ANNEXURE 12

Access and Success – Transitions into and through higher education

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Purpose

The issues of access and success are vast, complex, contested, and fundamental to meaningful transformation within the higher education sector. Much has been written on this topic, in academic publications, reports, policy documents, and in the media. The purpose of this paper is not to summarise these debates. This important task has recently been comprehensively done by Lewin and Mawoyo (2014)[2] who use a detailed desktop review and interviews with university staff (mostly those working in academic development) to identify academic (both staff and student aspects) and non-academic factors (such as financing, living conditions, socio-cultural and systemic factors, and institutional cultures) affecting access and success, as well as a review of interventions to improve success.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing body of work by drawing on research that focuses on students' lives and everyday educational experiences in school and at university. The paper argues for a rethinking of what university readiness means, and the implications of this for student retention, throughput and, ultimately, success. The paper ends with recommendations for action proposed as a platform for a deeper conversation about access and success, a conversation that is rooted in the realities of students' lives.

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[2] http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/Issues%20and%20Interventions%20in%20South%20African%20Universities.pdf

Background

South African higher education has made notable progress in terms of widening access. This was recently highlighted by the CHE during its presentation of the 20-Year Review to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2015). Overall enrolment has grown from 495 348 in 1994 to 983 698 in 2013. African students accounted for 42.5% of enrolment in 2004 and this proportion grew to 70.1% in 2013 (CHE 2015). Yet, cohort studies have shown that approximately 30% of students drop out of university in the first year, and about 55% of all students never graduate. These figures are even more concerning when we consider how the numbers are skewed by race (and class – although this is harder to measure), with estimates being that under 5% of African and coloured youth succeed in higher education (CHE 2013). This is clearly an issue of injustice, and so turning this tide must be central to any higher education transformation efforts.

As powerful as these numbers can be, what they don't tell us is anything about the students' lives and the numerous social justice issues that play out on a daily basis. The capabilities approach (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011) – the theoretical framework that informs this research – calls on us to consider individual wellbeing and quality of life as central metrics. As such, we need to ask questions about what students are able to be and to do in their lives as students, and we need to understand students' achievements as well as the opportunities that are (or are not) available to them.

Access injustices

In September 2010 and February 2014 first-year students at the University of the Free State (UFS) drew pictures of their experience of coming to university. These drawings visually highlighted the injustices faced by many students, despite being granted a place at university (and so being positively counted in our access statistics). Where universities increase access without improving chances of success they create new forms of injustice, whilst seeking to overcome old forms.

One student in the 2010 group drew herself on a swing, swinging above the world and stated 'Can c the whole world before me – a new one to experience.' Another student drew himself pushing against a high brick wall that he could not see over. On his side of the wall it was dark and on the other side of the wall was sunshine and success. Similarly, a student in the 2014 group depicted his degree as a monster.

These examples highlight the differences in quality of life or well-being of these students. How can we begin to knock down the brick walls and defeat the monsters that many students are up against when they start at university?

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of access issues from a social justice perspective by:

1. drawing on research focused on both the schooling and university ends of the transition (which is seldom done in studies on access);
2. rethinking what it means to be ready for university;
3. proposing a list of capabilities for university readiness; and
4. reflecting on what universities could do differently in an effort to confront the monsters and brick walls faced by many students.

Evidence base

Table 1 summarises the data on which this paper draws.[3] The iterative use of quantitative and qualitative data collected from high school learners, first-year students, and first-year lecturers in the Free State allowed for a rich, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional analysis of university transitions.

Table 1: Summary of evidence base

Level of Study	Sample	Date	Type of data
Schooling	2816 grade 10, 11 and 12 learners (sampled from 20 schools)	2009	Quantitative survey
	33 grade 11 and 12 learners who participated in a university readiness programme during June/July school holidays	2010	Qualitative – interviews, written reflections
University	128 first-year UFS students	2009	Qualitative – focus groups
	142 first-year UFS students	2010	Qualitative – focus groups and visual methods
	14 lecturers teaching first-year students	2010	Qualitative - interviews
	23 first-year social work students	2014	Qualitative and quantitative – reflections, group discussions, questionnaires
	40 first-year students	2014 (ongoing to 2016)	Qualitative - visual methods, participatory workshops, interviews

Eligibility versus readiness

"It's like getting thrown into the deep end of life…without a life jacket! (First-year student)

Being *eligible* for university (meeting admission criteria) does not necessarily mean that one is *ready* for university (Conley 2008) and this was clearly evident from the student data, even for students entering university with top school leaving results.

While the gap between school and university in terms of content knowledge (and to some extent learning skills) is often noted and is the subject of much media attention when the grade 12 results are released each year, this study shows that the gap is about much more than subject or content knowledge, as important as this is. Rather, university readiness is multi-dimensional.

Capabilities for university readiness

A comprehensive analysis of the access, readiness and transitions literatures globally and in South Africa, capabilities approach theory and applications in higher education was done to propose a theoretical list capabilities for readiness. The voices of the high school learners and students could then 'speak back' to the theory and through this process, a list of 7 clusters of capabilities for university readiness emerged.

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[3] For more details on the research and the detailed findings please see Wilson-Strydom (2015; 2014a; 2014b).

This list highlights the multi-dimensional nature and the complexity of transitioning to university, and shows what students ought to be able to be and do as they enter university. When readiness is approached in a multi-dimensional manner it becomes clear that all students are ready in some ways and not ready in others.[4] This approach helps us to move beyond the all too common deficit understandings of certain groupings of students being ready and others not (Lewin and Mawoyo 2014; Whittaker 2008; Smit 2012). Ideally, opportunities to develop these capabilities should be intentionally created at high school and during the first year.[5] The data highlighted how decisions made (or sometimes forced) at high school continue to have implications for students at university. It is thus insufficient to begin tackling readiness and transition challenges only once schooling has been completed.

Table 2: Capabilities for university readiness

Dimensions of readiness	Description – capabilities for university readiness
Decision-making	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent and reflective choices about post-school study
Knowledge and imagination	Having the academic grounding for chosen university subjects, being able to develop and apply methods of critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives and complex problems.
Approach to learning	Having curiosity and a desire for learning, having the learning skills required for university study and being an active inquirer (questioning).
Social relations and social networks	Being able to participate in groups for learning, working with diverse others to solve problems or complete tasks. Being able to form networks of friendships for learning support and leisure.
Respect, dignity and recognition	Having respect for oneself and for others, and receiving respect from others, being treated with dignity. Not being devalued, or devaluing others because of one's gender, social class, religion or race. Valuing diversity and being able to show empathy (understand and respect others' points of view). Having a voice to participate in learning.
Emotional health	Not being subject to anxiety or fear that diminishes learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn.
Language competence and confidence	Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction.

Towards a deeper understanding of students' experience

Within the capabilities approach, human diversity is seen as fundamental, rather than incidental, to our understanding of any situation. This is equally true of access issues. Individual and social diversity matters greatly for the development of capabilities for university readiness. In capabilities language, this diversity can be expressed using the concept of conversion factors. These are personal, social and environmental factors that influence the extent to which a given student can convert the resources at their disposable (such has having a place at university or NSFAS funding) into meaningful opportunities and achievements (Robeyns 2005; Walker and Unterhalter 2007). While

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[4] Similarly, during the CHE 20-Year review discussions with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education it was noted that cohort studies show that dropout is an issue for all students and not only groupings commonly regarded as 'at risk' (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2015).

[5] The longitudinal study referred to in the last line of Table 1 shows that these capabilities remain relevant across the undergraduate experience, although the level at which students need to function across each dimension increases. Further research is needed to confirm this emerging finding.

resources are critical for success we should not assume that equality of resources necessarily implies equality of access or success.

We need to understand the social conditions that either enable or constrain the development of capabilities for university readiness. At the personal level, particularly important conversion factors included having developed a will to learn (curiosity and desire for learning), having confidence to learn, and one's home language in relation to the language of instruction. At the social level, class, gender, school context and culture, quality of teachers, quality of subject choice, freedom to choose school subjects, and home environment created both enabling and constraining conditions for the diverse students in this study – and sometimes in unexpected and intersecting ways. Universities need to develop much deeper, contextualised understandings of who their students are and the complex web of conditions that influence what they can and cannot be and do as students.[6]

Amartya Sen (2009) reminds us that although an ideal world (or higher education access context) may be out of reach given current conditions, there are numerous 'remediable injustices' around us that we ought to work to change. The current access dilemmas we face, and complexity of factors that affect access and success, should thus not limit our thinking about what the transition into and through university ought to be like for our students. To move beyond the status quo, we need to ask different questions and apply new theoretical approaches to understanding access and success.

Recommendations for university action

Based on this study, the following recommendations for what universities could do to improve access and success have emerged:

1. Forge meaningful, long term partnerships with schools to create more easily visible access pathways from high school into university and to assist with decision making about courses of study much earlier than at the point of application or registration.
2. Adopt educationally intentional approaches to marketing at schools – focusing less on selling the given university and more on raising awareness about the range of capabilities underpinning readiness and providing substantive information about what it means to study at university – so confronting the gap between eligibility and readiness.
3. Embrace a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of access and readiness: this understanding ought to infuse the ways in which universities work – at all levels (administratively, academically and outside of the formal curriculum).
4. Assist first-year students to understand the complexity of university *readiness* (as opposed to *eligibility*), and to see that they are not alone when they are confused and scared or lack confidence in their ability as a university student.
5. Integrate across the curriculum opportunities to learn the required academic behaviours and learning approaches, including language competence and, importantly, confidence.
6. Create more flexible learning pathways through higher education and multiple opportunities to develop university readiness capabilities to accommodate the diverse personal, social and environmental factors that impact on students' lives, and hence, their success.

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[6] A similar point was made in the Commission on Student Experience at the 2010 Summit on Higher Education Transformation (CEPD and DHET 2010, 16).

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