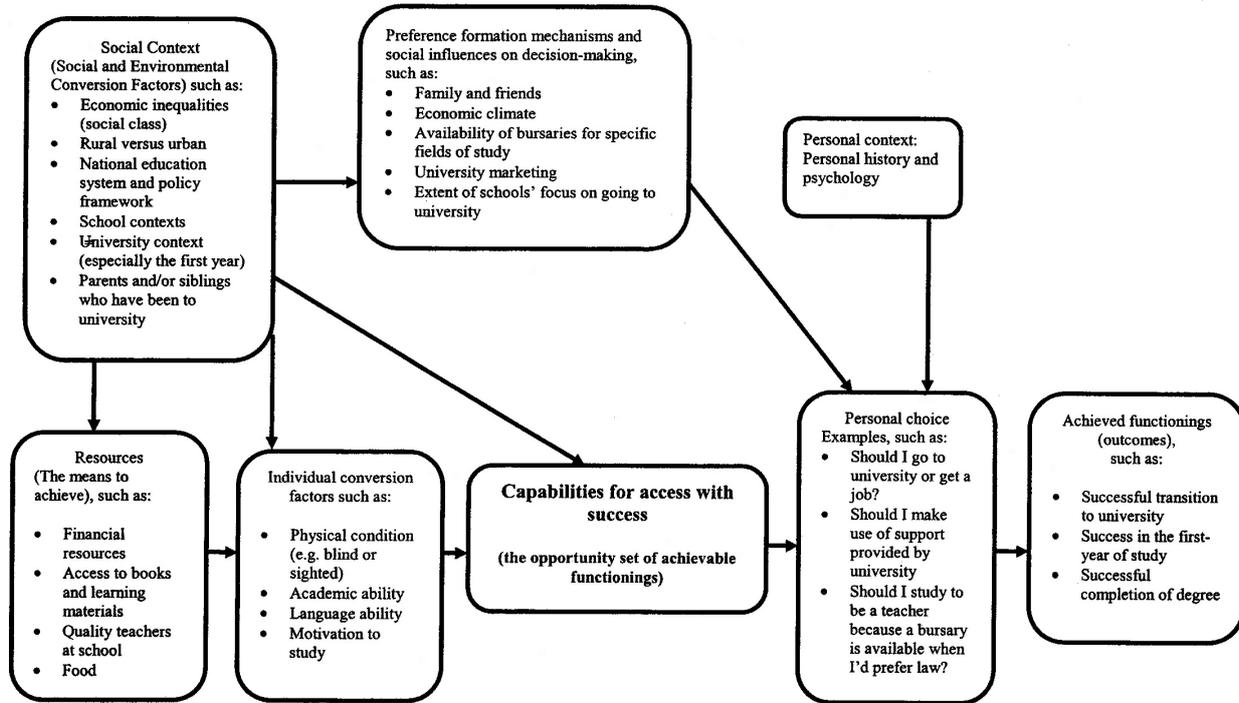


Figure 2 Visual representation of a capabilities framework for understanding access (adapted from Robeyns, 2005:98)

may be masked by a consideration of outcomes only, such as was demonstrated above with the case of Judy and Bernita's learning trajectories while at university. The framework shown in Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the conversion factors and the relationship between context/structure and agency. These elements need to be understood in order to formulate meaningful interventions supporting access to university with a specific focus on enhancing or building students' capabilities to successfully negotiate their university experience in a manner that they personally value.

Striving for university access that promotes social justice

When considering the domain of increasing or broadening access to university, one tends to focus on outcomes (functionings) such as the number/proportion of diverse students who are granted access and the resources that students require — such as financial aid for example. However, seldom is sufficient attention given to students' capabilities, their opportunity freedoms or their freedoms to make effective use of the opportunity of university study. Personal conversion factors such as academic preparation tend to be considered in making admissions decisions, but less often are the social and environmental conversion factors really understood and actively tackled by universities. The result of this is evident in the poor success of students described above, the large numbers of students who have been blacklisted for unpaid student loans and the disparities in performance by students representing different 'race' and class groups. As such, in many instances, access currently does not lead to success, but perhaps leads to new forms of injustices instead, such as young people dropping out of university with accumulated debt, self doubt and no qualification.

How might the capabilities approach presented in this paper provide a framework to inform access debates and interventions that explicitly seek to support social justice? Several examples have been provided in the preceding arguments, for instance that the capabilities framework provides a means of understanding our deeply divided education system in a manner that usefully brings together individual agency and choice with the impact of contexts or social structures on this agency. An understanding of how conversion factors impact on the capabilities of students to be successful at university has the potential to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for formulating interventions to enhance opportunities and the freedoms needed to convert those opportunities into achievements or functionings. As Walker argues, the capabilities approach shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions (social structures) that enable different individuals (agents) to make choices about what they want to be and do (Walker, 2006). Thus, the capabilities approach highlights the importance of understanding the social arrangements and institutional conditions of possibility for access in pursuit of just outcomes. The notion of capabilities provides a conceptual framework for exploring the complex processes underlying education outcomes in a manner that exposes injustices that are otherwise masked. A capabilities approach to university access and success brings to the fore the unequal conversion of higher education opportunities that currently perpetuate various injustices in the South African higher education system.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a theoretical argument in support of the capabilities approach as a useful framework for understanding the complex terrain of access to university. In particular, it was argued that paying attention to educational outcomes alone potentially creates new forms of injustice because it is assumed that once equal resources are provided (such as a place at

university or financial support) that all students are equally able to convert these resources to capabilities and functionings. Instead, specific attention should be given to understanding the complex personal, social and environmental conversion factors that impact on the opportunity freedoms (capabilities) of individual students.

In conclusion, Walker (2010:486) states that “we are better at critiquing what constrains higher education policy and its misalignment with the social good, but imagine less about what to do in its place, or how to advance the spaces of freedom which persist in universities”. This paper calls for educationists committed to social justice to begin to imagine and theorise new ways of confronting the legacies of our past and the injustices of the present through the enhancement of students’ capabilities to successfully access and engage with university study. The capabilities approach provides one way in which we can strive to ensure that the power to do good does not result in the opposite (Sen, 1999:xiii).

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Note

1. This article makes use of ‘race’ categories commonly used in higher education statistics (such as those in the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS)). While the author does not subscribe to racial classification, the extent of injustice remaining following the long legacy of racial classification in the country demands that these categories be used when arguing for a more socially just higher education system.

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