

POLICY BRIEF

What (dis)advantage means: capability-inspired dimensions of (dis)advantage in higher education?

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About this brief

This policy brief summarises the findings and recommendations from a study conducted in 2016-2018 to explore the meanings of (dis)advantage among diverse students at one South African university. It provides insights about dimensions of student (dis)advantage that emerged. The research could be helpful for policy makers at national level, as well as for university management, academics, researchers and other stakeholders concerned about reducing inequalities and promoting social justice in higher education.

Context

The context is one where inequalities and inequitable outcomes in higher education persist, despite the South African government having introduced policy that seeks to redress apartheid and historic race-based disadvantage. Nonetheless, various interventions targeting increasing enrolment, student funding and student academic development etc. have not translated into equal student success and outcomes in higher education. Despite the frequent use of the terms 'disadvantage' and 'advantage', there is a lack of clarity on what these mean when designing and implementing interventions in universities. Nuancing the definition of (dis)advantage could help in designing more fine-tuned interventions that address the real needs of students for fairer opportunities and outcomes.

A capability approach to (dis)advantage

Drawing from the capabilities approach first developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the study investigated 'well-being freedoms' [capabilities], 'well-being achievements' [functionings], and agency in order to understand whether and to what extent higher education provides opportunities to all students to participate equally and to succeed. The approach enabled a focus on individual students as the bearers

of advantage or disadvantage in comparison with each other. The normative position taken is that advantage occurs when students have wide freedoms (real opportunities) and agency to decide and to achieve the educational, economic and social goals of higher education, including academic success, economic opportunities, personal development, and preparation for good citizenship. The argument made is that students with a wider capability set and agency to convert resources into educational achievements are advantaged, while the narrower the capability set, the more disadvantaged a student is.

Methods

A qualitative case study was conducted at the University of the Free State. Twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with final year and honours students from the Faculties of Economics and Management Sciences, Education, The Humanities, and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. Additional interviews were conducted with seven key informants, who included four university staff members and three Student Representative Council members to complement the views from the students.

Key findings

What emerged is that (dis)advantage is multidimensional in nature. The dimensions of (dis)advantage between black and white students are more complex than what one might expect. For example, low-income black students have personal, navigational, resilience and aspirational resources that have enabled them to successfully complete their undergraduate studies, although among the students interviewed with lower degree grades compared to white students. Low-income black students also demonstrate commitments to relationships and the good lives of others beyond their families, which is less evident among white well-off students. Undoubtedly, however, material well-being is a key factor constraining educational well-being. The multidimensionality of student (dis)advantage is displayed in Table 1 - the deeper and more secure each capability, the more advantaged the student.

What does the evidence suggest are the capability-inspired dimensions for equal participation and success in higher education?

Table 1

<i>Dimension of advantage</i>	<i>Description of functioning</i>
Economic stability	Access to adequate to income
Intellectual growth	Having dreams for a better future for oneself. Being able to speak and understand the language of instruction. Having

	critical thinking in relation to knowledge acquired. Being able to apply knowledge to different contexts. Experiencing personal changes through university attendance, e.g. communication skills
Participation and voice	Being involved in the process of learning. Taking part in extra-curricular activities. Having a voice in achieving what one values. Being involved in activities meant to change one's environment, e.g. student protests. Being confident
Aspirations	Being able to have career dreams for one's future. Being able to think about improving the lives of others in future
Personal tenacity	Being hardworking. Being persistent in achieving one's goals regardless of the challenges
Safety and mobility	Being able to travel to and from the campus safely when one needs to. Having safe and decent accommodation
Socio-psychosocial and mental health	Being able to live lives free from social, economic, academic and psychological pressure. Having emotional health
Affiliation	Being able to have social networks. Being respected and recognised equally with regards to one's religious affiliation, race, and gender. Being aware of diversity
Empathy and diversity	Being able to care about other people from the campus and community. Being aware and tolerant of diversity
Employability	Being able to know one's professional area. Being exposed to employment during the study period. Having the skills for employment

The data shows that these dimensions intersect, with the effect of advantaging and disadvantaging individual students. The findings also demonstrate that the capability approach is a robust framework for evaluating student (dis)advantage as enables to consider how students were disadvantaged in some dimensions but advantaged in others. The approach further helps us to identify areas where interventions could be implemented by understanding social, institutional, material and individual conversion factors that constrain and enable students' freedoms to secure their educational achievements.

What are the intersecting factors that constrain student participation and success at the university?

In this study, the conversion factors that disable students from participating effectively and succeeding in their studies were as follows:

- Socio-economic conditions
- Race
- University practices, e.g. teaching
- Gender practices at university
- Funding and funding policies
- Schooling
- Distance from university (being off-campus)

While these factors constrained most black low-income students from succeeding, they were enabling for higher-income white students.

What are the factors that positively affect student participation and success at the university?

Although most black low-income students faced challenges, they completed their studies successfully enabled by the following factors:

- Being resilient and having the motivation to work hard;
- Being affiliated to friends, religious groups and sporting activities.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the research proposes the following recommendations as ways of improving students' access, participation and success in universities:

1. The university should design and implement programmes to build confidence among students from low-income backgrounds who might be facing challenges in adjusting and participating effectively in the university's academic and social projects.
2. Build resilience among low-income black students through learning from their counterparts who are succeeding. This intervention could target first-year from similar backgrounds who often struggle to adjust to the university environment.
3. Sponsors and funders should increase resources to adequately support all low-income students materially.
4. Accredite off-campus private accommodation to ensure that the living spaces are safe and conducive for studying. Coupled with that, affordable transport should be also offered to off-campus students.
5. Intensify campaigns against racism and enforce punitive measures to perpetrators of racism.
6. Develop a gender and sexuality policy, together with having clear reporting structures for incidences of gender unfairness at the campus, including pedagogically.

7. To improve its teaching practices, the university should further train its teaching staff in being sensitive to the needs of diverse students.
8. Embed social citizenship values in the curriculum of the various degree programmes.
9. Recognise and support minority religious groups.

These recommendations should not be implemented in isolation, as there is need to follow a holistic approach that considers the intersectionality of student disadvantage.

Useful references

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