Higher Education Pathways

Case, M., Ashwin, Paul

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CHAPTER 8
HOW HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH USING THE CAPABILITY APPROACH ILLUMINATES POSSIBILITIES FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Monica McLean

Introduction

The capability approach offers a normative framework for thinking how higher education can support human well-being and fulfilment. It was developed with a focus on poverty reduction by the economist Amartya Sen during the 1980s (see, inter alia, 1985 and 1999). Originating in welfare economics, it is underpinned by a commitment to human development and social justice. Following on, Martha Nussbaum collaborated with Sen, bringing in a perspective from philosophy. (Nussbaum & Sen [1993] and 1997, 2000, 2003, 2010, 2011). Over the last two decades, the approach has been taken up by scholars across the disciplines to research a broad range of topics related to human development and flourishing. This community is served by the Human Development and Capabilities Association (HDCA) which was established in 2004 and by a dedicated journal entitled the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* (JHDC). While empirical work from a capabilities approach perspective is often carried out in poorer countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa, comparatively little deals with education per se and even less with higher education. Work in this area was pioneered by Melanie Walker, who directs the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chair in Higher Education, & Human Development Research Programme at the University of the Free State.
Several chapters in this book identify how higher education in South Africa is expected to contribute to the policy agenda of social transformation by reducing deep social and economic inequalities and how reality is falling far short of policy aspiration. In the light of this contradiction, this chapter discusses how the capability approach illuminates how university education might transform both individuals and South African society. This discussion is presented in two parts. The first part shows how the central concepts of the capability approach focus on reducing poverty, conceptualised as depriving people of life’s opportunities and freedoms. The second part considers two strands of higher education research based in South Africa and informed by what Ingrid Robeyns (2017) calls ‘capabilitarian’ theory or analysis. The first strand is about those students who have accessed university against the odds because they are black and come from poor rural and township areas; the second is about how higher education can shape graduates oriented towards contributing to social transformation, whatever their background.

The capability approach and poverty reduction

Several key texts offer overviews of the capability approach and the work that it does (e.g. Alkire, 2005; Deneulin & Shahani, 2009; Ibrahim & Tiwari, 2014; Nussbaum, 2011; Otto & Schafer, 2014; Robeyns, 2016, 2017; Sen, 1985, 1999). Here I draw from them to identify key ideas and concepts (identified by italics when first introduced) to show how they relate to poverty, well-being and social justice.

Human capital is a measure of the skills, education, capacity and attributes of labour which influence peoples’ productive capacity and earning potential (Becker, 1964). For the capability approach, the human capital emphasis on material resources is unidimensional. Rather, poverty is seen as multi-dimensional, limiting opportunities in many areas of life for individuals to choose to be and do what, with good reason, they value. In parallel, poverty reduction and human development are understood as the expansion of life choices. The approach is concerned with what constitutes a flourishing life: for example, enough to eat, sound health, supportive relationships and good quality education. Opportunities (also called ‘freedoms’) to eat, be healthy, have supportive relationships and be well educated are termed ‘capabilities’. The realised states of being and doing, that is, the actual practices of individuals in their everyday lives are called ‘functionings’. Individuals flourish when they are free to choose how they want to function in all areas of life. So, the capability approach promotes agency whereby individuals are free to choose lives (beings and doings) that express their own values and objectives. The social justice goal is that people lead free and dignified lives in a position of equality with others. Structural constraints are accounted for in the concept of ‘conversion factors’ which are the social, political, policy and economic arrangements that interact with personal biographies to enable or constrain capabilities for well-being and a flourishing life.

In the capability approach, justice focuses on the extent to which people have the same opportunities to be the kind of person they want to be and to do what they want. Inequality
is challenged when political, economic or social developments expand peoples’ opportunities or capabilities. Each ‘person as an end’ is a principle and, in this approach, individual choice is given a central place (Robeyns, 2017, p. 57). Yet, choice of what to be or do is often constrained economically, socially or culturally and the term ‘adaptive preferences’ refers to the phenomenon of people being socialised to accept unconsciously the constraints of their deprived circumstances: they might not aspire to what they do not expect or think achievable.

Much debate in such fields as welfare economics, development studies, gender studies and political philosophy centres on operationalising the approach and drawing up ‘capability sets’ (or lists) as guides, both to evaluating whether people have the capabilities to lead valued, good lives and to making changes to expand capabilities. On the one hand, Nussbaum (2000, 2003) proposes a set of ten ‘central’ ‘universal’, ‘comprehensive’ capabilities as a threshold to which all humans are entitled, which has been criticised for not allowing people living in poverty to specify what they themselves value (Clark, 2013). On the other hand, Sen (2004) rejects the specification of capabilities because it denies the role of democracy. He foregrounds participation and informed reasoning so that those people who are concerned can come to agreements about what capabilities matter.

While empirical research taking a capability approach often develops an ‘ideal-theoretical’ set of capabilities drawn from literature, including previous similar studies, it is essential that those whose capabilities are of concern have a voice. In an iterative, interrogative process, the ideal-theoretical set and empirical data from participant stakeholders about what is valued are brought together. The combined set can then be adjusted for relevance and feasibility and in some cases used for evaluation in different, similar settings with similar groups of people. There are now numerous empirical applications of the approach aimed at evaluating people’s freedoms and opportunities in many different contexts and in diverse ways, for example, to evaluate gender inequalities and the effects of health programmes; or to assess the level of human development in different countries (see Robeyns, 2006, 2017). Education is a sub-field of the applications of the capability approach.

The capability approach and higher education

Generally, education applications of the capability approach are few but increasing. In human development, education has a specific relationship to poverty:

The human development approach recognizes education primarily not as an instrument or means of development, but as development itself, while lack of the same constitutes not just a cause of poverty, but poverty itself. Educational deprivation or poverty of education becomes an integral part of human poverty. Accordingly,

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12 Nussbaum’s ten universal capabilities are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment.
standard of living, quality of life, human development, human poverty, and so on, are measured in terms of, inter alia, educational status of the population. (Tilak, 2002, p. 195)

Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter’s edited book ‘Amartya Sen’s capability approach and social justice in education’ (2007) shows conceptually and empirically the potential of the capability approach in education. The editors point out that for both Sen and Nussbaum education is itself a basic capability (to be educated) that affects the development and expansion of other capabilities. However, in the same volume, Terzi (2007) warns that evaluations should not assume that education is transformative: if it is of poor quality, it can close opportunities, for example, by instilling a sense of failure. So, she tentatively proposes a sub-set of capabilities without which an individual cannot be said to be educated: literacy; numeracy; sociality and participation; learning dispositions; physical activities; science and technology; and practical reason. Arguably, these capabilities are the starting point for someone coming to university. Yet, there is strong evidence that the quality of schooling in South Africa is so poor for many students\(^\text{13}\) that they arrive under-prepared for university education, despite working hard, holding high aspirations and being determined in the face of many structural barriers (Calitz, 2018; Spaull, 2013; Wilson-Strydom, 2015, 2017).

Applications of the capability approach to higher education specifically are few; nevertheless they illustrate what can be illuminated. Nussbaum (1997, 2010) (who, as a philosopher, does not undertake empirical research) makes a case for university humanities and arts producing world citizens because they teach empathy and critical thinking. In the UK, Caroline Hart (2014) has combined the capabilitarian and Bordieuan theory to explore hope and aspiration in the lives of working-class young people as they leave school and go to university.

However, it is Melanie Walker who has arguably broken new ground, interpreting Sen and Nussbaum to explore empirically and to think about higher education and social justice. In the UK, as well as in South Africa, she has used a capability lens to discuss pedagogies to support under-privileged students, who can feel alienated by university (Walker, 2003, 2006, 2010). She proposes participatory research methods to generate, implement and evaluate capability sets for higher education (2005, 2006, 2018a). With Alejandro Boni (Boni & Walker, 2013), she edited a book with global reach dedicated to the capabilities approach and higher education. It positions universities (if ‘reimagined’) as potentially powerful sites for achieving human development by challenging the status quo and entrenched interests. Her research programme produces a steady stream of doctoral theses and publications, which form the basis of this chapter.

The rest of this chapter discusses capability research which first focuses on how under-privileged students in South Africa access and participate in higher education; and, secondly, focuses on how to produce graduates oriented towards the public good. The two sets of studies\(^\text{13}\)
are not discrete because the capabilities and functionings that are generated often overlap, as will be shown. At this point, it should be noted that little is known about students in rural universities in South Africa because higher education research tends to be undertaken in historically white universities where the researchers work (cf. footnote 14).

A capabilities approach to evaluating and addressing unequal access to and participation in universities in South Africa

The body of capability approach studies that has been undertaken in South Africa confirms structural inequalities (Calitz, 2017, 2018; Calitz, Walker, & Wilson-Strydom, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015, 2016, 2017). Someone born into poverty competes for access and success in higher education with those from socio-economically advantaged circumstances. Students from rural and township areas usually attend poorly resourced schools without access to technology, have difficulty finding information and being well-advised about choosing and applying for university, and often cannot afford university (from 2018 the government will pay poor students’ tuition fees, though not accommodation, food or other living expenses). Nevertheless, students from poor backgrounds do gain access to university. But equitable participation often does not follow. The same studies reveal that once at university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds usually have insufficient and precarious financial resources (often going without food or toiletries); sometimes feel they do not ‘belong’; and do not always experience teaching and learning which is confidence-enhancing and imparts critical knowledge. These students do not have substantive equality compared to better-off or racially privileged students.

Despite the intractability of the material poverty of these students, capabilities studies reveal how institutional and pedagogical discursive practices can both expand and constrain capability formation. Often the first from their impoverished communities to come to university, they have worked extremely hard to achieve access and are shown to be agentic, resilient and resourceful. They are also often full of hope for themselves, their families and communities which they want to benefit from their education. Yet, the studies also reveal that the transition to university is often punishing for a range of economic, academic, linguistic and social reasons. Curricular and pedagogical arrangements can mitigate or exacerbate difficulties, and many do not complete their course.

In capability approach studies ‘participation’ in higher education is understood normatively to be capability expanding. As explained above, capabilities are the opportunities or freedoms to be or act as one chooses, and realised capabilities are called functionings. For researchers, functionings are often the focus because they are more likely to be observable. Sets of educationally based capabilities and associated functionings are produced by exploring student perspectives with mixed and participatory methods (Bridges, 2015; Calitz, 2018; Crosbie, 2014; Flores-Crespo, 2007; Walker, 2006; Walker & Fongwa, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). There is much overlap in the sets of capabilities that higher education should expand; most include a version of the following capabilities:
Knowledge of the field or (inter) discipline being studied: for example, having opportunity to be critical from a specific perspective;

Practical reason: being free to make well-informed, independent choices about one’s life;

Deliberative participation: having opportunities to enter into dialogue and come to agreements with others;

Affiliation: having the opportunities to develop social relationships and networks for the benefit of oneself and others;

Respect and dignity: being free from denigration and not denigrating others;

Emotional health: being free from fear or anxiety that might constrain learning; and

Resilience: to be persevering in difficult circumstances.

While expansion of capabilities can be understood as an educational goal, the capability approach also focuses on conversion factors. To possess a capability often requires functioning or practise; learning to read is an obvious example. For this reason, curriculum (what students learn) and pedagogy (how they are taught and learn) are key conversion factors: their quality influences whether or not students possess the capabilities for successful participation (McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin, 2013). A frequent example in the literature is that for students to have the capability for deliberative participation, classrooms need to be democratic, participatory spaces where students are included in collaborative decision-making (Calitz, 2017; Walker & McLean, 2013; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Providing further principles and examples for enabling pedagogic arrangements is work by June Pym, Rochelle Kapp and colleagues based on small-scale case studies in different disciplines in South Africa (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017; Pym 2017; Pym & Kapp, 2013; van Rensburg & Kapp, 2014). These papers are not explicitly framed by the capability approach but invoke it in their definition of student agency: ‘[A]n individual’s capacity to act purposively to make choices about how they wish to live and to act on those choices’ (Pym & Kapp, 2013, p. 274). The focus is on formation of identity and agency: supporting students to gain confidence and to be and do what they value. The authors show how compensatory provision can make underprepared students feel stigmatised by foregrounding white, middle class values and norms and by ignoring the social and psychological aspects of becoming a university student (Pym, 2017; Pym & Kapp, 2013). They argue for interventions which connect to students’ home identities and foster a supportive social community and culture of learning. Such interventions include: ‘visible’ pedagogies where values and expectations are made explicit; increasing interactions between lecturers and students and small group work; flexible entry and exit points; time for reflection; and dedicated academic and psychological support.

Before concluding this section, I want to address an important question I have been asked: how does a set of higher education capabilities differ from a set of graduate attributes? Vivienne Bozalek (2013) answers it directly in relation to developing graduate attributes for an historically black university (the University of the Western Cape, UWC). She argues that the
The capability approach offers an enlarged view of the purpose of a university education, a broader conception of the graduate’s ‘good life’, pointing out that it has at its heart social good, whereas graduate attributes might or might not. Moreover, she identifies the significance of the concept of conversion factors:

*The [capability approach] offers a way of taking into account where students and institutions are positioned and what they are able to do with personal, material and social resources, rather than merely looking at what resources people have and assuming that people are equally placed in relation to these resources.*

(Bozalek, 2013, p.74)

Although UWC uses the term ‘graduate attributes’ in its institutional documentation, the capability approach informed three overarching attributes to encompass human flourishing and social concern, which are based on an investigation of the needs of students and staff and collaborative deliberation. They are scholarship, critical citizenship, and lifelong learning.

Currently, there is limited evidence regarding the outcomes of university education for people from low-income backgrounds in South Africa. In the capability approach, the outcomes of education are understood as ‘achieved functionings’: that is, what graduates actually do and actually are in ways they value and choose. Little is known from any perspective about what happens to students from rural and township backgrounds in South Africa when they leave university: their numbers are small; research does not follow students after they leave; and data about employment and other destinations is patchy.14

To summarise this section: studies of higher education in South Africa that are shaped or influenced by capabilitarian theory are based on rich data usually including methods which give participants a voice. They reveal (1) how academic under-preparation, poverty and an alien environment constrain capabilities for access and participation; (2) how successful participation in university emerges in the interaction between agency and social context: students from deprived and difficult backgrounds who have managed to access university show agency, determination, often identify as academically able and have high hopes, but are often still living in extreme poverty; (3) that successful transition to and participation in university involves a varied, multi-dimensional set of freedoms and opportunities (including enough resources); (4) that unequal participation is an injustice which can be remedied by institutional and pedagogical arrangements which provide opportunities for specific

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14 The Miratho project (www.miratho.com) aims to address this lacuna. It is an ESRC/DfId and NFR-funded project based in HEHD (University of the Free State) led by Melanie Walker and part of the ‘Inclusive Learning Outcomes in Challenging Contexts’ research programme. It is a four-year (2016–2020) mixed methods research project, including interviewing students over the course of their degrees and into employment in both city and rural universities. It has two main aims: 1) to investigate how complex biographical, socio-economic, policy, and educational factors interact to enable or inhibit pathways for rural and township youth to get in, get on, and get out of higher education, in terms of the formation of their capabilities and how fair and inclusive are the ‘learning outcomes’ or functionings achieved; 2) and to produce a normative, multi-dimensional human capabilities-based index for evaluating the extent to which capabilities are expanded by a university education.
capabilities and functionings, if only imperfectly, especially when students do not have sufficient material resources.

In this section of the chapter, I have presented the capability approach as offering purchase on how university education might expand the freedoms of graduates who have grown up in poverty to live rich, fulfilling lives. In the next, I focus on what has been written about how university education might develop graduates with the capabilities for public good.

**Higher education for making contributions to social transformation in South Africa**

Sen (2008, p. 335) proposed that: ‘[I]f someone has the power to make a change that he or she can see will reduce injustice in the world, then there is a strong social argument for doing just that (without having to dress all this up in terms of some imagined cooperative benefits enjoyed by all).’ So, being advantaged, which university graduates are, brings ‘inescapable’ responsibilities: ‘[C]apability is a kind of power, and it would be a mistake to see capability only as a concept of human advantage, not also as a central concept in human obligation’ (p. 336). This argument justifies capabilitarian higher education scholars’ interest in producing graduates oriented to the public good.

In South Africa, the literature on this topic is small. First, there are studies exploring whether and how the capabilities for political agency and critical citizenship are formed through university education.¹⁵ Some were based on participatory action research in which students develop as political agents by taking part in projects related to gender (Boni & Walker, 2016; Walker, 2018b; Walker & Loots, 2018). Two further studies were based on interviewing students to explore how taking part in specific extra-curricular programmes expanded their capabilities for ‘citizen agency’. Walker and Loots (2016, p. 63) found that for a mixed race and gender group of 50 students going abroad as part of a leadership programme, ‘Confidence emerged as the basic platform for changing selves: taking on new knowledge, finding their own (informed) critical voices and participating in discussions.’ Moreover, there was evidence that the students had come to value four functionings in relation to race (critical awareness of race, racism and history; affiliation; critical reasoning; to act for change) which Walker (2016, p. 1284) judges as ‘capabilities formation to support a non-racist campus and society, emerging from inauspicious circumstances.’ Conversely, Mtawa and Wilson-Strydom (2018, pp. 9–10) found that taking part in community service programmes led students (at an historically white university) to unquestioningly ‘position community members as disempowered individuals in need of assistance’, which entrenched paternalistic attitudes.

¹⁵ There is also a small South African capabilitarian higher education literature which focuses on gender and disability. For this chapter I am bracketing it, although it deals with the how institutional and pedagogical arrangements can be capability constraining or expanding (Loots, & Walker, 2015, 2016; Mutanga, 2016; Mutanga & Walker, 2015, 2017; Unterhalter, 2003; Walker 2018a; Walker & Loots, 2017).
Secondly, there is a small body of literature from the capability perspective about professional education in South Africa. This includes a book by Mikateko Mathebula (2018) on engineering university education in South Africa and Germany; and a book and papers based on a research project in South African universities (two historically white and one historically black) of five professional education departments: engineering, theology, social work, law and public health (McLean & Walker, 2012; McLean & Walker, 2016; Peppin Vaughan, & Walker, 2012; Walker & McLean, 2013). In both studies, there was an explicit focus on what kind of university education would produce public-good professionals interested in poverty reduction conceptualised in the broad capability sense of expanding clients’ freedoms and opportunities beyond the economic (in the case of Mathebula’s engineering study, the interest was in professionals oriented and able to act for sustainable development). For both studies a wide range of stakeholders (students, educators, alumni and employers) were interviewed and workshops held to explore collaboratively what was valued and what the contextual constraints were, so that the sets that emerged were not over-idealised. There were overlaps in the capability sets that finally emerged. The capabilities for a public-good engineer were: solving problems; being confident and feeling empowered; being resilient and having a sense of affiliation; and working in diverse fields. For the other study the capabilities for professional public-good which spanned the professions were: knowledge and skills; informed vision (for the country and profession); affiliation; integrity; resilience (these five were strongly encouraged in university departments); social and collective struggle; emotional reflexivity; and assurance and confidence (these three were differently inflected or disappeared according to profession).

Both these studies engaged with what kinds of universities, departments and pedagogical arrangements would be likely to support students’ formation as public-good professionals. Peppin, Vaughan, and Walker (2012) note that the findings provided examples of how education can either ignore poverty awareness and engagement or enable students to value and choose pro-poor professional work. The latter was done by: exposure to the realities of poverty in South Africa; the development of critical reasoning, giving students the ability and opportunity to explore their own underlying values; and imparting certain skills and capacities (resilience, relevant professional knowledge, understanding of collective effort and struggle), so that those who chose a ‘pro-poor’ professional path would be better equipped to do so. But even when pedagogy was enabling, some students cared more about social transformation than others. The authors conclude that pedagogy itself should respect individual’s freedom to choose what is valuable, despite Sen’s insistence on the obligations of someone with expanded capabilities.

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16 ESRC/Dfid (Award No. RES-167-25-0302)
Conclusion

I have brought together capabilitarian higher education research from South Africa which, on the one hand, explores the access and participation experiences of black students from poor rural and township backgrounds; and, on the other, engages with both black underprivileged and privileged people (black or white) to explore how universities might produce graduates oriented to and able to act as public-good professionals. I have done this because the transformation of individuals and society in South Africa will take both the full educational inclusion of people who experience extreme poverty and professionals who want to address the multi-dimensional problems associated with the poverty in which most black South Africans live and want to contribute to social transformation in a highly unequal society. Although there is still only a small number of students from impoverished backgrounds getting to university, it is growing, and the evidence is that, while they certainly want to support their families out of poverty, they also want to ‘give back’. Many of the capabilities for inclusion and for public-good professionalism are often the same (knowledge and skills; affiliation; respect and so on).

The capability approach offers a contribution to higher education in South Africa primarily because it derives from a normative framework which places human flourishing as its primary goal, chiming with the country’s transformation goals. Though the field is relatively small it offers contextualised, collaborative and feasible ways of thinking about university education goals; for designing and evaluating curriculum and teaching methods; and for making recommendations about policies and practices. The focus of capability higher education research is on how South African universities might expand graduate capabilities for choosing valuable functionings for success at university and for productive, fulfilling work and life after university.

However, the South African studies discussed are also cognisant of societal and material constraints, often attributable to the legacy of apartheid: for example, under-resourced and often poorly managed public services; a brain drain of skilled professionals either into private practice or jobs abroad; and a dearth of black professionals in some fields because of race-based discrimination. While there is a small body of evidence about some graduates developing as public-good professionals, as noted above, little is known about what happens in work and life to graduates who come from poor backgrounds. We do not know whether their dreams are being fulfilled. University education cannot do everything; graduates might expand their capabilities as students, but they need conditions in employment and as citizens to convert capabilities to achieved functionings.

17 See the ‘photovoice’ project with students from the University of the Free State talking about their aspirations: https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/librariesprovider34/default-document-library/photovoice-project_crhed_2018.pdf?sfvrsn=996a621_0
References


Part B: How higher education research using the capability approach illuminates possibilities


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