

A capabilities approach to student experiences of
pedagogy, power and well-being at a South African university

by

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This thesis is submitted in accordance with the requirements for the

PhD in Higher Education Studies

in the

School of Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education

at the

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

Date of submission: 30 November 2015

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I declare that the study hereby submitted for the Philosophiae Doctor in Higher Education Studies in the Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university. I also hereby cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.

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Abstract

Persistent educational, economic and social inequalities in South Africa perpetuate patterns of unequal access and participation for a significant number of university students. In particular, many first-generation, working-class and African students are positioned precariously within institutions, and have fewer opportunities to convert academic resources into successful outcomes. In response to these structural constraints, the study investigates undergraduate student experiences of pedagogical and institutional arrangements at a historically advantaged South African university. The study is guided by the following research question:

Given the structural inequalities within universities, how could pedagogical and institutional arrangements enable first-generation students to convert available resources into the capability for equal participation?

The research problem is informed by the assumption that having access to higher education does not mean that individuals have the freedom to participate in an equitable way, or to achieve the same outcomes. The research problem informed the design of four research questions:

- 1. How do structural conditions at school, in the family, and the community enable and constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
- 2. How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
- 3. How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enable the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
- 4. How could student experiences be used as evidence to inform the design of capability praxis for equal participation?*

The study is situated within a transformative paradigm, where qualitative methods are applied to track the experiences of eight undergraduate university students over a period of two years. I collected qualitative data using a number of narrative research tools, including in-depth interviews, focus groups and digital stories. Another aspect of data collection was

involving students as co-researchers in the study, in order to draw on student voices to shed light on the complexities underlying unequal participation.

The theoretical framework used to conduct the research integrated Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach with critical social theory. The capability approach is a multidimensional approach that I used to evaluate the comparative opportunities for participation available to the research participants. The capability approach offers an egalitarian evaluation of the individual consequences of inequality, while retaining a focus on the agency and resources that students bring to higher education. Based on this framework, I make the argument that unequal participation is a remediable injustice that can be partially addressed by creating enabling arrangements for capability development.

The outcome of the data analysis is a capability-informed praxis, in which I propose and defend six capabilities as a pedagogical response to inequalities identified in the student data. These capabilities are listed below:

1. *Practical reason*
2. *Critical literacies*
3. *Student research*
4. *Deliberative participation*
5. *Critical affiliation*
6. *Values for the public good*

The capability-informed praxis conceptualized equal participation on a spectrum where on the one end, equality is defined as access to the resources and opportunities needed to achieve valued outcomes aligned with student capabilities, agency and aspirations. On the other end of the spectrum, unequal participation refers to students who are vulnerable to drop out, face resource scarcity, and do not have sustained access to pedagogical or institutional arrangements that enable them to convert available resources into equal participation. I conclude the study with *recommendations* that could expand opportunities for equal participation for undergraduate students at the university.

Key terms: higher education, equal participation, human development, the capability approach, social justice, critical pedagogy, qualitative methodology.

Samevatting

Onverpoosde opvoedkundige, ekonomiese en maatskaplike ongelykhede in Suid-Afrika bestendig ongelyke toegang en deelname vir 'n beduidende aantal universiteitstudente. In besonder word 'n groot aantal eerste-generasie, werkersklas en swart studente wisselvallig geposisioneer binne instellings en het minder geleenthede om akademiese hulpbronne te omskep in suksesvolle uitkomst. In reaksie tot hierdie strukturele beperkings, ondersoek die studie voorgraadse studente se ervaring van pedagogiese en institusionele bedeling by 'n voorheen historiese begunstigde Suid-Afrikaanse universiteit. Die studie se sentrale navorsingsvraag kan soos volg gestel word:

Gegewe die strukturele ongelykhede binne universiteite, hoe kan pedagogiese en institusionele bedeling eerste-generasie studente in staat stel om beskikbare hulpbronne te omskep in die bekwaamhede tot gelyke deelname?

Die navorsingsprobleem word geïnformeer deur die aanname dat toegang tot hoër onderwys nie beteken dat individu die vryheid het om op 'n gelyke wyse deel te neem en in dieselfde uitkomst te voldoen nie. Die navorsingsprobleem het die daarstelling van vier navorsingsvrae meegebring:

- 1. Hoe het strukturele toestande op skool, in die familie en binne die gemeenskap die omskakeling van hulpbronne bewerkstellig of teengewerk in die bekwaamhede tot gelyke deelname?*
- 2. Hoe weerhou die universiteit se pedagogiese en institusionele bedeling die omskakeling van hulpbronne in die bekwaamhede tot gelyke deelname?*
- 3. Hoe stel die pedagogiese en institusionele bedeling op universiteit die student in staat om hulpbronne om te skakel in die bekwaamhede tot gelyke deelname?*
- 4. Hoe kan die studente se ervarings gebruik word as getuie tot die ontwikkeling van bekwaamhede toepassing vir gelyke deelname?*

Die studie is vervat binne 'n transformerende paradigma, waar kwalitatiewe metodes toegepas word om die ervarings van agt voorgraadse universiteitstudente oor 'n tydperk van drie jaar te volg. Ek het kwalitatiewe data versamel deur gebruik te maak van verskeie

narratiewe navorsingsmetodes, insluitend omvattende onderhoude, fokusgroepe en digitale stories. 'n Verdere aspek van my dataversameling was om die studente as medenavorsers te ken in die studie, en daardeur die studente se stemme toe te laat om meer lig te werp op die kompleksiteit van onderliggende ongelyke deelname.

Die teoretiese raamwerk waaruit die navorsing onderneem is integreer Amartya Sen en Martha Nussbaum se 'bekwaamheidsbenadering' ['capability approach'] met kritiese sosiale teorie. Die 'capability approach' is 'n multi-dimensionele analitiese benadering wat ek gebruik om die fokus vanaf meetbare akademiese uitkomst te verskuif na die vergelykbare geleenthede wat beskikbaar is aan die navorsing se deelnemers. Hierdie teoretiese benadering bied 'n egalitariese evaluering van die individuele gevolge van ongelykheid, maar terselfdertyd behou dit 'n fokus op die agentskap en hulpbronne wat studente bring na hoër onderwys. Gebaseer op die raamwerk, argumenteer ek dat ongelyke deelname 'n herstelbare onreg is wat deels aangespreek kan word deur die gelykmatige verdeling van hulpbronne en die daarstelling van bekwaamhede ontwikkeling.

Die uitkomst van die data-analise is 'n bekwaamheidgedrewe toepassing, waarin ek ses voorstel en verdedig as 'n pedagogiese reaksie tot ongelykhede soos uitgewys in die navorsingsdata. Die ses bekwaamhede is as volg:

1. *Praktiese rede*
2. *Kritiese geletterdheid*
3. *Studente navorsing*
4. *Beraadslagende deelname*
5. *Kritiese affiliasie*
6. *Waardes vir openbare welwillendheid*

Die bekwaamhede benaderende praktyk konseptualiseer gelyke deelname op 'n spektrum waar aan die eenkant, gelykheid definieer word as toegang tot die hulpbronne en geleenthede om prysenswaardige uitkomst te behaal in lyn met studente se bekwaamhede, agentskap en strewes. Aan die anderkant van die spektrum, verwys ongelyke deelname na studente wie kwesbaar is om op te skop, die skaarsheid van hulpbronne in die gesig staar en wie nie volhoubare toegang tot pedagogiese of institusionele bedeling het nie, wat hulle in

staat sou stel om beskikbare hulpbronne om te skakel in gelyke deelname. Ten slotte maak ek aanbevelings rakende die geleentehede vir voorgraadse universiteitstudiante wat gelyke deelname kan meebring.

Sleutelwoorde: hoër onderwys, gelyke deelname, menslike ontwikkeling, die 'bekwaamheidsbenadering' [*capabilities approach*], maatskaplike geregtigheid, kritiese pedagogie, kwalitatiewe metodologie

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List of abbreviations

CHE – Council on Higher Education

CHET – Centre for Higher Education Transformation

CRHED – Centre for Research on Higher Education and Development

HDCA – Human Development and Capability Association

DHET – Department of Higher Education and Training

HESA – Higher Education South Africa

NSFAS – National Student Financial Aid Scheme

SRC – Student Representative Council

UFS – University of the Free State

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for funding from the National Research Foundation, the Department of Science and Technology Chair in Higher Education and Human Development and the Centre for Research in Higher Education and Development (CRHED) at the University of the Free State.

The following people have played an invaluable role in the completion of this thesis:

Prof. Melanie Walker and Dr Merridy Wilson Strydom for their sustained mentorship during the past three years, and for creating a rigorous space for intellectual development at CRHED.

The scholarly community at CREHD, and in particular to Mikateko, Oliver and Tendayi for the fertile conversations that have been woven into this research.

Prof Andre Keet and former colleagues at the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice for cultivating values for the public good.

Lucretia Smith, for your assistance with countless administrative tasks, and for encouraging words in between deadlines. Margaret Linström for language editing and proofreading.

I am deeply grateful to Toy Janse van Rensburg and the hounds whose love, support, and presence meant the world to me during these past three years.

To my parents, Anton and Riana Calitz and my sister Adéle Steyn for your love and support. The beloved friends whose good sense and humour kept me sane, in particular Cornelis Muller, for your friendship and wisdom, and Janeke Thumbran, for two decades of conversations that taught me to see the world differently.

I am deep indebted to the countless university students and learners who have crossed my path, whose courage has inspired my commitment to socially-just education. And most importantly to the participants. This research would not have been possible without your commitment to the project. *Ke a le boa.*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Once the commodity value of people displaces their intrinsic human worth or dignity, we are well on our way to a state of barbarism. Unless and until we bring back into our paradigms, and thus into our social analyses, the entire human being and the ways in which human beings can live fulfilled lives beyond mere economic needs, we will continue to promote anti-human philosophies and policies that ultimately tend to work to the benefit of those who have, and to the detriment of those who do not.

Neville Alexander¹

1.1 Mapping the problem of unequal participation

South African higher education is a complex landscape marked by uneven freedoms and opportunities, and the historical inequalities that characterize the country's economic and social segregation. While universities offer the promise of knowledge, employment and enhanced lives, they are also competitive spaces where resources and opportunities are not equally distributed. In this project, I have taken a social justice approach to first-generation² student experiences of structural arrangements at a historically advantaged university. I applied Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach to the research problem, which is based on the assumption that inequality in higher education is a remediable injustice³. The capability approach made it possible to investigate the individual consequences of inequality, while retaining a focus on the agency and resources that students bring to higher education.

The research has found that unequal participation is a multidimensional injustice at the intersection of neoliberal policies, distributional inequality, identity misrecognition,

¹ Quoted in Vally & Motala 2014: 1.

² The definition of first-generation students used in this thesis is students who are the first person in their immediate family to attend university. In the thesis, two participants have been included who do not for this definition of first-generation students, in order to demonstrate the complexity of unequal participation. As discussed in subsequent chapters, a number of individual and institutional factors make it difficult for them to achieve equality of participation, despite not being classified as first-generation.

³ Sen 2009: vii.

institutional arrangements, and pedagogical arrangements. I approached the research problem using a theoretical integration of the capability approach and critical social theory⁴ to critique the distributional inequality in higher education. Although studies have investigated systemic conditions that exclude students from equal participation at university, relatively few empirical studies⁵ have applied a capability approach to first-generation student experiences in South African higher education.

My interest in this problem emerged from questions about whether pedagogical arrangements were enabling first-generation students to participate equally at university. Drawing on evidence of structural inequalities during engagement with students, and informed by the well-publicised⁶ exclusion of working-class, poor and black⁷ university students the study was designed in response to qualitative evidence of structural injustices⁸. This research interest was deepened by evidence that foundational programmes seemed to have limited potential to develop capabilities that could increase equal academic participation. In the early stages of the project, these observations shifted the focus away from assumptions about student deficits towards structural deficits in pedagogical and institutional arrangements. Instead of asking how students should adapt to institutions, the research interrogated the responsibility that institutions have to create conditions that enable equal participation. The study also takes into account the academic and personal capabilities that individual students should develop in order to benefit from pedagogical and institutional arrangements, thereby ensuring a fair balance between individual and institutional responsibility for participation.

Given the social justice focus of this research, I wanted to investigate these barriers using first-generation student perspectives, which informed the decision to conduct participatory research with students as co-inquirers. This decision was also guided by the intention to amplify first-generation voices in higher education research, instead of relying on a

⁴ Fraser 2000; 2008; 2013; Freire 1970; 1973; 1992.

⁵ Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Gachago *et al.* 2014; 2014a.

⁶ Scott *et al.* 2007; CHE 2010; CHE 2013; Ministry of Education 2013; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Khosi 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d.

⁷ The persistence of racialized classification of the population in South Africa means that the data reflected these apartheid-era categories.

⁸ Keeping in mind that HEI's have historically acted as centers of elite selection that created and reinforced social stratification in terms of social standing and professional capacity (Castells 2009).

hierarchical approach that prioritized expert opinions about student participation. While first-generation South African students have persistently lower participation and completion rates compared to other developing countries⁹, statistical analyses do not explain the structural and individual complexities and tensions embedded within this low participation and high drop-out system¹⁰. Based on the assumption that information about access and completion rates does not give an accurate picture of opportunities for participation, it was important to use student experiences to inform the research design.

The outcome of the study was a capability-informed praxis for undergraduate students based on the qualitative findings and broad principles of justice. Drawing on human development values¹¹, this praxis conceptualized equal participation on a spectrum where on the one end, equality means access to the resources, opportunities and arrangements needed to achieve valued outcomes aligned with student capabilities, agency and aspirations. On the other end of the spectrum, unequal participation refers to students positioned precariously at the institution, who are vulnerable to drop out, face resource scarcity, and do not have sustained access to pedagogical or institutional arrangements that enable them to convert available resources into the freedom for equal participation.

1.2 Situating unequal participation within the South African higher education landscape

Before outlining the research problem, I present a brief overview of policy and higher education research that helped me to formulate and refine the research questions, and to locate the study within the South African higher landscape. This section attempts to bring the question of institutional resource constraints and unequal participation into conversation with broader issues of resource scarcity and vulnerable youth in South Africa. It also positions the injustice of unequal participation within the context of current challenges faced by the higher education system.

During the transition to democracy, higher education policy was committed to creating transformed institutions where ‘the doors of learning would be open to all’ (Sitas 2011 quoting the Freedom Charter 1953). By 1997, the Department of Education’s (DoE) White

⁹ Bozzoli 2015.

¹⁰ World Bank Report 2013.

¹¹ ul Haq 2003.

Paper 3 outlined a programme of transformation for higher education as South Africa began building its democracy. White Paper 3 stipulated some of higher education's strategic functions as the following:

To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is thus a key allocator of life chances and an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens (Ministry of Education 1997: 3).

Since the 1990s, the higher education sector has moved through a number of major transitions in pursuit of these strategic goals. Notably, the institutional mergers and incorporations in 2006 attempted to even out the historical inequalities created by the neglect of historically black institutions (HBIs). Despite these efforts, HBIs still struggle to compete for adequate resources to reverse decades of discriminatory funding and development of infrastructure (Ministry of Education 2013).

Another significant transition occurred in 2006, when the Department of Education split into the Department of Basic Education, which deals with schooling up to secondary level, and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), which administers a broad range of post-school education and training routes. The DHET has been tasked with providing education and training opportunities for the millions of young people and adults who are not in school and are, in various ways, still excluded from participation in the social and economic life of the new democracy. For instance, there are currently around 3.4 million [32.9%] South Africans between the ages of 15 and 24 who are not in any form of education, training or employment (Ministry of Education 2013: 7; World Bank 2013; CHE 2013). In addressing these injustices, the DHET must create and sustain:

a post-school education and training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens, employers in both public and private sectors, as well as broader societal and developmental objectives (Ministry of Education 2013: xi).

In the past 21 years, there has been much progress in pursuing these objectives. As I discuss in more detail later, the university system has managed to produce a more racially representative cohort of students and graduates, while female students constituted 58% of the overall enrolment at universities for 2014 (Ministry of Education 2013: 33). Moreover, there have been institutional commitments to redesigning teaching and learning structures to enable more equitable access to knowledge, although the impact has been unevenly spread across institutions and deep forms of pedagogical and curricular transformation have been slow to take hold. Furthermore, earmarked funding and infrastructure in dedicated access, support and foundational programmes have afforded opportunities to students who would not previously have been admitted to university. These interventions have made some advances in redressing historically unjust exclusion, although their success has been uneven across institutions, which I discuss further in chapter two.

However, it would be naïve to evaluate these successes without asking how structural inequalities threaten to undermine systemic transformation. While the Constitution now protects the right of every citizen to pursue education, resource scarcity and unequal arrangements means that not all students have the same opportunities to access higher education or to succeed once they have gained entry. Increased student numbers have transformed the institutional demographic only in absolute numbers, since the proportional demographic representation has improved; although better, it remains very unequal. This failure to address expanding inequalities within structural arrangements reproduces the very socioeconomic injustices that expanded access seeks to address. Thus, while the *doors* of learning might be open to more students, to some extent the issue has shifted to what happens within the *walls* of higher education¹².

Overall, a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse student cohort has revealed weaknesses in the system to which there has been a protracted and uneven response. At the same time, HEI's are negotiating the pressure to compete in global rankings, knowledge production and research outputs, while underfunded institutions must also provide good quality teaching and learning by appropriately qualified staff. Amid growing concerns about the stable and

¹² To some extent the recent #FeesMustFall protests have reshifted the thinking to the issue of access again, which may have the unintentional effect of drawing attention away from what happens within the walls of higher education.

adequate funding that higher education needs to fulfil these functions, universities' ability to provide equal opportunities for the degree of participation needed to achieve aspirations and develop potential is precarious. Therefore, although the question of *access* to higher education remains important, it is also essential to understand how these competing demands influence the opportunities of individuals to achieve equal participation.

1.2.1 Higher education and inequality in South Africa

The *socioeconomic inequality* at the core of South Africa's intersecting social and political crises is reflected within the microcosm of higher education, where the possibility of successful completion is influenced by individual and structural factors such as poverty, school of origin and access to basic resources (Ministry of Education 2014). With a Gini coefficient of 0.64 (HSRC 2014), South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, with the associated poverty, violence, social segregation, and human rights violations associated with extreme inequality. This means that school-leavers from historically excluded groups who aspire to higher education must navigate the structural injustices which prevent fair distribution of basic social services such as health, nutrition and good quality schooling.

Yet, while some aspects of higher education still perpetuate inequality, successful completion of a degree has high stakes in a country where in 2013, the percentage of young people aged 15 to 24 'without work but available for and seeking employment' was 53.6% (World Bank Report 2013; CHE 2014). In comparison, the unemployment rate for graduates is much lower at 7% (Broekhuizen & Van der Berg 2013). Although there is a complex education-employment fallacy that I explore in chapter 2, and a growing number of unemployed graduates (Jansen 2013), there is also evidence that university graduates have a better chance to access decent work and improved quality of life than young people not in employment, training, or education (Ministry of Education 2013; World Bank Report 2013). In addition, while a human capital stance foregrounds the economic failure of unemployed young people who 'were not accumulating human capital that could improve their employability', there are similarly convincing human development arguments that could be made about the tragedy of these systemic failures for the opportunity freedoms, quality of life and well-being of new generations of South Africans.

The comparatively low participation rate of 19.5% in South African higher education, together with an urgent shortage of high-level skills will probably 'act as a major impediment to achieving the government's economic development goals' (Ministry of Education 2015: 14; HRSC Report 2008: 1; see CHE 2013: 52 for a similar argument). According to the human development perspective, the state's economic goals within a strongly market-driven system are necessary but not necessarily sufficient to lead the expansion of the public good, namely decent employment or good quality public services. Nevertheless, young people who have received a good quality higher education may be better prepared to respond to these challenges and to create alternatives than students who never have the opportunity to study, or those who leave higher education burdened with debt, without a recognized qualification, and with diminished opportunities to pursue their aspirations.

1.2.2 Race, gender, class and exclusion

Higher education's policy response to persistent inequality reflects the continued struggle against race-, gender- and class-based exclusion. Beginning during the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, and in particular after 1994, the student demographic expanded to include a higher percentage of black students, which grew from 53 to 67% of the national student population between 1996 and 2010 (CHE 2013). However, by 2010 the net participation rate for black students remained relatively low at 14%, and by 2011 the national participation rate for both black and Coloured students was only 14%, while participation for white students was 57%, and 47% for Indian students (CHE 2013: 14). The national participation rate reported for 2013 increased to 19.5%. When disaggregated by racial group, however, only 16.5% of black students and 14.5% of Coloured students were participating, while a much higher 48.9% of Indian students and 54.7% of white students enrolled (Ministry of Education 2015). Therefore, even though there has been some improvement in the enrolment rate, there is still evidence of major inequality based on race (Ministry of Education 2015).

Furthermore, while there has been progress made in retaining more students within the system, persistent racial disparities in participation do not give a complete picture of the extent of inequality in higher education. A report by the Council on Higher Education (2013)

found that when the high drop-out rate is taken into account, where as many as 55%¹³ of undergraduate students drop out, only 5% of black and Coloured students completed their qualifications, which is an 'unacceptable failure to develop the talent in the groups where realisation of potential is most important' (CHE 2013: 51). More recently, disaggregated data on race and gender for the 2012 cohort showed that black and Coloured males had a 37.5% and 39.5% chance of drop-out respectively, while white females had only a 10.1% chance of drop-out, which also reflects historical patterns of inequality (Ministry of Education 2015: 21).

While these racial disparities remain a serious concern, the growth of a black middle class suggests that an over-simplified analysis of race and participation can downplay the *intersectionality* of race and class in participation patterns (Du Toit 2010). At issue then is the way that the resource insecurity and identity misrecognition associated with socioeconomic class become blurred when previously disadvantaged students are treated as a homogenized group.

Understanding the intersection of race and class could provide a more critical understanding of the *multidimensional* nature of unequal participation. A new White Paper on the Post-School Sector released by the DHET at the end of 2013, and which effectively replaces White Paper 3, summarizes this intersectional disadvantage as the following:

A growing black middle class has been empowered by the new conditions created by the arrival of democracy, and its members have managed to transform their lives in many ways. However, the majority of South Africans have still to attain a decent standard of living. Most black people are still poor; they are still served by lower quality public services and institutions (including public educational institutions) than the well-off (Ministry of Education 2013: 4).

In response to these patterns of unequal access, an important policy goal is to increase participation in the system from 17.3 to 25% by 2030 (Ministry of Education 2013: 30). Yet at the same time, persistently low graduation rates mean that the emphasis on expanded

¹³ 'In the best-performing cohort analysed to date (the 2006 cohort), only 35% graduated within five years, and it is estimated that 55% of the intake will never graduate. This translates into a loss of some 70 000 students from the cohort' (CHE 2013: 52).

student input has been positioned alongside interventions to retain students once they enter the system. The importance of increasing access and successful participation foregrounds the complex reasons for the persistent poor performance within the sector, which include: 1) inequality in access to high-quality schooling; 2) school-leavers who are not prepared for the academic demands of university; 3) inadequate early warning systems for students who need support; 4) inadequate funding, poor living conditions and insufficient support needed to adjust to the academic and social demands of university; 5) generally weak support for the professional development of undergraduate teaching staff (Ministry of Education 2013: 32).

While all the factors above are pertinent to the research problem, of particular interest is the attention drawn to the interventions that universities have made available to address the needs of underprepared and/or underperforming students, including a focus on curricula, support for teaching staff, mentoring for students, and also a particular emphasis on improving the quality of undergraduate teaching (Ministry of Education 2013: 32). Although the White Paper mentions how this foundational provision is unevenly spread across the system, of greater importance to this research is that once these arrangements are in place, the need to assess whether students are able to convert resources and opportunities into expanded participation.

In conclusion, the intersection of high attrition, youth unemployment, race, gender and class are directly related to the research problem, since exclusion from the system before graduation is a reality for many first-generation students. Yet between initial access to the institution and eventual drop out, there are dimensions of unequal participation that are less usefully captured only by tracking the number of students who drop out or who eventually graduate. Significantly increased enrolments are complicated by obstacles to 'substantial and comprehensive inclusion' (Singh 2011: 486), which points to 'a disjuncture between policy aimed at promoting inclusivity and the experiences of students and staff in the higher education sector' (Bozalek & Boughey 2012: 688). So while increased access appears to enable more equitable higher education (Badsha 2004), structural inequality can still be found in 'the subtext of the organisational life even as institutions seek to transform' (CHE 2010: 179). This means that besides resource constraints, there are embedded institutional codes, cultures and practices that exclude and marginalize students in different ways. For instance, language of instruction has been prominent in policy debates, and for many

students education that is not their home language has added another dimension of inequality¹⁴.

1.2.3 Funding constraints in higher education

Another urgent problem facing South African higher education and directly related to the question of undergraduate participation is an under-resourced system at the intersection of national inequality and individual poverty, as demonstrated recently in the nationwide #FeesMustFall¹⁵ protests (Bozzoli 2015; McKenna 2015). South Africa's national allocation of GDP to higher education is only 0.6 %, which falls short of African and global resource commitments to higher education (Bozzoli 2015; Du Preez 2015; Dickinson 2015; Pithouse 2015). Moreover, South Africa allocates only 12% of its total expenditure on education to higher education, while other African and OECD countries appropriate 20 and 23.4% to higher education respectively (Bozzoli 2015). At the same time, South African state subsidy has been declining in real terms, which means that while student numbers have increased dramatically, state funding has not increased in relation to the growing student body (Bozzoli 2015; (Ministry of Education 2015; HESA 2014) (**see Figure 1 below**). Because state subsidy has decreased from 50% to the current 40% of total funding in the past 20 years (Bozzoli 2015), HEI's have become more reliant on funding from tuition fees and donor or 'third stream' income, which is a relatively unstable source of funding.

¹⁴ The University of the Free State conducted a language poll for students and staff in the first week of November 2015 as part of the ongoing transformation of its language policy. Currently tuition is offered in English and Afrikaans, which raises questions about equity and fair opportunities for the majority of students who are not Afrikaans speakers and do not have the opportunity for tuition in their home language.

¹⁵ Nationwide student-led protests erupted in October 2015 in reaction to the suggested fee increases at South African universities in 2016. The protests also foregrounded issues of transformation and issues of quality around teaching and learning. The Ministry of Higher Education eventually agreed to a zero percent fee increase for 2016. In the second week of November 2015, Stellenbosch University, a previously advantaged and predominantly Afrikaans university, announced its decision to change its language of instruction to English.

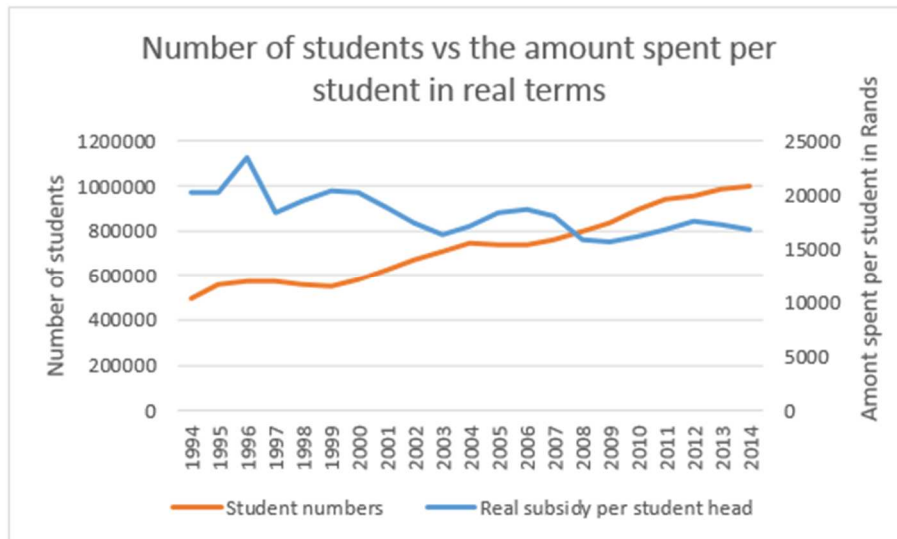


Figure 1: Declining state funding to HE¹⁶

This situation has intensified the responsibility of students to carry the cost of higher education, thereby increasing the likelihood of exclusion due to financial reasons. Since both institutional and individual sources of funding are inadequate and precarious, access and equal participation based on resource security continues to exclude poor students.

In addition, many students depend on funding and scholarships to afford tuition and basic living costs (Du Toit 2010; Fataar 2003). Yet despite significant annual increases, allocations by South Africa’s national bursary scheme, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme [NSFAS], have not been sufficient to meet the needs of all eligible students, which raises the question of how increased future enrolments are to be funded. Following public protests by students who were forced to leave universities and colleges due to financial reasons, the DHET confirmed that to provide bursaries for poor and working-class university students, allocated funds needed to increase to R36-billion from the current R4.094-billion, while nationally, a total of R51-billion would be needed to fund university and college students who qualify for admission (Khosi 2015; Nkopo 2015). Yet given the reality of underfunded higher

¹⁶ Source: Bozzoli 2015.

education institutions, this raises concerns about how to increase participation rates and support for poor students currently enrolled at universities¹⁷.

1.2.4 Resources and social justice

Despite higher education's commitment to equity and justice, the resource scarcity associated with socioeconomic inequalities filters down into universities (Vally & Motala 2014; Alexander 2011; Khosi 2015a, 2015b, 2015c and 2015d). While arguably all students and staff are affected to some extent by institutional resource constraints, students who enter an institution with resource vulnerability, less academic preparation, the pressure to work while studying, misrecognized agency and potential to succeed, together with cultural resources that are devalued within embedded institutional cultures are particularly vulnerable to exclusion. In contrast, students from wealthy and middle class families can more realistically afford basic needs such as tuition and textbooks, and are more likely to possess the academic and social resources, mobility and dispositions that enable them to navigate the institution successfully. This unequal positioning was vividly expressed in a recent collective statement by South African academics during the #FeesMustFall protests:

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. It is no longer tenable that the burden of balancing the university ledger be placed on the backs of the poorest students and the worst-paid workers who have the least capacity to bear it (Mail & Guardian 2015).

A lack of resources not only constrains the ability of individual students to cover tuition costs or the institutional commitment to assist poor students. Universities running on insufficient budgets with a significantly larger student body also face operational constraints that can affect the quality of teaching and learning, the retention of qualified staff, adequate infrastructure, attention to pedagogy, and a basic threshold of resources needed for equal participation (Bozzoli 2015; HESA 2014).

¹⁷ It will also be important to track how the state intends to resource its commitment to no fee increases in 2016.

At the same time, there has been concern that investment in earmarked state funding for foundational provision is not adequate to ensure that teaching and learning can respond to the diverse student cohort (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015). If universities make it their mission to enable all students who are admitted to have a fair opportunity to succeed (Tinto 2014b), then state funding would have to be aligned to the investment in human and academic resources that have been shown to enable success for the majority of students. Despite a range of interventions aimed at improving retention, these programmes have remained marginal and underfunded (Ministry of Education 2015: 21), as I discuss in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

1.2.5 Equity, transformation and neoliberal higher education

Closely related to the resource scarcity discussed above is another significant challenge within South African public universities, which is responding to increased demand for access, while simultaneously being influenced by global neoliberal trends, such as outsourcing of auxiliary services, the employment of executive deans, performance management and other managerial practices (McKenna 2015). In the wake of the national tuition fee protests, critical scholars are calling for a collective resistance to 'the dangerous construction of higher education as a big business' (McKenna 2015). This reflects a growing concern about the integrity of public universities:

[A]s students fees escalate, along with student debt, as workers are outsourced to private companies, large bonuses are paid to senior administrators, and academic life is increasingly corporatized (Mail & Guardian 2015; see also Pithouse 2015).

The neoliberal agenda is also evident in the pressure on universities to implement 'efficiency measures' (Ministry of Education 2013: 2) such as contract-based teaching, contributing to the peripheral positioning of foundational provision for undergraduate students.

Despite the increasing socioeconomic inequalities in South Africa, in theory higher education policy has shown a sustained commitment to equity issues, even though implementation, coherence, and stable funding remain urgent issues to be addressed (Mayowo & Lewin 2014; Cloete *et al* 2009; Wilson-Strydom 2015a). So while taking into account South Africa's relatively unique historical trajectory, which has retained its focus on equity within rapidly

corporatizing global systems, the sector has not been immune to narrow ideas about development as economic growth (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; see also Badat 2010).

Other analyses suggest that equity and development goals have converged since the country's need for economic growth cannot be met without developing the intellectual talent of the majority of students entering the system, suggested by the connection between knowledge production and equity targets in formulating the National Development Plan in 2001 (CHE 2013; Badat 2010; Scott 2009; Scott 2012; Cloete 2011). Yet despite these assurances, an important barrier to equal participation is the *position of first-generation undergraduates* in a system that prioritizes innovation, the production of new knowledge, research outputs and doctoral graduates. While these are crucial goals that have the potential to contribute towards sustainable human development (Boni & Walker 2013; see also Unterhalter 2013), it would be important to establish the position of vulnerable undergraduate, working-class and/or first-generation students within the context of three major goals in the National Development Plan for Higher Education, namely: 1) 'higher education as the major driver of the information-knowledge system', 2) a 'dominant producer of new knowledge', and 3) 'opportunities for social mobility... equity, social justice and democracy' (Ministry of Education 2001: 262; see also Cloete 2011).

In the formulation of my research problem, there is a worrying gap between the misframing of 'first-generation students' who 'cannot read, spell or count' (Fraser 2008; 2009; Boughey & Niven 2012; see also Bozalek & Boughey 2012), the institutional goals listed above, and the reality of a low success rate for student populations who would benefit from the opportunities offered by higher education. Universities may be committed in theory to equity but are under pressure to meet research quotas and improve pass rates in the push towards research and innovation and stable funding (Ministry of Education 2013). While these goals are not necessarily incompatible, they create considerable tension in making the transition to research-intensive institutions. Given this tension, how could an underfunded higher education system that prioritizes high-level research and a sustainable contribution to the knowledge economy manage the trade-offs between research commitments and the resources, staff development and institutional transformation needed to invest in students whose enrolment accounts for a considerable proportion of state subsidy?

To put the position of first-generation students into an institutional context, it is also necessary to consider how public funding from the state is allocated at South African universities. This draws attention to the way that resource allocation remains a serious concern in creating conditions for equal participation. Keeping in mind the high attrition rate, and that only a small percentage of graduates continue to postgraduate studies, state funding for teaching *input* is still significantly higher than funding allocation for actual teaching outputs or graduations (Ministry of Education 2013: 9; see also Woodiwiss 2008). At the same time, this teaching output grant – which is state funding that was introduced to incentivise increased graduations – is only weighted at 16% (Ministry of Education 2013). This means that over 60% of state funding is allocated for enrolments, which for first-generation students vulnerable to drop out and/or the unequal participation reflected in ‘marginal passes’ (Yeld quoted in *Mail & Guardian* 2012), is arguably a benefit to an institution’s budget, rather than to an individual student’s future opportunities:

The South African higher education system has, for years, operated a 'win win' situation. Universities admit students who they say are not adequately prepared for higher education. At least 50% of these students fail. But universities take the subsidy (more than 80% of the total government allocation) and blame the school system for the failure. In other words, they keep the money and displace the blame (Cloete 2011).

In light of the contextual landscape mapped above, concerns about poor throughput and low retention rates and actual graduation rates do not give much insight into the actual equality and/or quality of participation, since one student can scrape by academically, having met the minimum requirements of coursework, while another student could have developed critical academic capabilities while gaining important extracurricular experience and professional networks. These two degree ‘outcomes’ appear identical on paper, yet are unlikely to produce the same future opportunities. Moreover, the long-term issue is not only participatory equality at university, but what this means for future employment, opportunities, mobility, and contribution to socially just outcomes.

1.2.6 Student deficit or structural exclusion?

Before moving to the research problem, I explore the possibility that the tension between development and equal participation for first-generation students could be indicative of structures which are not conducive to success for large number of undergraduate students.

In a meritocratic system, failure and exclusion are characteristic of systemic constraints that fail to provide equal opportunities for all its members. This meritocracy is reflected in economic and social arrangements that determine a student's place in the hierarchy and therefore position some first-generation students as particularly vulnerable to exclusion or unequal participation (Fraser 2013; Currie & Newson 1998). Given South Africa's complex history, this meritocratic system is complicated by the misrecognition associated with race, gender, class and other identity-specific hierarchies (Fraser 2008; Walker 2005 a).

In this study, I am concerned that the drive for recognition and resources creates an unjust playing field where a compromised public school system, the erosion of basic social services such as health, housing and transport, and extreme socioeconomic inequalities compromise some students' ability to compete as equal members when they first enter the institution (Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Leibowitz 2011; Mthethwa 2013; Soudien 2007; Fataar 2012; CHE Monitor Report # 6, 2010). In response to this accumulative injustice, I am interested in whether:

modern mass universities [are] really doomed to be like mediaeval fortresses, with the peasants always locked outside their gates? Is there an explanation for this long litany of 'failure' other than the recalcitrant 'unfairness' of institutions? (Marginson 2011: 26).

These are the structural complexities that contributed towards the formulation of my research problem and the research questions outlined below.

1.3 The research problem

As the preceding section has shown, institutional inequalities exacerbate cultures and practices that are slow to respond to the needs of diverse student cohorts. Yet unequal participation is an injustice that can be partially addressed by equally distributing resources and arrangements for capability development in pedagogy and institutional structures, while keeping in mind broader clusters of conversion factors that constrain participation such as school, personal circumstances, social inequality, and poverty.

I have tracked the experiences of eight undergraduate first-generation students at a South African university to investigate the freedom they have for equal participation within these

structural constraints. The research problem is informed by the assumption that having access to educational resources in higher education does not mean that individuals have the freedom to participate in an equitable way. This leads me to the following research problem:

Given the structural inequalities within universities, how could pedagogical and institutional arrangements enable first-generation students to convert available resources into the capability for equal participation?

This research problem has been designed to determine whether pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university perpetuate inequality and offer students adequate resources, recognition and representation¹⁸ to convert education into capabilities and functionings for participation. I also want to establish whether a capability approach could respond to these inequalities with pedagogy and policies that enhance students' freedom for participation. In this thesis, I defend the argument that structural inequalities create unequal participation and leave vulnerable students less able to benefit from available resources in the same way as privileged peers.

1.4 Research questions

Based on the research problem, I then formulated four research questions which guided the collection and analysis of data, as discussed in the empirical chapters.

5. *How do structural conditions at school, in the family, and the community enable and constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
6. *How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
7. *How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enable the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?*
8. *How could student experiences be used as evidence to inform the design of capability praxis for equal participation?*

1.5 Rationale for the research design

Since the aim of this research was to investigate how the actual lived experiences of first-generation students in higher education fit into the complex policy debates outlined earlier, I

¹⁸ Fraser 2009.

used a qualitative research design to highlight tensions and gaps in the policy goals and the experiences of first-generation students. In framing the research questions, I have taken into account that strategic policy goals and institutional mandates have clear directions for practice and research, but reveal relatively little information about actual student experiences. The intended outcome of these findings was to challenge the disconnection between policy goals on the one hand and the inclusion of actual student experiences in the policy and institutional environment. For these reasons, I have relied on the richness of student voices in interview data to provide evidence of their freedom for participation. Since the research project exceeds the scope of my thesis, there were space and time constraints to reporting on collected data, which means that I have relied mostly on interviews, even though a large amount of qualitative data were collected.

1.6 A working definition of equal participation

I now present a preliminary working definition of equal participation, which I expand in chapter 3 [section 3.4], and which is formalized into a list of six capabilities for equal participation in chapter 8. The definition reframes student success as ‘equal participation’ to draw attention to the limits of academic success as a measure of equal opportunity to benefit from the resources in higher education. **Figure 2** below summarizes this definition as follows: the outermost level **(1)** is access to the institution and to a basic resource threshold needed to participate. The middle level **(2)** is concerned with structural arrangements, discussed at length in the next chapter, which enable and/or constrain individuals’ ability to convert the available access and resources into success and participation. The final level **(3)** represents the capabilities and personal resources that the individual brings to the university, which the student uses to convert available resources and arrangements into participation and success. In the construction of my argument, when any one of these resource and opportunity clusters is compromised, then the ability to participate equally is diminished.

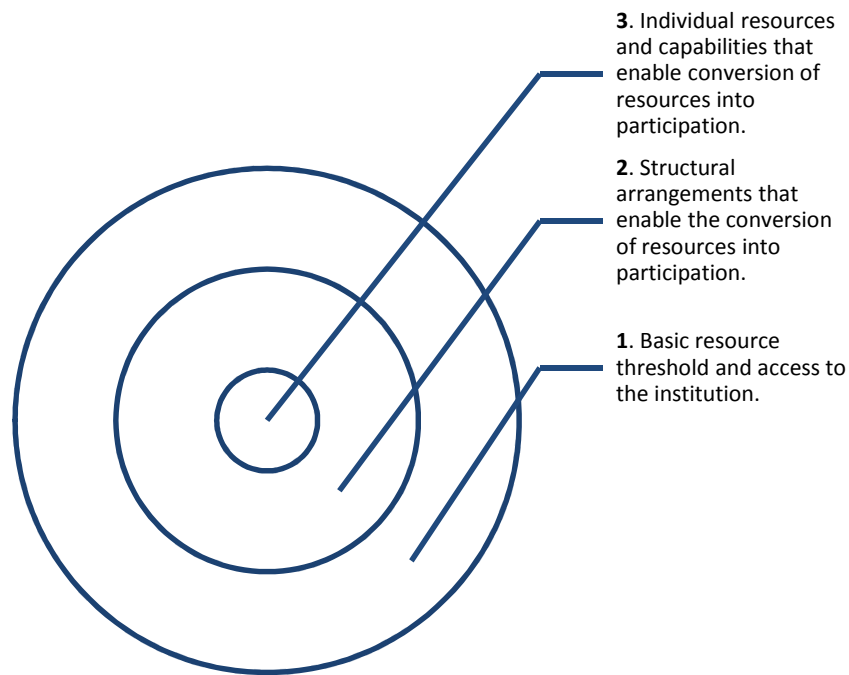


Figure 2: Working definition of equal participation

For instance, an individual may have access to adequate funds for tuition, and the potential to convert academic resources into success. However, if the arrangements are not conducive to learning [e.g. crowded classrooms, inadequate number of permanent staff] or misrecognition based on race, class and gender operating with pedagogical spaces, this would erode the freedom to convert available clusters into actual participation. In a different case, a student may have access to enabling structural arrangements, but a lack of tuition, or being academically unprepared for university learning might constrain her freedom to convert academic resources into participation. These levels are also interconnected in that the pedagogical arrangements – if aligned to student capabilities – could enable the development of underdeveloped capabilities needed for participation before the student is excluded.

1.7 Chapter outline

I now present a brief overview of the nine chapters in the thesis, where I summarize the content of each chapter.

Chapter 1	In <i>chapter one</i> , I introduce the research questions and give a brief overview of the research problem. The chapter also outlines my positionality as a researcher.
Chapter 2	The <i>second chapter</i> is a literature review of relevant research used to refine and frame the research problem. In this review, I focus on two primary approaches to student participation; the first approach addresses unequal participation using a remedial approach to student problems, while the other more critical cluster takes a structural approach to unequal participation.
Chapter 3	In the <i>third chapter</i> , I introduce the capability approach and critical social theory as the conceptual framework within which I collected and analysed data. The capability approach is founded on the principles of social justice and human development, which focus on both agency and structure in addressing unequal arrangements.
Chapter 4	<i>Chapter four</i> presents the methodology and methods of the research design. It maps out justifications for the qualitative, longitudinal research methodology and introduces the narrative research methods used to collect data.
Chapters 5, 6 & 7	<i>Chapter five</i> is the first empirical chapter in which I present evidence of student agency and structural inequalities before entry into higher education. Chapter six focuses on pedagogical and institutional arrangements that constrain the freedom for equal participation, while chapter seven looks at enabling arrangements.
Chapter 8	<i>Chapter eight</i> draws on the empirical findings to suggest praxis for higher education based on the development of six capabilities and an egalitarian distribution of resources.
Chapter 9	Finally, <i>chapter nine</i> concludes the research project with recommendations for institutional interventions and policy, while reviewing how the research questions were answered.

1.8 Researcher positionality

The normative stance I take as a researcher is an interest in the human consequences of structures of power, resources and hierarchies that perpetuate existing inequalities. Based on the egalitarian position I develop in later chapters, I believe that universities should offer challenging and fertile opportunities to develop the potential inherent in students. Such arrangements could provide a critical environment that recognizes that students bring capability clusters to the institutions.

In this study, I was positioned as both a facilitator on an academic literacy course and a doctoral student. My ideological stance on academic literacy has been informed by research within New Literacy Studies, in which literacy is defined as a socially-mediated practice instead of a set of decontextualized skills (Lea & Street 1998). As such, I have selected a methodology and designed research questions suited to the critical pedagogy that underlines my theoretical stance on academic literacy and critical pedagogy. In my view, transformative teaching and learning in higher education should disrupt unjust practices within pedagogy, institutional structures, and within the embedded power relations between staff and students.

Chapter 2

A structural analysis of first-generation student participation

Any theory of justice has to give an important place to the role of institutions... we have to seek institutions that promote justice.

Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice¹⁹

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the question of unequal participation by drawing on international and South African higher education research on ‘underprepared’ students. In the overview of these literatures, I wanted to understand institutional responses to first-generation and/or socioeconomically vulnerable university students. A critical reading of these literatures produced two approaches to student participation: firstly, much research focused on student underpreparedness and technical solutions to student problems. Secondly, a smaller and more critical cluster of literatures foregrounded the unequal structures within which students have to navigate higher education. Although there are important overlaps between these two clusters, this distinction has been helpful in exploring the broad range of literatures related to student participation. The affirmative approach in the first cluster of literatures addresses the symptoms of systemic inequalities, while the second cluster takes a transformative approach to the deep-seated structural barriers to participation (Fraser 2013).

While research that responds to the academic and social needs of underprepared university students offers a range of important lessons for policy and practice, this study was interested in research that positioned first-generation students within a structural analysis. For this reason, the review investigated how a deficit approach individualizes failure and misrecognizes student potential while downplaying or reproducing systemic injustices (Leibowitz 2011). I critique a deficit approach not only as status misrecognition but also as resource provision that is misaligned to student capabilities (Fraser 2009). I argue that this

¹⁹ Sen 2009: 82.

misframing is an institutional failure that wastes potential while perpetuating patterns of unequal participation.

I have organized this chapter as follows: the first two sections [2.2 and 2.3] introduce international and South African literatures that have paid attention to aspects of unequal opportunity, failure and exclusion, with an emphasis on undergraduate and socioeconomically vulnerable university students. In this section, I aim to identify major debates within the interdisciplinary research which respond to the complexity of unequal participation. Using this exploration of literatures, I identified areas within the research which have been relatively neglected. I also discussed how this review of a fragmented and frequently overlapping range of academic fields has guided the integration of structural critique and individual agency in my research design.

The third section [2.4] is an overview of literatures that focuses in particular on underprepared South African students on extended degree programmes, and which highlights the limitations of developmental interventions. The fourth and fifth sections [2.5 and 2.6] of the review introduce a structural critique of unequal participation, with a focus on literature that resists a deficit approach to underprepared students. The chapter is concluded with a case study [2.7] to illustrate the difference between an individual deficit and a structural approach to participation.

As an important caveat to the critique of academic development in this section, I must reiterate the importance of diverse institutional contexts that offer vastly different theoretical and practical approaches to academic development. Therefore, the critique is drawn from a number of sources, but does not attempt to generalize across these diverse intuitional contexts. Instead, I attempt to highlight some limitations and constraints within some academic development approaches which contribute towards unequal student participation.

The aim of this chapter is to position my research within the range of scholarly conversations around student participation, while identifying important fields of research and significant debates within the literatures. In particular, the review aims to offer a detailed overview of contentious issues in relation to my research questions. However, this is not an exhaustive account of the vast range of interdisciplinary research that responds to unequal participation

in higher education, and as such does not capture all the debates and contradictions in these research conversations.

2.2 Bridges, gaps and ‘underprepared’ students

Higher education research on underprepared students offers a wide range of interventions in response to unequal student participation. Interventions for vulnerable students are found across academic disciplines and are spread across a number of broad, interrelated and frequently overlapping fields, including **1) student engagement** (Axelson & Flick 2010; Christenson 2008; Govender 2012; Handelsman *et al.* 2005; Kahn 2014; Kahu 2014; Kuh 2003; Kuh 2009; Pietarinen *et al.* 2014; Pekrun *et al.* 2012; Quaye & Harper 2014; Rowley 2015; Strydom *et al.* 2010, Strydom *et al.* 2012; Strydom & Mentz 2013; Umbach & Wawrzynski 2005; Zepke & Leach 2010; Leach 2010); **2) the first-year experience** (Adams *et al.* 2006; Badenhorst & Kapp 2013; Bitzer 2005; Bojuwoye 2002; Cole & Korkmaz 2013; Krause & Coates 2008; Padgett 2014; Upcraft *et al.* 2004); **3) attrition, retention and throughput** (Alarcon & Edwards 2013; Barefoot 2004; 2008; Gregerman *et al.* 1998; Nelson *et al.* 2014; Ortiz & HeavyRunner 2003; Parmar & Trotter 2000; Perez *et al.* 2014; Samson 2005; SUN 2008); **4) access and success** (Akoojee & Nkomo 2007; Andrews 2015; Burke 2012; Christie *et al.* 2005; CHE 2010; Ministry of Education 2015; Dhunpath & Vithal 2012; Elliott 2005; Engel & Tinto 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer 2009; Hlalele & Alexander 2005; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Lubben *et al.* 2010; Maree 2015; McKenzie & Schweitzer 2001; Tinto 2014a; Tinto 2014b; Walton *et al.* 2015; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; 2015b) **5) widening participation** (Bridges 2006; Burke 2012; Christie *et al.* 2005; David *et al.* 2009; Godfrey 2004; Hockings *et al.* 2007; Walker 2008a; Wilkins & Burke 2015); and **6) first-generation and/or diverse students** (Ahmed 2012; Bowl 2001; Case 2007; Garriott *et al.* 2015; Haggis 2006; Harackiewicz *et al.* 2014; Kezar & Walpole 2014; Kezar *et al.* 2014; Mann 2001; Pascarella *et al.* 2004; Sandoval-Lucero 2014; Janse van Rensburg & Kapp 2015; Terenzini *et al.* 1996; Thomas & Quinn 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2014; Wilcox *et al.* 2005).

Analyses of student participation have become increasingly nuanced over the past few decades, **with more race-, class- and gender-based analyses** and a stronger focus on social justice (Adair & Dulhberg 2009; Archer & Hutchings 2000; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Brow 2009; Burke 2015; Harackiewicz *et al.* 2014; Marsh 2011; Moll *et al.* 1992; Reay *et al.* 2001; Rose 2005; 2012; Sayer 2005; Stein 2000; Reay *et al.* 2005; Solórzano & Smith-Maddox 2002;

Walker 2005a; Walker 2008a; Yosso 2005). Moreover, the past decade has seen an increase in research that integrates the academic and psycho-social demands of university study by acknowledging the complexity of **becoming a university student** (Adams *et al.* 2006; Alarcon & Edwards 2013; Beard *et al.* 2014; Busato 2000; Chemers *et al.* 2001; Cheng *et al.* 2013; Ewald 2007; Gachago *et al.* 2014a; Gachago *et al.* 2014b; Kristjánsson 2008).

While important lessons emerged in a number of the studies identified above, the **student engagement**²⁰ literature is particularly aligned with my research interest because of the broad focus on students' participation in learning and campus life, which are also important aspects of equal participation. Student engagement is defined as 'students devoting their time to educationally purposeful activities' leading to academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005: 417-420), and is interested in the way that resources and opportunities are allocated by institutions to ensure that students are able to benefit from them (Kuh *et al.* 2005: 92; see also Strydom *et al.* 2010: 261-262).

Focal areas in the **student engagement** literature that resonate with my definition of equal participation include the following: student-based interventions that increase belonging (Engel & Tinto 2008; Zepke 2010), ownership of the learning process, undergraduate research, engaging pedagogies, and fostering student agency (Kuh *et al.* 2010), positioning the classroom as central to the process of engagement (Tinto 2014a), and predictors of graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; see also Strydom *et al.* 2010). Engel and Tinto's (2008) recommendations for expanded recognition include for example: improving academic preparation; providing additional financial aid; easing the transition to university; and encouraging engagement on campus. Scholars have framed engagement as a process of 'academic, attitudinal and social preparation' for university study which should promote interaction between students and staff (Lowe & Cook 2003: 5; see also Trowler 2014; Zepke & Leach 2010; Zepke 2010). Other analyses stress an important measure of engagement as a student's ability to 'see him/herself as a valued member of an academic and social community' (Tinto 2014b: 9; see also Zepke & Leach 2010).

²⁰ At the University of the Free State, the approach to teaching and learning focuses on student engagement, defined as 'what students do (the time and energy they devote to educationally purposeful activities) and secondly, what institutions do (the extent to which institutions employ effective educational practices) (UFS Integrated Report 2014: 40).

2.3 The limitation of affirmative approaches

The aspects of engagement listed above have contributed important insights to my research. I have found that research that takes a *socio-cultural* perspective acknowledges contextual factors such as power, race, class and gender and the complex ethical and political issues underlying disengagement. This literature also foregrounds agency; affiliation with lecturers and peers; the creation of active citizenship; an emphasis on the development of student capitals; and shaping institutional cultures to enable student belonging (Kahu 2013; 766; Zepke & Leach 2010; see also Christie *et al.* 2005; Mann 2001; McMahon & Portelli 2004). Yet although the theoretical and methodological differences in these clusters are significant, and despite important insights offered by this research, a number of limitations emerged in relation to my research problem. For instance, some studies aimed to increase motivation, self-efficacy, autonomy, and competence, which focuses on the agency of the individual student while downplaying the structural arrangements within which individual participation is cultivated (Alarcon & Edwards 2013; Blythman & Orr 2004; Busato *et al.* 2000; Christenson 2008; Fazey & Fazey 2001; Garriott *et al.* 2015; Gregerman *et al.* 1998; Haggis 2006; Kristjánsson 2010; Leach & Butler 2010; Pietarinen *et al.* 2014; Ryan & Deci 2000; Solomonides & Reid 2009; Whittaker 2008).

In response to these limitations, I have used Fraser's distinction between *affirmative and transformation approaches* to point out that many of the interventions reviewed in the sections above are affirmative approaches 'aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' (Fraser 2008: 82). Some remedial interventions based on an affirmative approach foreground a *skills model* that measured gaps, designed technical solutions, and implemented these solutions without taking contextual factors and systemic inequality into account. As such, much of the literature was focused on a *deficit approach* to student participation that aimed to remediate individual gaps while downplaying the role of structural constraints (Kahu 2013). These approaches also overemphasize the individual student's responsibility to cope within unjust arrangements. For instance, research that focuses on qualities like resilience or self-efficacy (Cole & Korkmaz 2013; Dass-Brailsford 2005; Van Dinther *et al.* 2011) downplayed contextual factors that constrain student participation and in this way risked

perpetuating a pathologizing view of students who were then held responsible for not being resilient (Theron 2011).

Without an analysis of social, political and historical factors, some interventions are bureaucratic and based on 'expert' interpretation of student problems, yet without consulting students (Brown 2009; Deneulin 2014). The assumption that the individual alone is responsible for the hard work, motivation and academic achievement necessary to make the transition from school to university thus misframes first-generation students as 'poorly prepared for learning and/or lacking motivation and academic ability' (Christie *et al.* 2008: 568). Another critical response summarizes this deficit discourse as:

the growing dominance of a neo-liberal culture emphasising individual competitiveness and responsibility spreading through society... A meritocratic ideology is central to this culture, bringing with it the message that your problems are all your fault. And similarly, your privileges are all your own achievement (Brennan & Naidoo 2008: 90).

These interventions also reinforced an approach to participation that **devalued existing student capabilities and resources**, which created a deficit approach that focused on what students were not yet able to achieve. At an institutional level, the deficit approach was evident in research findings that reflect:

[a]cademics' continuing and widespread negative expectations directed at undergraduate students. Throughout this study, students complained about persistent negative expectations of their chances of success on the part of university teachers. Lecturers would explain how few students historically passed a course and how difficult past students found the content, and tell them their numbers would be dramatically reduced in the course of the programme (CHE 2010: 110a).

Another limitation to the deficit approach was that it 'disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success' (Smit 2012: 378). Without embedding appropriate responsibility for equal participation in institutional structures, a deficit approach blames individual students for their failure to participate as equal members of academic communities (Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Fraser 2008; 2009).

2.4 Do developmental interventions enable equal participation?

In the review of literature, a significant yet contentious site of student participation was the various foundational interventions aimed at expanding student success, including extended curriculum programmes, psychological support, and financial aid. Although foundation provision continues to receive earmarked grants, the allocation of such resources does not necessarily mean that participation is being expanded as a crucial part of the equity response in higher education policy (Ministry of Education 2014; Walton *et al.* 2015). Some recent limitations have been identified as the need for nuanced approaches that could enable more students to graduate (Ministry of Education 2015: 23), while these foundational approaches have at times been unsuccessful, in some cases exacerbating exclusion (Walton *et al.* 2015: 263). In the section below, I apply a structural critique to the role of extended degree programmes and foundational provision in creating pedagogical environments that make it possible for students to participate as equal members of the institution.

Since all the participants in this research were registered on extended degree programmes, it was important to understand the debates outlined in the previous section within the context of programmes designed to increase access and success for first-generation students. The introduction of extended curriculum programmes (ECPs) responded to the increase of ‘underprepared’ students into higher education in the 1980s in response to a changing student demographic during the struggle against academic segregation and then in the transition towards democracy (Volbrecht 2003; see also Walker & Badsha 1993; Volbrecht & Boughey 2004; Garraway 2008; Dhunpath & Vithal 2012; Kioko 2010; Leibowitz 2012). Extended degree programmes²¹ form part of foundational support as envisioned the DHET, and earmarked state funding for foundational provision is allocated to universities (Ministry of Education 2014).

²¹ The participants in this research were all registered on extended degree programmes in the Humanities, which admitted the second highest number of undergraduate students at the university. At the University of the Free State, extended degree programmes are offered to students with a lower admission score who still manage to meet entry requirements. The three-year degree is extended over a period of four years in order to ‘bridge the gap between inadequate preparation at school and expected higher education achievement (UFS South Campus 2013b: 9). The UFS approach to extended provision further states that ‘skills and competencies acquired in the academic development modules are then applied in the subsequent years of study in the core disciplinary modules’ (UFS South Campus 2013b: 9).

The historical trajectory of access programmes and academic support programmes dates back to the 1980s, when institutions began responding to the academic ‘needs’ of the slowly expanding black student cohort, and intensifying as increasing numbers of students were admitted to university in the early 1990s (Ministry of Education 1997; Boughey 2010b; Scott 2009). By 1997, the DoE’s White Paper stipulated that it would be necessary to accelerate the provision of bridging and access programmes alongside the systemic transformation of pedagogy and institutional environments (Ministry of Education 1997). These programmes received significant funding²² from the DHET in order to increase academic success and graduation rates for disadvantaged students (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015: 8; see also Case *et al.* 2013; Kioko 2010; (Ministry of Education 1997; Ministry of Education 2006).

As pedagogical and curricular interventions, these interventions have been mandated to fix the ‘gaps’ with which students enter higher education, as discussed in the section above (Fraser 2013). ECPs are found in traditional universities and in universities of technology where they have been implemented across disciplines to help students make the transition from school to higher education (Eybers 2015; Krige & Bezuidenhout 2015; Louw & De Villiers 2015; Lubben *et al.* 2010; Pearce *et al.* 2015; Slabbert 2015). Foundational programmes are ‘intended to equip underprepared students with academic foundations that will enable them to successfully complete a recognised higher education qualification’ (Ministry of Education 2006 as quoted in Scott *et al.* 2007: 43). Programmes offer students additional time to complete their degrees, together with foundational provision meant to address knowledge and skill ‘gaps’. In relation to my research questions, extended degree programmes could make an important contribution to equal participation since they are designed to improve equality of outcomes for marginalized students (Boughey 2010b; CHE 2013; Scott *et al.* 2007; Ministry of Education 1997).

Some empirical studies suggest that foundational programmes have enabled students to successfully access learning at university (Andrews 2015; Bitzer 2005; 2009; Dednam &

²² While these programmes have received funding from external donors since the 1980s, in 2000, the first funding was made available to redress historical inequalities, which eventually led to the USAID Tertiary Funded Linkages Programme (TELP), preparing institutions the significant funding which became available in 2004 (Boughey N.D.). In 2009, R146 million was allocated to ECPs. This provision has risen on a yearly basis and the funding allocated for 2013/14 was R204.705 million (Van Staden 2013; see also Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015: 8).

Dednam 2012; Krige & Bezuidenhout 201; Louw & De Villiers 2015; Lubben *et al.* 2010; Mashiyi 2015). Research has also found that these programmes have been 'sites of innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices' that enhanced discipline-specific literacy skills, scholarly identities and student engagement (Case *et al.* 2013: 2; see also Loji 2010; Marnewick & Lourens 2010; Marshall & Case 2010; Volkwyn *et al.* 2014). Because modules offered by extended degree programmes are usually located on the margins of mainstream curricula, research has also shown evidence of pedagogical conditions that increased student confidence and belonging as members of the institution (Boughey 2010b; Ellery 2011), while other programmes offered evidence of pedagogy dedicated to introducing students to critical ways of being and thinking (Ellery 2011; Kioko 2010; McKenna 2012; Pym & Kapp 2013).

While there is a significant body of research on these extended degree programmes, there have been relatively few critical contributions to the work being done by South African academic development scholars in the 1980s and early 1990s that focused on how institutional structures needed to adapt to a changing student cohort (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015: 10; see also Dhunpath & Vithal 2012; Kioko 2010; Nzimande 1988; Ndebele 1995 in Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Vilakazi 1986; Volbrecht & Boughey 2004). Therefore, despite the incremental successes highlighted above, there is concern within the academic development community about limitations to foundational provision and its impact on student success. The problems within programmes have been summarized as the limitation that:

foundation provision focuses on a narrow band of students, over a limited time period, and that... separates the educational thinking and planning for foundation students from mainstream students. This is to the detriment of either group of students and lecturers (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015).

At the same time, persistent inequalities in access and throughput have also been connected to ineffective attempts to address inequalities, summarized as the following three issues:

*the need to acknowledge that injections of finance may secure access, but do not necessarily secure success; a concern about the proliferation and fragmentation of interventions which do not ultimately have systemic impact; and the need for multi-site, multi-method and longitudinal studies that track students' experiences through university and beyond (Walton *et al.* 2015: 263; see also Boughey 2007a).*

These three concerns are significant because they illustrate the movement away from focusing on student deficit towards understanding the systemic nature of unequal participation. From a justice perspective, acknowledging the structural barriers to participation is a critical step away from blaming the student and addressing the conditions that maintain unfair patterns of academic achievement. For this reason, even though programmes committed to increasing retention abound in higher education:

[t]hey have done little to change the essential character of [university], little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts to enhance student success, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could (Tinto 2005: 1).

As mentioned above, one of the most significant challenges to the deficit approach is that interventions based on 'fixing' students problems or 'closing gaps' are ineffective at best and in some cases have failed to develop the 'skills' that students were assumed to lack when they entered university:

Attendance at the tutorials and special classes intended to address the deficits identified by the universities was poor and academics complained that even when students had completed... a compulsory language course, they still could not read or write in ways appropriate to higher education (Boughey & Niven 2012).

These systemic weaknesses 'remain an obstacle to realizing equitable teaching and learning in higher education' (Cloete 2011; Parkinson *et al.* 2008; Gilmour *et al.* 2012) which:

*may manifest itself as student deficiencies, [while] the problem is in key respects systemic in that it relates to curriculum structures that hinder rather than facilitate student potential (Scott *et al.* 2007: 44).*

Similarly, Hlalele's (2010) evaluation of skills acquisition found that while access programmes might 'add some value' to the university experience it was unclear whether these skills enhanced students' epistemological access. At the same time, a comprehensive report on the quality of teaching and learning in South African has found that:

extended degree programmes have been compromised by structural problems, notably a lack of sustained resources and capacity development for staff, provision located outside of departments, and limited impact for students who fall outside the parameters of extended programmes but who also require provisional support (Scott et al. 2007: 47; see also Boughey 2010b).

In the review of literature, I found that these structural problems have been under-emphasized while the focus of remediating student deficit has been foregrounded.

Another concern across the critical literature is that programmes have stigmatized a student cohort that already faces multiple forms of discrimination based on race, poverty and poor schooling. The 'divide-and-support' approach (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015) has been criticized for separating students in a form of othering that exacerbates the marginal status of first-generation students (Fraser 2008). For instance, the 'homogeneous environments' of access programmes in which:

student are generally segregated and stigmatised [and] treated as a separate group that accessed university somewhat "illegitimately" was found to have a negative effect on social inclusion and diversity, while producing damaging stereotypes and detracting from the development these programmes were meant to offer (Hlalele & Alexander 2011: 497; see also Hlalele 2010; Pavlich & Orkin 1993).

This critical perspective reflects some of the earliest critique of academic support programmes, namely a 'deficiency model' that alienated students from programmes that were designed to 'help' students, but which instead created suspicion and resistance from students who 'experienced themselves as survivors of an inferior educational system and, thus, as achievers rather than as victims who needed to be pitied and helped' (Tema 1986 quoted in Boughey 2010b: 10; see also Nzimande 1988).

Yet despite this critique, some academic development policy and practice continues to emphasise student deficits by constructing a view of students as:

i) lacking skills; ii) experiencing gaps in conceptual knowledge areas; iii) in need of language development; and iv) lacking the ability to think "critically" although there is also some acknowledgment of the impact of social and personal factors in learning

resulting in attempts to address “personal growth” through the development of “life skills” (Boughey 2010b: 9).

The deficit view of students thus creates a ‘crisis discourse’ that focuses on the worst case scenario in pointing to examples of ‘illiteracy’ and the worst cases of underpreparedness of university students to justify remedial interventions (Leibowitz 2011). This in turn creates an environment where focusing on student agency or evidence of achievement is rejected as denial of student ‘needs’, despite these needs being narrowly defined within the context of higher education discourses and social practices (Leibowitz 2011). The crisis discourse is also strengthened by a homogenized view of all students struggling to the same degree with the same ‘problems’, instead of separating differences associated with access to resources and structural limitations (Wilson-Strydom 2015a). For these reasons, despite progress within academic development:

[e]xamples of older academic support models, in which “gaps are filled”, “bridges are built” and missing “skills” are somehow “added on” to students who are deemed to be poorly equipped for university study... sadly persist (Boughey & Niven 2012).

This crisis discourse was also reflected for instance in language development where interventions focus on students as second language speakers, instead of incorporating ‘theory which takes into account literacy as a socially embedded phenomenon’ (Boughey 2010b: 6; see also Street & Lea 2006; Gee *et al.* 1996; Leibowitz 2011 provides a useful structural analysis of the panic around student ‘illiteracy’). From a multiple literacies perspective, an individual has differential access to literacies based on systems of privilege that value for example formal academic literacy over a student’s home language. At the same time, the social and professional literacies that students use outside universities are devalued and misunderstood by lecturers, creating a distorted perspective of illiteracy based on narrow institutional privilege (Archer 2012; Lea & Street 2006; Gee 2011; Leibowitz 2004; Paxton 2007). This devalues student agency by failing to ‘build upon what students know and do not know and can and cannot do, in order to realise their potential’ (Leibowitz 2011: 223; see also Ivanič *et al.* 2009; Jacobs 2005). From a structural perspective, this reflects how:

academics have struggled to take on ideas of academic ways of reading, writing and knowing as situated culturally and socially laden, and thus more accessible to some than to others (Boughey & Niven 2012).

At the same time, separating students into extended and mainstream groups also prevents 'mainstream' students, who despite meeting entry requirements, would also benefit from foundational support to succeed in higher education (Scott *et al.* 2007; see also Wilson-Strydom 2015a). The homogenized approach to underprepared students ignores the fact that the 'skills' offered by these programmes are important to a broader student body which must be developed throughout the duration of a university degree within the context of a specific discipline:

Given the significance of this cluster of attributes, it would be fair to assume that attention to them would occupy a central place in the design of a learning programme. It is unfortunately the case that they tend to be deemed the expertise of "outsiders" to the discipline or department. They get relegated to Cinderella first-year courses and siphoned off for specific groups of what in South African policy discourse are called 'educationally disadvantaged' students (Leibowitz 2011: 222).

Scholars have also critiqued programmes that separate students in nurturing environments meant to 'bridge the gap' to university (Boughey 2010b: 6) in 'adjunct' modules located outside the discipline. The problem with these programmes was that trying to develop academic capabilities outside mainstream teaching and learning is an ineffective approach that 'did not teach students to read, write and know in the ways they were meant to do' (Boughey & Niven 2012). Scholars within the academic development community have not supported additive or stand-alone modules since there is evidence that additive courses failed to prepare students for the rigorous mainstream learning environment, which meant that as soon as they completed these first-year modules, many students started to fail (Boughey 2010b: 10; Walton *et al.* 2015; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Boughey & Niven 2012; see also Wilson-Strydom 2012a: 68 on why only one-third of students on a university access programme complete their qualification). A similar problem was noted in science and engineering programmes, where adding a foundation year onto an existing degree had limited potential to increase access (Case *et al.* 2013: 2; see also Scott *et al.* 2007; CHE 2013).

Separating these programmes from the mainstream also meant that they were being taught by people with little or no expertise in mainstream disciplines, which limited their ability to introduce students to disciplinary discourses, to conduct research and publish, or to engage in academic debates related to teaching and learning (Boughey 2010b: 7). Furthermore, frontloading foundation provision during the first year transition failed to provide adequate support into the more challenging later years of the degree, when students struggle to cope with a greater volume and complexity of academic work (Pearce *et al.* 2015).

Moreover, the separation of academic support from mainstream academic subjects meant that many students were not able to perceive the benefits of academic support initiatives in their mainstream classes. Although much has been made of the success of access programmes, with high-achieving students held up as indicators of their ability to integrate 'under-prepared' students (UFS Integrated Report 2014), there are serious questions that must be asked about what happens when students leave the relative isolation of these supportive environments (Wilson-Strydom 2012a: 68). Instead of these segregated approaches, scholars have identified the need to 'normalise' programmes across the student cohort that enable the majority of students to graduate within an allocated time frame (Case *et al.* 2013: 3; see also the CHE 2013 which recommends a systemic transformation to an extended degree structure).

Another structural challenge to student drop out is Tinto's theory of student attrition (Tinto 1987; 2014) which contests the usefulness of understanding the reasons for student engagement (or lack thereof) as being unable to tell practitioners 'what they could do to enhance academic and social engagement in their institution', while these practical 'how to' responses have also been 'fragmented and poorly organized' as a 'laundry list of actions, one disconnected from another' (Tinto 2012: 5; see also Walton *et al.* 2015; Kahu 2013). A further critique is that interventions have been relegated to the margins of academic life, which neglects the classroom as the domain that for some students is the only space where interaction with peers and staff is possible, since they are juggling work and family responsibilities (Tinto 2012: 5; see also Leach & Moon 2008).

Finally, foundational provision that is framed as value-neutral academic development, while reflecting normative beliefs about language, identity and resources, fails to provide a

transformative space where students learn to engage critically with knowledge (Boughey 2010b: 5; see also McFarlane 2011). This raises questions about whether students are free to construct valued ways of being and thinking, given the power imbalances between students and faculty. This power imbalance compromises student access to a legitimate voice for challenging a deficit approach that frames institutional failures as individual problems to be overcome by personal effort (Bozalek & Boughey 2012: 698).

2.5 Individual participation and the neoliberal university

In resistance to the remedial approaches discussed above, in the next section the review incorporates critical social theory to construct a nuanced understanding of institutional arrangements that influence student participation. Scholars who have influenced this structural critique include Nancy Fraser (1995; 1996; 2000; 2008, 2013a; 2013b), Sara Ahmed (2012; 2013), Noam Chomsky (1999), Stanley Aronowitz (1992; 2008), Naomi Klein (2014) and Zygmunt Bauman (2009; 2013), Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur (2005), and Stephen Klees (2015) in conversation with Salim Vally and Enver Motala (2014). To shift the focus away from individual student deficit, I draw on these theories and empirical findings to argue that unequal participation is rooted in the neoliberal university's human capital model (Bauman 2009; Boughey 2007b; Bok 2009; Currie & Newson 1998; Esquith & Gifford 2010; Fataar 2000; Piketty & Goldhammer 2014; Seekings & Nattrass 2002; Van Zyl 2014). A critique of the neoliberal²³ university has enabled a reinterpretation of the structural barriers that limit students' freedom to participate. The purpose of this section is to position the individual consequences of unequal participation within a macrostructure, before returning to individual student experiences in the final part of the chapter.

I argue that unequal participation is partly a systemic problem that is indicative of shifting priorities within national goals for development and economic growth (Cloete 2011; Gasper 2013; Feldman & Gellert 2010; Walker 2012). The expansion of free markets has pushed global economies towards neoliberal policies that have had a profound effect on the higher education landscape. The economic and human consequences of these policies are evident in the practices, cultures and identities within universities (CHE 2010; Marginson 2011; Naidoo 2011; Peet 2002; Walker 2012). Therefore, instead of leading society towards sustainable

²³ I define the neoliberal university as an institution that reflects the shifts towards corporate higher education, with practices such as outsourcing, managerialism, executive leadership and profit motives [see section 1.2.5].

solutions to inequality, in some cases, the university has become a significant part of the problem (Boni & Walker 2013; Walker & McLean 2013).

Furthermore, institutions that have compromised their position as an ethical voice in economic redistribution has meant that 'the notion of social justice has been appropriated into a neo-liberal strategy for growing competitive economics' (Singh 2011: 482; see also Akoojee & Nkomo 2007; Bauman 2009; Delanty 2003; Marginson 2006). The instrumentalism of this system is evident in the failure to consider 'the social and futuristic consequences of educational policy as [institutions] examine short-term skill acquisition' (Shor 1992: 8-9). This has also weakened higher education's 'critical vocabulary for speaking about political or social transformation as a democratic project' (Giroux 2005: 10). For this reason, it becomes difficult to enable participation for vulnerable students who are perceived as unlikely to contribute towards the universities' role as in contributing towards economic growth (Vally & Motala 2014). Increasingly in the global North, some institutional mandates have repositioned concern over profits to '[replace] the older idea of the redistribution of wealth and the narrowing of the poverty gap' (Phipps 2010: 46; see also Nussbaum 2010) while rewarding personal achievement at the expense of a common good (Fraser 2013; Feldman & Gellert 2010; Marginson 2011; Walker 2008a).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, South Africa's historical trajectory, with the strong push for equity in the policy environment post-1994, has positioned South African higher education somewhat uniquely within the growing neoliberalism in the global North. Although South Africa has not been immune to the international shift towards corporate higher education, there has been a persistent albeit contested commitment to equity within policy and practice²⁴ (Ministry of Education 1997; National Plan for Higher Education 2001; National Development Plan 2013). For instance, while undergraduate success is strongly associated with excellent teaching (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014: 6), there is tension between a system based on output-based funding with a smaller percentage dedicated to teaching. At an undergraduate level, there are more resource constraints in catering for large cohorts, which leaves vulnerable undergraduates without individual support and mentoring (McKenna 2015;

²⁴ See also Ntshoe & De Villiers (2008: 23) for an analysis suggesting that the funding formula has been successful in enabling more students to progress successfully through the higher education system.

Lewin & Mawoyo 2014: 100-111; Scott 2009). In my view, one consequence of this approach to funding is that foundational provision for vulnerable students is still inadequately funded and stigmatized as marginal institutional spaces with limited capacity for research and staff development (Boughey & Niven 2012; Boughey 2010b; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Walton *et al.* 2015). Even where funds have been made available for the development of undergraduate teaching, there has not been an adequate systemic impact (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014: 6).

But this is only part of the problem, since even at well-resourced universities there are concerns about the quality of teaching and learning, as class numbers have increased as a result of insufficient resources to invest in permanent academic staff and there has been a large growth in student enrolment since the 1990s (McKenna 2015). Furthermore, such institutions have recently come under scrutiny for institutional practices and cultures that exclude a diverse student cohort, which was most powerfully evident in the recent #RhodesMustFall protests. Another distributional issue is the low status of undergraduate teaching, which means that academic staff often prefer postgraduate teaching and supervision because of the associated status and career advancement (Mouton *et al.* 2013).

Given these contradictory pressures, it is important to understand how undergraduate students are positioned not only as 'outsiders' on extended degree programmes, but also to determine their relative weight within national and institutional policy goals, as I discussed in chapter 1. Although arguably all students are positioned as outsiders in the current university system, socially vulnerable undergraduates who are also first-generation students, many of whom attended poorly resourced schools, occupy a marginal position. From a human capital perspective, students positioned precariously at the institution could pose a financial risk and a human resource burden to already limited institutional capacity. This is because first-generation students are misframed at the intersection of economic, cultural and political injustice, while they do not have the same resources or recognition to make justice claims (Fraser 2013). This means that their position within the policy and institutional environment is more precarious in that they are not equally valued actors and are in some cases seen as a burden to the operation of the institution (CHE 2010).

As I discussed in the introduction, the economic, political and social inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa are exacerbated by policy-driven priorities that promise that 'education leads to skills, skills lead to employment, employment leads to economic growth, economic growth creates jobs and is the way out of poverty and inequality' (Klees 2015; see also Peet 2002). The assumption that higher education can provide access to the market system 'places the burden of responsibility squarely on individuals and their "deficits" while obscuring the real obstacles to procuring decent and remunerative employment' (Vally & Motala 2014: 6). In a similar way that 'full employment is neither a feature nor a goal of capitalism' (Klees in Vally & Motala 2014: vii), is equal participation for vulnerable undergraduate students a possibility within current pedagogical and institutional arrangements?

2.6 From student deficit to structural critique

In response to the structural limitations to foundational provision and other interventions designed to remediate student problems, I now turn to interdisciplinary literatures that have challenged a deficit approach to student participation. These studies provide evidence that institutions should be held responsible for arrangements that make it possible for students to learn while drawing on the agency and resources that they bring to higher education. Therefore, these literatures resist a homogenising view of students, while taking a systemic approach that de-individualizes academic struggle and failure.

As an important caveat, by taking a structural approach to participation, I am not suggesting that students enter the university prepared with the appropriate academic capabilities they need to convert available opportunities and resources into participation. It is not possible to ignore the evidence within educational research that points to areas of academic and social development, sustained resources allocation, and institutional commitment required for students to thrive within academic institutions. However, as I have argued in the section above, there has been an over-emphasis on the resources that students 'fail' to bring to the institution, without a sufficiently rigorous investigation of what institutional arrangements would look like, not in response to disadvantage and deficit, but in alignment with the agency, resources and existing capabilities that students bring to the institution.

At the same time, there has not been a coherent and evidence-based interrogation of the subtle forms of exclusion, discrimination and misrecognition that permeate the very programmes that are designed to remediate student deficits, which subsequently exacerbate unequal patterns of participation. For instance, there is a strong emphasis on evaluative studies that show how interventions develop skills or fill knowledge gaps required by summative assessment, without simultaneously asking whether these programmes enable the development of academic identity, academic freedom and inquiry, and critical academic capabilities required for equal participation not only as a university student but as a future employee and a citizen.

2.6.1 Universities as underprepared

Even though some higher education practices, cultures and hierarchies have played a part in reinforcing practices that exclude and marginalize students, as I discussed in chapter one, scholars and practitioners have become increasingly invested in responding to unequal participation. Higher education literature has made an important transition from the focus on access to equitable outcomes:

we have been impacted by the lengths to which so many people have gone in devising, funding and implementing programmes that seek to interrupt inequitable access to higher education, and to find ways to support students who have been disadvantaged by an unjust system. There is evidence of significant human and financial investment in efforts to offset the disadvantage that apartheid entrenched, and to facilitate equitable outcomes for all South African university students (Walton et al. 2015: 266).

There is a growing body of scholarship that shifts responsibility towards institutional arrangements (Akoojee & Nkomo 2007; Badat 2010; Boughey 2007a; Brennan & Naidoo 2008; Cross & Carpentier 2009; Du Toit 2010; Dhunpath & Vithal 2009; Fataar 2012; Heymann 2011; Janks 2000; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Lockett & Lockett 2009; Mashiyi 2015; Manik 2014; Morrow 2009; Scott et al. 2007; Soudien 2007; Soudien 2008 et al; Slabbert 2015; Smit 2012). Overall, these studies present a well-articulated social justice agenda in resistance to unfair conditions within higher education:

In diverse and unequal societies, it is important to understand both the structural and material conditions affecting academic achievement, as well as the powerful resources

lecturers and students bring to the teaching and learning situation (Leibowitz 2009: 261).

The convergence of material, affective, agentic and structural influences in this research prioritizes a 're-organization of institutions and practices of decision making, alteration of the division of labour, and similar measures of institutional, structural, and cultural change' (Young 1990: 53). Instead of focusing on ways to fix student 'problems', systemic change thus interrogates how micro-level pedagogical arrangements, social structures and relational engagement contribute towards or inhibit student participation (Scott *et al.* 2007: 41). As early as the 1980s, critical scholars such as Vilakazi and Tema (1985) were pointing out the need for universities to adapt to diverse student cohorts within a democratizing South African context (Boughey 2010b: 7). More recently, scholars have applied theoretical frameworks that are explicit about social justice, such as universal design and the capability approach in order to enhance 'equity of access and outcomes' (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; see also Walker 2006; Walker & McLean 2013; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; 2015b; Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015; Walker 2013a; 2013c; 2014b for research that has contributed to mainstreaming the capability approach in higher education research; Bozalek & Dison 2013 for a capabilities approach to teaching and learning). I return to a detailed discussion of the capability approach in chapter three.

Within a post-apartheid context, institutional transformation in the critical literature has been cognizant of values underlying higher education cultures and practices in response to institutions that are 'underprepared for the task of embracing the diversity that would characterise student populations following a shift to democracy' (Boughey & Niven 2012; see also Leibowitz 2013; Ahmed 2012). Furthermore, concerns that efficiency is replacing a focus on equity means that scholars within the academic development community have also employed a structural approach to strengthen their critique²⁵ of the homogenized crisis discourse around student achievement (Boughey 2007a; Brennan & Naidoo 2008). For example, some scholars have critiqued the values that inform inaccurate assumptions about student participation, such as in the context of academic literacy:

²⁵ Importantly, this critique was already evident in the 1980s when foundational programmes were still framed as 'academic support' for the small minority of black students within socially progressive liberal universities (Boughey 2010b).

[t]he “common sense” status of dominant literacies allows true interests and injustices to be concealed. The attitudes, values and norms embodied within the socially prestigious forms of literacy are seen to be neutral and apolitical and therefore above question (McKenna 2010: 11).

In relation to my research problem, a distinctive feature of much of the student-deficit literature discussed earlier is based on assumptions about knowledge and identity. This means for instance that literacy interventions are based on normative assumptions about language, culture and racial identity, yet present literacy as a value-neutral skill for academic productivity (Bock & Gough 2002; Gee 2011; Kapp & Bangeni 2011; Leibowitz 2004). In contrast, the structural critique introduced below is reflexive about the embedded values and cultures within higher education that marginalize and exclude students.

2.6.2 The intersection of race, class and participation

In South African higher education, the intersection of race, gender and class creates particular barriers to equal participation. However, much of the focus on transformation has been on issues of race and diversity. While the need for a representative student cohort and inclusive institutions remains urgent, the emphasis on racial diversity has not produced sufficiently nuanced critiques of the *intersection* of race, class, gender, language and ethnicity (Fataar 2003; 2012; Walker 2005a; Walker 2013b; Walker 2014a). In this thesis, I argue that this is an important theoretical gap that needs to be interrogated within the context of first-generation students who face multiple forms of exclusion in addition to racial discrimination. Since the participants were all from previously marginalized racial groups, it was important to take into account how socioeconomic class and poverty exacerbated this race-based exclusion.

The international literature on working-class students in higher education has challenged pervasive stereotypes about ability and deficit by highlighting multidimensional inequalities within university life. Notably, scholars have brought a class-based analysis to the conversation about access to foreground how cultural capitals, resource inequality and invisible privilege alienate students from the institution (Archer & Hutchings 2000; Aronowitz 1992; 2008; Burke 2012; Hart 2012; Sayer 2003; Skeggs 2004; Reay *et al.* 2001; Reay *et al.* 2005; Walker 2008a). Empirical research on social class and exclusion has found that ‘participation is an inherently more risky, costly and uncertain “choice” for working-class

groups than for middle-class groups' (Archer 2003: 17). The freedom to have control over the environment means that students who have access to sufficient resources, such as parents' financial assistance, or bursaries and loans which provide money for accommodation, textbooks, proper nutrition and transportation for students living off-campus, have greater freedom for equal participation (Mthethwa 2013).

Yet access to resources and recognition work simultaneously to decrease or expand students' opportunities to participate. Class-based analyses have drawn on Nancy Fraser's theory of justice to integrate the importance of recognition and distributive justice, noting that inequality has *normative* significance and therefore demands an ethical response beyond resource distribution (Sayer 2005: 53). In relation to first-generation student participation, this means that the structure of inequality is entrenched not only within the way resources and opportunities are unfairly distributed amongst a diverse student cohort, but that the relational, dispositional and cultural aspects of learning have a profound effect on students' ability to participate as equal members in 'a competition which [working-class students] have effectively lost before they have begun to play' (Sayer 2005: 35). The integration of material resources and the individual need for recognition by valued others is pertinent to the experiences of first-generation students who need not only epistemological access but also the recognition of their potential to succeed (Sayer 2005: 54-55; see also Walker 2008a).

Class-based analyses of student participation have also produced a critical response to normative ideals around higher education as an unquestioned good or the development of aspirations and academic identities (Burke 2012; Ziplin *et al.* 2013; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013). By questioning how education can be alienating to a diverse student body, this critical approach disrupts the assumption that low skill or ability is the primary barrier to academic access:

Those who scorn the demands of socially excluded groups for respect or esteem, on the grounds that they have clearly not earned it, callously overlook the need of such groups for both resources to be able to achieve much and unconditional recognition of their needs and powers as human beings (Sayer 2005: 62).

The expectations of time, energy, commitment and investment in undergraduate students speak to the absence of recognition for black, working-class students who are perceived as less deserving of institutional time and commitment while being vulnerable to the 'unspoken

messages of contempt or disrespect transmitted to marginal groups within hierarchical relationships' (Sayer 2005: 64; see also Ahmed 2012; Pym & Kapp 2013). Recognition is therefore not only visible in distributional inequality, but in the forms of status, injury and misrecognition that 'reduces human dignity rather than expanding capabilities' (Walker in Otto & Ziegler 2013: 16; Fraser 2009).

Bourdieuian²⁶ analyses have also found leverage in the South African context with scholars who examine the consequences of culturally determined value systems for student participation (Archer 2012; Bozalek 2004; Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Fataar 2012; Leibowitz 2009; Naidoo 2011; Thesen 2001). Although students brought various forms of capitals to pedagogy, the contextual challenges that students face to attain institutional belonging negatively affected their engagement with learning (Leibowitz 2009: 265-266). This perspective acknowledges the interconnectivity of language, power, identity, and the way in which race, gender and socioeconomic class contribute towards the power relations in academic literacy classrooms (for another empirical study see Kapp & Bangeni 2011; see also Lew *et al.* 2015).

2.6.3 Against a homogenizing view of students

Another trend within critical literature is 'understanding the nuanced experiences of all students within highly diverse student groups' in order to avoid homogenizing student experiences (Hockings 2011: 521). This means shifting institutional patterns of recognition without assigning a pre-determined group identity onto any individual student (Fraser 2000). Based on the findings of her research on first-year students' transition from high school to university, Wilson-Strydom (2012: 147) argues that:

[i]t is... not helpful to talk of and think about students as being either well-prepared or under-prepared for university level study. Instead, we need to move towards a view that regards all first-year students as under-prepared in some areas and better prepared in others.

²⁶Although I draw upon Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital as particularly relevant to participatory parity of first-generation students (Leibowitz 2009; Hart 2012; Skeggs 2004), I used the capability approach to interpret cultural and symbolic capitals as personal or social resources which are converted into capabilities or functionings within structural arrangements (Bourdieu 1984; 1991; see also Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

Valuing the 'pre-higher education contexts from which students come' is a necessary step towards de-individualizing student failure (Smit 2012), while also taking into account the ways that institutions can be alienating to students (Case 2007; Mann 2001; 2005; Lawrence 2003; Theron 2011). At the same time, it is important to be aware of how:

[s]tudents are not in a position to press justice claims against a system that has not prepared them adequately for tertiary study and that does not address their development needs once they are admitted to it (Bozalek & Boughey 2012: 699).

Structural analyses which have focused on de-individualizing failure suggest that:

the idea that success is dependent on factors (such as intelligence, motivation, aptitude, language ability and so on as defined by institutional discourse) inherent to the individual makes it 'easier' to explain why some fail and why some succeed (Boughey 2010b: 7).

These personal factors shift responsibility to the individual from the structural factors that have created these inequalities. Boughey and Niven (2012) also argue that:

it was not students who were 'underprepared' for higher education but rather the other way round: universities were underprepared for the task of embracing the diversity that would characterise student populations following a shift to democracy.

2.6.4 Recognizing student resources and agency

The final alternative to the deficit approach explored in this chapter is the recognition of the resources and agency that students bring to higher education. It was important to balance the structural critique of institutional constraints with recognition of the complexity of human agency acting within the higher education system. I found a cluster of literature that:

in various ways recognize and build upon the capabilities that students bring with them into higher education, rather than being bound by traditional assumptions about what these capabilities should be (Scott et al. 2007: 45).

In particular, a critical approach to student literacy has challenged the power imbalance in practices required for access to university knowledge (Archer 2012; Banda 2003; Kapp & Bangeni 2011; Jacobs 2005; Janks 2000; Kapp 2014; Kapp 2004; Leibowitz 2004; 2005; 2011;

McKenna 2010; Nomdo 2006; Thesen 2001; 2009; Stein 2000). Acknowledging diverse student literacies as an important cluster of resources has disrupted the privileging of dominant languages while recognizing the 'acting, reasoning individual' (Alexander 2011; CHE 2010; Henderson & Hirst 2007; Gee 2011; Leibowitz 2004; 2011; Lea & Street 2006; Lillis & Scott 2007; Nomdo 2006; Paxton 2009; Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006; Thesen 1997). From another perspective, this means acknowledging the 'interim literacies' that English second language speakers bring to the university and utilizing them within teaching practice (Paxton 2007), while highlighting the importance of an 'aligned and integrated academic literacy module' that helps students gain access to the discourses of the academic community (Van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009).

These critical literatures have moved away from an additive approach to student development by:

challenging the assumptions of assimilating students into the university and moving toward shifting the programme's practices to address and utilise more adequately the resources with which the students present themselves (Pym 2013: 357).

A number of researchers have used in-depth narrative and biographical methodologies to establish the material, cognitive and affective issues that influence teaching and learning for vulnerable students (Leibowitz 2009: 272; see also Marshall & Case 2010). This contextual approach would resist:

*the temptation to create curricula and other programmes in the abstract, without regard to the situation, background and the academic and social needs of today's students (Nzimande 2010; see also Gilmour *et al.* 2012).*

Understanding student biography can also reframe the struggle that students face in accessing higher education (Bozalek & Boughey 2012: 699). For example, taking into account the lack of resources at schools could offer insight into the resource scarcity that students face while drawing on the capabilities they have developed while negotiating these environments (Pym 2014; Janse van Rensburg & Pym 2015; Marshall & Case 2010).

The use of individual case studies has also illustrated that even when students face barriers in accessing higher education, they bring agency and reflexivity to the institution as they learn

to negotiate new ways of thinking and being (Rensburg & Kapp 2015; see also Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Walton *et al.* 2015). These qualitative studies have drawn attention to the impact of individual agency by resisting 'simplistic, anecdotal, sociologically ungrounded characterisations of young adults in the post-apartheid context' (Marshall & Case 2010: 493 quoting Soudien 2008). While Pym and Kapp (2013: 274) insist that higher education institutions should be unapologetic about the fact that some students require more support than others, they should offer developmental support to students without reinforcing stereotypical positions (for an example of an academic support programme successfully embedded in a Commerce module, see Pym & Kapp 2013).

Another approach conceptualizes using student agency in a collaborative transformation of the teaching and learning environment, while drawing on 'the great diversity of strengths and challenges that the students bring to higher education' (Pym 2013: 365). In Pym's (2013) application of this approach to an extended degree programme:

[t]he challenge is to draw on students as a resource in the teaching and learning process and develop a way of working collectively and reflectively to help shift both teaching practices and students' level of engagement and reflection.

Kapp and Bangeni (2009) found that when students had access to embedded pedagogical support that scaffolded the process of discourse acquisition throughout their degree programmes, many students developed the discourses they needed to write academically. Another report found that students who entered an elite, historically-white university without the ability to 'crack the code' of academic discourses required dedicated support programmes to be equal participants in academic discourse (CHE 2010: 80).

In conclusion, the issue of student voice is particularly contentious within institutional hierarchies where the legitimacy to speak increases with qualification, status and measurable success (Fraser 2008). In response to this problem, another cluster of literature focused on students developing an independent and critical voice (Brooman *et al.* 2014; Burke 2008; Canagarajah 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011; Nkoane 2010; Paxton 2012; Seale 2009; Sellar & Gale 2011; Thesen 1997). This means that vulnerable students are silenced because they do not *yet* have access to the resources and education needed to formulate a legitimate and articulate voice. In addition, their status as first-generation students who are vulnerable

to drop out and unlikely to contribute towards institutional funding or prestige means that they are less likely to receive the high-level, expensive resources that could help them develop a legitimate voice before they are excluded. At the same time, the struggle to cope with academic demands coupled with resource scarcity means that the most vulnerable students are unlikely to have the freedom to develop a legitimate voice or to be given a platform where this voice can be articulated.

2.7 Deficits or structures? A comparative case study

In concluding the overview of research that responds to the complex terrain of underprepared students, I construct a case study as a comparative ‘thought experiment’ to illustrate the difference between the deficit and structural view of student participation (Sen 2009; Rawls 1971). This is not to suggest a ‘perfect’ set of pedagogical arrangements, but to argue against a deficit approach for students who do not have access to enabling conditions in which to learn. Importantly, equality of participation does not mean that individual differences are ignored, but that resources and opportunities in the institution are not unfairly distributed. This does not suggest that there should be equality of outcomes – individual aspirations, internal capabilities, effort, goals, and more will differ, so outcomes cannot be the same for all students.

Imagine two different academic scenarios for the same first-generation student. In the first scenario, the student struggles to access basic needs like nutritious food, decent housing, transport, and money for photocopies and textbooks. Her family is poor and her bursary does not cover living costs and academic expenses like books. She spends a lot of time worrying about money, walking long distances to unsafe accommodation where a racist landlord threatens to evict her if she cannot pay the rent on time. She enters an institution that measures her potential with standardized entry scores. When this student produces a lower score, her lack of skills is then addressed as the primary obstacle to her success. She is placed on foundational programmes to address her academic and social ‘deficits’. The programme is based on generic skills, located outside the mainstream, and misaligned with the academic demands of her modules. These courses demotivate her and remind her of school work, and make her feel like she has not yet reached university. She does not understand why she has to write essays about general topics that have nothing to do with her degree. She thinks that it wastes her time and often skips class or does work for other more difficult modules in class.

Most of her classes are crowded, there are few opportunities for lecturer interaction or small group tutorials, and she is not involved in any extracurricular or leadership programmes. In the classroom, she is frequently reminded how 50% of students will never graduate, and of her inability to pass challenging modules. Because of a low quality school environment, she cannot compare these conditions with a good quality teaching environment, and does not recognize systemic failures. Around her she notices peers who are confident and doing well, but she does not know what their 'secret to success' could be. She tries to study harder and spends a lot of time alone at the library summarizing her textbooks and reading the PowerPoint slides her lecturer made available.

Now imagine this same individual in a different environment. Her family is poor but she has access to a bursary that covers all her basic living costs with enough money to buy nutritious food. She has regular access to the Internet and is able to afford textbooks for her course. She lives on campus in an integrated residence where she receives appropriate social support and opportunities for development. She is not placed on a foundational programme that separates her from her peers. Instead, foundational support is embedded in her department as discipline-specific support structures available to all students on her degree course. Her department offers a capacity-building programme that employs dedicated senior students and postgraduate students to critically mentor undergraduates in the discourses and theoretical traditions of the discipline. Her degree programme has a sophisticated tutorial system for every subject that does not teach students to memorize content for the next test, but offers research-based projects around pertinent questions in the discipline. The tutorials encourage critical reading and writing development on a weekly basis in line with challenging, multimodal content.

There is a discipline-specific programme taught by lecturers and professors in her subject area that focuses on developing critical literacies and capabilities for practical reasoning. Her time studying is not alone in the library or in her room, but with undergraduate peers working on interdisciplinary projects that apply disciplinary knowledge. These projects bring knowledge and practice together in finding research-based solutions to problems relevant to their discipline. Although the environment is challenging, she is reminded frequently of her potential, encouraged to challenge herself and reminded that despite being a 'beginner' at the institution, she has the ability and necessary support to succeed. There are regular

opportunities for social support, and a counsellor dedicated to her faculty that is available to meet psychosocial needs. She is part of a cohort of students and lecturers from her first year until graduation.

Now imagine the measurable academic and social 'outcomes' for these two scenarios. If the first scenario produces uncritical learning, low scores and eventual drop out, while the second scenario produces a critically thinking graduate, what does this say about individual 'deficits'? Given such enabling pedagogical and institutional structures, what could 'underprepared' first-generation students be capable of achieving (Pym & Kapp 2013)? Given the importance of balancing structural arrangements with individual responsibility, could enabling structures enable students to take greater responsibility for their own learning?

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an overview of literature relevant to my research problem. This review has demonstrated that research that takes a remedial approach to unequal participation misframes student potential and creates a deficit approach. In contrast, I outlined a cluster of critical literatures that take a structural approach, in this way highlighting student agency and the role of institutions in perpetuating inequalities. It is my hope that a justice-focused analysis of student experiences in combination with critical social theory could shed light on these 'deeper roots' of unequal participation. Based on the insights found within these literatures, I now move on to the conceptual framework, in which I construct a theoretical approach to the research questions based on human development principles.

Chapter 3

Conceptualizing freedom for equal participation

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.

Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*²⁷

3.1 Introducing the capability approach

In the previous chapter, I outlined the complex problem of unequal participation for first-generation and socioeconomically vulnerable students. In the review of the literatures, I highlighted interventions that are designed to remediate student 'deficits' emerged. While some research was convincingly framed as a social justice response to student participation, the capability approach was the most appropriate theoretical framework found in the literature review that takes a rigorous approach to the intersection of structural injustice and individual vulnerability, while remaining cognizant of individual agency and freedom. For this reason, I decided to apply the approach to my research problem as a theoretical framework most suited to an integration of individual agency and structural injustice within the analysis of student experiences. Furthermore, the capability approach makes a stronger case for equal opportunities than educational research that separates the individual experience of education from broader questions of just institutional arrangements (Walker 2006; Boni & Walker 2013; Vaughan & Walker 2012; Wilson-Strydom 2015a). At the same time, the framework prioritizes well-being outcomes for the public good, which distinguishes the approach from other educational theories (Sen 1992; see also Walker 2005b). Furthermore,

²⁷ Nussbaum 2010: 2.

the approach brings together concepts of freedom, agency, and human development into a robust theory of justice that offers a 'space within which to make comparisons about life quality' (Nussbaum 2011: 18) as the following:

a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society (Robeyns 2005: 94).

Within the context of South Africa's post-apartheid landscape, the normative language of capabilities responds to questions about how education benefits people and societies using claims of justice and equality (Sen 1999; 2009; Nussbaum 2001; 2010; 2011). *As an evaluative framework, the capability approach foregrounds the multidimensional injustices embedded in South African higher education.* When held up against the standard of individual achievement in higher education, the capability approach is an inherently egalitarian alternative that is interested in the resources that students have access to and the relative quality of arrangements that enable students to convert these resources into capabilities and functionings for equal participation. In this framework, the capability approach offers a multidimensional analytical tool that expands the focus on measurable academic skills and speaks directly to the *comparative* freedoms and opportunities available to students positioned precariously within institutional hierarchies. In contrast to a deficit view of students, the capability approach prioritizes the dignity of human lives in which every individual has 'intrinsic worth as a human being and not simply as an economic producer' (Walker 2009: 304). Instead of only asking whether a student has access to education as a bundle of resources, the capability approach interrogates arrangements by investigating:

the context in which economic production and social interactions take place, and whether the circumstances in which people choose from their opportunity sets are enabling and just (Robeyns 2005: 99; see also Deneulin 2014).

This structural approach to institutional arrangements and student freedom is explored in more detail in the conceptual outline developed in this chapter.

3.2 The capability for education

Empirical research that applies the capability approach to higher education is spread across interdisciplinary research areas including *undergraduate access and widening participation*

(Bridges 2006; Hart 2009; Hart 2012; Wilson-Strydom 2012a; Wilson-Strydom 2015a); **curriculum and pedagogy** (Crosbie 2013; McLean 2009; McLean *et al.* 2013; Walker 2002; 2006; 2010); **political science and philosophy** (Nussbaum 2006; Robeyns 2005; 2006a); **and social justice, diversity, institutional reformation, and higher education policy** (Flores-Crespo 2007; Wilson-Strydom 2014; Walker 2005a; Boni & Gasper 2012; Walker & Unterhalter 2007; Unterhalter 2003a; 2003b; 2009; 2012). During the past decade, capability scholars have also applied the approach to pedagogical settings (Crosbie 2013; McLean 2009; McLean *et al.* 2013; Walker 2006; Walker & Unterhalter 2007; Wood & Deprez 2012) to seek:

[a]nswers to practical educational questions about what knowledge to teach, using what pedagogy, and to whom, [to] express judgments about which aspects of existing forms of social life ought to be reproduced and to be transformed if all [students] are to be prepared for the world of the future (Walker 2006: 90).

A capability analysis of educational arrangements has been interpreted as a *process* (Boni & Lozano 2012: 17) that does not equally benefit students, while some educational practices and policies actually harm student freedom (Unterhalter 2003b: 7-8). These applications have analyzed teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment as conditions that *ought to* equalize education for all students (Walker 2005b: 108) but which ‘acknowledges that some [students] may benefit more than others from the same quantity of educational experience’ (Hart 2009: 396).

This framework seeks to understand the role of both agency and structural inequality in contributing towards student participation. Instead of technical interventions, the capability approach contributes a theory of justice that prioritizes the involvement of people in their own development, in order to shift the focus from deficit to agency. From this agency-orientated lens, higher education should be ‘fostering first generation participation in higher education by building aspirations, confidence and educational capabilities’ (Marginson 2011: 34), while being cognizant of socioeconomic gaps between students as ‘equality of capability for diverse students and not just those whose family and socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural capital are taken for granted in education’ (Walker 2008b: 478). Framed in this way, I was able to evaluate whether the arrangements and opportunities offered by higher

education could enable all students to achieve capabilities for ‘good and worthwhile lives’ (Sen 2009: 226).

Many capability scholars would agree that the freedom to be educated counts as a basic freedom that should expand an individual’s access to fertile opportunities (Sen 1999; Wolff & De-Shalit 2007; see also Nussbaum 2011; Terzi 2007). For example, one form of literacy²⁸ could allow an individual to communicate using the Internet or to read books and newspapers (Robeyns 2006a) which could in turn develop a critical voice that contributes to important civic matters that influence the well-being of a community. Yet this defence of the value of basic education – being literate and numerate (Nussbaum 2011: 155) – is more complicated when applied to higher education since post-secondary education is not universally framed as a basic human right (Unterhalter 2013). However, I have applied the approach as an evaluative framework based on *comparative* freedoms between individuals positioned *within* higher education to draw attention to inequalities within a relatively privileged academic space. As such, even though a student who has access to university may have more opportunities than an individual who only completed a few years of primary school, the student’s freedom for equal participation is evaluated by comparing her freedoms to those of her peers at university (Walker & McLean 2013).

3.3 Conceptualizing education as freedom

In this section, I outline the foundational concepts that constitute the theoretical framework that was used to interpret and analyse the qualitative data produced by this research. These concepts are based on the human development discussed in section 3.3.1. Informed by the data analysis in the empirical chapters, these principles were then used to design the capability praxis discussed in chapter eight.

3.3.1 Human development values in higher education

The capability approach is located within a human development paradigm and espouses the values of participation, sustainability²⁹, equity and productivity³⁰ (Alkire & Deneulin 2010: 29-

²⁸ I must reiterate that my position on literacy, informed by

²⁹ In the context of higher education, I use ‘sustainable’ or ‘sustained’ to mean secure opportunities that are guaranteed over the course of a degree, instead of once-off or time-bound opportunities that leave students vulnerable once these programmes are terminated.

³⁰ I define productivity as ‘efficiency’ within institutions which prevents wasted time and resources while retaining a commitment to the other three principles.

30; ul Haq 2003). These values take into account the economic, environmental, political and social consequences for human development. An essential feature of a human development approach to education is that quality of life is the central concern, in direct contrast to a human capital concern with economic growth as development (Walker 2011). From this perspective, income and GDP are insufficient indicators of development because of growing economic disparities within nations and groups (ul Haq 2003; Sen 1992; 1999; 2009).

While a human capital model quantifies 'skills' as commodities as the 'main criteria of human success' (Sen 2009: 233), a human development model reframes success as the freedoms an individual needs to pursue a meaningful life, which include but is not limited to economic resources (Boni 2012; McLean 2012; Walker 2012). A human capital approach that prioritizes education as skills and knowledge 'as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor' (Robeyns 2006a: 72) is limiting because it constricts the function of education to an instrumental good. This is also an unreliable measure of development because it downplays the way that education often fails to benefit people in the same way (Hart 2012; Walker 2008a; Tickly & Barrett 2011; Unterhalter 2014). When this instrumentalism is combined with the logic of a neoliberal university, vulnerable students who seem less likely to offer a return on investment then fall to the bottom of the institutional hierarchy (Catlaks 2013: 135).

Instead of reducing university education to private benefits, a human development approach calls for structural arrangements that enable more citizens to benefit from public resources (Deneulin 2014: 35). Broadly aligned with a liberal humanist approach to education, where the individual is enabled to cultivate empathy, reasoned thinking, and critical imagination (Nussbaum 2010; Flores-Crespo 2007), the human development approach offers 'alternatives to the narratives of consumerism, and corresponding alternative channels for improving well-being' (Gasper 2013: 101-102). When applied to institutional arrangements, curricula and pedagogy, the human development approach offers philosophical and practical alternatives to the complex problems facing twenty-first century higher education.

I now turn the analysis to scholarship in which pedagogy for social justice has enabled the development of human capability in resistance to the narrow ends of neoliberal higher education (Walker 2008a). Scholars' applications of the capability theory have offered

significant alternatives to a human capital approach, within the *context of higher education pedagogy and policy* (Nussbaum 2010; Tickly & Barrett 2011; Walker 2003; Walker 2006; Walker & Unterhalter 2007); *widening participation debates in the United Kingdom* (Bridges 2006; Hart 2012; Walker 2008a; Walker 2011); *equal participation for vulnerable students* in higher education (Kosko 2012; Walker & Mkwanzani 2015; Wilson-Strydom 2012a; 2014; 2015); *the role of pro-poor professionals* (Walker & McLean 2013); a *list of capabilities for undergraduate students* (Walker 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2015a); and the *role of education in cultivating the public good* (Boni & Walker 2013; Otto & Ziegler 2013; Vaughan & Walker 2012; Walker 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015).

These analyses have shifted attention from meritocratic outcomes to evaluating 'social and pedagogical arrangements that support equality in capabilities for all students' (Walker 2008b: 477), and to argue that the role of the university transcends 'the prevailing reductionist view of higher education as a business whose product is increased revenues and profit' (Boni & Walker 2013: 1-2; see also McLean, Abbas & Ashwin 2013). In contrast to neoliberal education, socially just pedagogical arrangements 'would require us not just to evaluate satisfaction with individual learning outcomes, but to question the range of real educational choices that have been available to people' (Walker 2009: 306), while paying attention to 'the details of educational processes and outcomes' (Walker 2008b: 477).

3.3.2 Development as freedom

A capability-informed interpretation of *freedom* is the first foundational aspect of my theoretical framework, which has been developed during the engagement with student experiences. Amartya Sen, who first conceptualized the capability approach, states that 'greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world' (Sen 1999: 18). Similarly, Mahbub ul Haq, founder of the human development paradigm, defined development as the aim 'to enlarge people's choices' (ul Haq 2003: 17), which means expanded freedom and not a greater range of consumer choices or service providers (Deneulin 2014: 28).

Yet education has a history of constraining individual freedom in the way that values and information have been imposed onto passive student recipients (Aronowitz 2008; Burke 2008; Darder *et al.* 2009; Gandin & Apple 2002; Freire 1970; 1974; 1976; hooks 2003; Kincheloe 2008; Tagore 1917; Weiler 1988; 2002). Although there is a rich body of

scholarship that has resisted the socialization of people into docile workers and citizens (Apple 2012; 2013; Dewey 1920; Greene 1988; Giroux 2003; Freire 1970; Freire & Macedo 1987; Nussbaum 2010; Richardson 2010), education's legacy as schooling *being done to* people has lingered despite these alternatives. Although some critical contributions have found a footing in schools and universities around the world (Bozalek & Biersteker 2010; Brown 2009; Freire 1970; Gee *et al.* 1996; hooks 2003; Leach & Moon 2008; Kincheloe 2008; Leibowitz 2009; Meier 1995; Pym & Kapp 2013; Stein 2008; Shor 1996; Walker 2006; Waghid 2009; Weir 1988; 2002), education is some way from replacing traditional forms of teaching and standardized testing with freedom-informed alternatives.

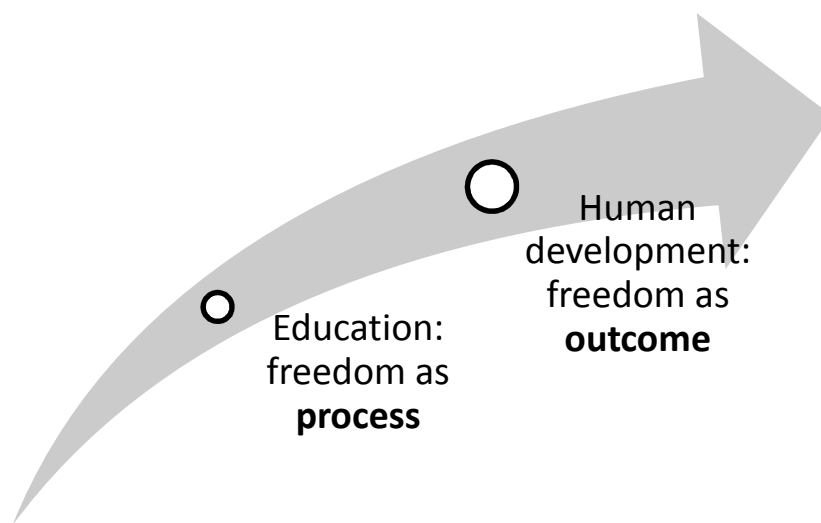


Figure 3: Education as the practice of freedom

For this reason, applying Sen's notion of development as freedom would have profound implications for education. Starting with the assumption that human development is an intended outcome of education, and that freedom and flourishing are intended outcomes of development (ul Haq 2003) *education is a crucial means to these important ends*. Yet for education to enable development, the *process of education* must offer conditions aligned with development *as freedom*. This means positioning education as a foundational point on an individual trajectory towards freedom as the 'primary end', while simultaneously embedding freedom as 'the principal means of development' (Sen 1999: 36; see also Freire 1970).

A superficial understanding of this idea of freedom might appear to be aligned with higher education policy statements where an equity-driven discourse about education as a valued end can enable students to escape poverty and live more dignified lives. These policies make the claim that higher education offers the freedom to find a job, buy a house, improve the life of your family, afford medical aid, and more – while much less is said about the accompanying idea of freedom as a fundamental *educational process*. Thus, a closer reading of what development as freedom actually means shows that Sen’s notion of freedom is in itself intrinsically radical and as a means would demand a radical theoretical and empirical shift away from established practices in higher education. This is not a subtle difference but a critical distinction that if translated into practice could revolutionize higher education’s landscape (Walker 2006). In other words, I argue that some education policy and practice agree about the value of freedom as an intrinsic good. However, the *instrumental* role of freedom as a means to development has not been adequately translated into educational theory or practice. I focus now on this instrumental role of freedom in response to equal participation for first-generation students.

As a starting point, Sen posits that development depends on five *instrumental freedoms* which include: 1) political freedoms, 2) economic facilities, 3) social opportunities, 4) transparency guarantees, and 5) protective security (Sen 1999: 10). These five freedoms work together to ‘advance the general capability of a person’ (Sen 1999: 10). Instrumental freedoms are compatible with a view of freedom that does not artificially separate interconnected aspects of these freedoms; for instance, an individual should not have to wait to be adequately nourished before having access to a platform where she can criticize her leaders, nor should she wait to become educated before she can choose who should govern her country. Applied to first-generation participation at university, instrumental freedoms can be used to ensure that pedagogical and institutional arrangements reflect basic requirements for development as freedom. In this way, multidimensional freedoms challenge a deficit approach to student development by interpreting education as a process that should allow a student to have a say in designing arrangements *while* she is still developing the capability for voice.

In response to critique that first-generation students, who have attended township³¹ schools and entered university with lower entry scores than privileged peers, 1) cannot decide for themselves, 2) do not know what is best for their lives, or 3) cannot understand what education should be, it would be useful to keep in mind that the human development approach has been applied to the most vulnerable people in society, e.g. homeless people, refugees, and people living in extreme poverty. Yet despite their vulnerability, Sen's theory of development insists that even the most vulnerable must participate in the planning of their own lives. This means providing opportunities for deliberation and access to information while cultivating practical reasoning.

In my analysis of student data, I apply the idea of freedom to mean that vulnerability cannot be used as an excuse to exclude students from contributing to arrangements that affect their ability to participate. Instead, students who need more resources, opportunities and assistance to reach a basic threshold should receive appropriate opportunities and resources (Nussbaum 2011). For instance, instead of imposing literacy 'interventions' onto first-generation students because they cannot access formal academic discourses yet, they would receive diverse sources of information in an accessible format, and have access to deliberative platforms to decide between real alternatives instead of being coerced by an 'expert' into choosing a particular option. They would have opportunities to debate and discuss these alternatives with peers in an environment that takes the context of student lives into account. An important condition of these platforms would be access to strategic information and knowledge of genuine alternatives, so that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are free to recognize unjust conditions and conceptualize alternatives.

3.3.3 Education and democratic participation

Development as freedom rejects education that is imposed onto students without rigorous processes of *participation*, which is the second human development value in the conceptual framework. A freedom-based approach would initiate deliberative processes that include students from the earliest stage of design to implementation (Crocker 2008). This participatory focus would replace the imposition of top-down approaches and lack of

³¹ Township schools are generally located in informal settlements and many have been notoriously under-resourced. These schools would be classified as low income schools at the lower quintile.

consultation that characterise a deficit approach to first-generation students. In this way, having the freedom to participate brings political freedoms into conversation with pedagogy to challenge the split between politics as leadership and management on the one hand, and teaching and learning as a value-neutral technical expertise on the other. Sen defines the political freedoms required for democratic participation as:

the opportunities that people have to determine who should govern and on what principles, and also include the possibility to scrutinize and criticize authorities, to have freedom of political expression and an uncensored press, to enjoy the freedom to choose between different political parties and so on (Sen 1999: 38).

A human development perspective requires an expansion of choice and alternatives as a condition of development as freedom; according to Sen, freedom of choice becomes a criterion of development (Sen 1999: 290) which is concerned with 'our ability to decide to live as we would like and to promote the ends that we may want to advance' (Sen 2009: 228; Nussbaum 2011: 18). Instead of bureaucratic processes that fail to include people as decision-makers, education should connect the individual to her social reality and the possibility for change (Freire 1970). For this reason, deliberative processes require access to critical knowledge to help people understand the costs and consequences of arrangements. As such, 'the role of public discussion to debate conventional wisdom on both practicalities and valuations can be central to the acknowledgement of injustice' (Sen 1999: 287). Furthermore, democratic participation requires the development of practical reason as a capability that is woven into other freedoms (Nussbaum 2010).

If these freedoms are applied to *micro* processes in the classroom, there would be evidence that students were involved as actors who contribute to decision-making. Instead of being consumers of knowledge, students would be free to engage in a process of decision-making that shapes the structural conditions in which they learn and the outcomes that this learning enables (Sen 1999: 291; see also Fraser in Bozalek 2012: 148). Walker's (2006: 47-48) application of democratic participation to higher education argues that in:

developing a capability-based policy for teaching and learning at university, those affected by the policy – lecturers, students, support staff... should be participants and

agents. They would collectively decide on the selection of relevant capabilities, and the institutional conditions should support such participation.

Sen's theory addresses the tension between economic and political freedoms, which I found particularly relevant to addressing the financial and academic vulnerability of first-generation students, since 'the intensity of economic needs adds to – rather than subtracts from – the urgency of political freedoms' (Sen 1999: 148):

An attempt to choke off participatory freedoms on grounds of traditional values... simply misses the issue of legitimacy and the need for people affected to participate in deciding what they want and what they have reason to accept (Sen 1999: 32).

As I discussed in the previous section, socioeconomic vulnerability makes it even more important for students to have a *platform for participation* since political rights:

including freedom of expression and discussion, are not only pivotal in inducing social responses to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves (Sen 1999: 154).

Applied to the experiences of first-generation students, the analysis seeks to establish the degree of freedom that students have in determining the conditions of their own learning and whether pedagogical arrangements offer an opportunity to learn and practice their democratic rights (Sen 1999: 155; see also Deneulin 2014 on the intrinsic and instrumental value of democratic freedom):

If people are well-nourished [or educated] but not empowered to exercise practical reason and planning with regard to their health and nutrition [or education and learning], their situation is not fully commensurate with human dignity: they are being taken care of the way we take care of infants (Nussbaum 2011: 39).

Participation can for instance take the form of deliberative reasoning that enables students to 'identify which valuable capabilities people are deprived of – and to discuss the most appropriate actions to remedy the injustice they face' (Deneulin 2014: 48). In combination with platforms for resistance, I am interested in whether students who face significant resource constraints have sustained support to access these platforms. An important step to

remediating injustices and redistributing resources would be to facilitate and support the public platforms that students need to identify injustices and act to enable 'the capacity to influence the range of available choices and the social settings in which choices are made and pursued' (Bauman 2009: 189). These platforms could empower student voices to 'challenge dominant discourses of aspiration, well-being and advantage' (Hart 2012; see also Walker 2012 on using marginalized student voices).

The freedom to participate as critical and engaged members of the institution is '[t]o promote areas of freedom, and this is not the same as making people function in a certain way' (Nussbaum 2011: 25). I therefore focus my analysis not only on whether students have the freedom to contribute to decision-making, but the stage at which a student gains an entry point into these processes. According to David Crocker's model, the earlier the individual entry into decision-making, the higher the quality of participation and agency (see Crocker 2008 for a detailed analysis of participatory entry levels; see also Crocker and Robeyns 2010; see also Kosko 2013 for an analysis of agency and participation for vulnerable populations).

3.3.4 Freire and education as freedom

In designing this framework, I have found a useful compatibility between Sen's conceptualization of freedom and Paulo Freire's critical consciousness (1970; 1973; 1992; 2005). Both scholars ground their respective theories of human development and critical pedagogy as the expansion of freedom. Freire's contribution to critical pedagogy has arguably been one of the most important scholars in twentieth century education, and his philosophy of freedom continues to influence critical scholars today. I also found his redistributive class consciousness compatible with the egalitarian norms of the capability approach (Aronowitz 2008; Giroux 1992; 2003; 2014; Kincheloe 2003; 2004; 2008; McLaren 1995; 2003; Shor 1992; 1996; 2009). Furthermore, these approaches both recognize that institutional power involves hierarchical relationships to the detriment of people who have relatively little power (Freire & Faundez 1993; see also Walker in Otto & Ziegler 2013).

Critical conscientization contributes to the capability theory's focus on public deliberation as:

the extent to which other people engage in practical reasoning and exercise their agency in a responsible way in view of the good of others, and the environment, on which their own good depends (Deneulin 2014: 59).

Reiterating the arguments in the previous section, Freire argues that individuals who are denied access to platforms of decision-making are at risk of being assimilated into massified systems of education which preclude the development of critical-participatory consciousness:

Any situation in which some [people] prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate [people] from their own decision-making is to change them into objects (Freire 1970: 73).

Education that is a technical 'domestication' denies the practice of democratic values and leaves students poorly equipped to participate in the transformation of their society (Freire 1970: 34; see also McFarlane 2011: 725 for a critique of student domestication). This insight has enabled me to interrogate how higher education treads a precarious line between the provision of resources that graduates need to compete in a globalized knowledge economy, without these arrangements regressing into un-participatory assimilation that leaves the individual with a highly specialised, yet uncritical knowledge (Freire 1970: 34). This framework therefore uses the capability approach to ask critical questions about the opportunity freedom of participation for each student as 'a basis for assessing equality of opportunity, rather than simply access to resources or equality of outcomes' (Tickly & Barrett 2011: 7). As opposed to a skills focus which 'places too great an emphasis on de-contextualized individual abilities and too little emphasis on the interaction with the social, familial and political environments that define the skills that can be developed' (Wilson-Strydom 2012a: 17), this framework analyses the conditions that inhibit the development of capabilities for participation.

3.3.5 Resisting the banking system

The most significant contribution of Freirian analysis is the critique of the banking system, described as deposited information that the student passively receives, memorizes and reproduces (Freire 1970: 58-59). In opposition to the banking system, the capability analysis investigates whether pedagogical conditions cultivate practical reason (Nussbaum 2011: 39).

As such, my critique of the banking system shifts the focus to ‘processes of learning and personal development taking place within educational institutions and elsewhere rather than on the more traditional focus on outcome measures’ (Hart 2009: 396). Moreover, equal participation is framed as an approach to learning that offers critical engagement with knowledge (McLean *et al.* 2013: 65; Walker 2006). Therefore, the banking system is not only unjust because it stifles the development of intellectual autonomy and critical consciousness, but also because its invisibility often leaves the individual with constrained access to knowledge as critical capabilities (Freire 1970). In this view, a solution to epistemological access would not be technical solutions to student learning, but would rather interrogate whether the knowledge on offer enables students to recognize how uncritical education misframes ‘cognition as a neutral process that takes place in a vacuum’ (Kincheloe 2008: 32). These systemic arrangements alienate students with:

a narrow academic focus, drill and recitation, little student choice of activities and materials, large group as opposed to small group instruction, truncated exploration of contextual knowledge, and emphasis on convergent questions with short correct answers (Kincheloe 2008: 48).

Yet when the banking system normalizes uncritical arrangements, it is more difficult for some students to recognize and resist the barriers to capability development (Kincheloe 2008). When students’ access to powerful knowledge is constrained, they are less able to resist the biases which ‘lie deep within the very structure of the educational system’s processes of transmission and acquisition and their social assumptions’ (McLean *et al.* 2013: 530; see also Hockings 2011; 2013; Pym & Kapp 2013). This creates:

more subtle aspects of higher education pedagogical cultures [which] may themselves be creating conditions which make it difficult, or even impossible, for some students to learn (Haggis 2006: 521).

At the same time, both the capability approach and critical pedagogy suggest that student-lecturer relationships require a participatory approach. Freire’s view is that a dialogue is the only way to resolve the teacher-student binary and to enable relations that resist and destabilize unjust institutional arrangements (Freire 1970). Students who are vulnerable to unequal participation struggle to negotiate university environments where meritocracy and

the hierarchies between professors, lecturers and students deny struggling students access to the support they need to participate. The capability for affiliation and Freire's emphasis on resolving the teacher-student duality suggests that relationships are resources which enable students to convert educational resources into valued functionings. In later chapters, I illustrate how affiliation between lecturers and students is one of the most important arrangements which enable students to convert education into equal participation (Crosbie 2013; Fraser 2000; Freire 1970; Nussbaum 2010; Pym *et al.* 2011; Wood & Deprez 2012; Walker 2006).

In making the distinction between capability and competence in higher education, 'freedom is education's core value [while] participation and dialogue are central teaching methodologies that cannot be reduced to a mere strategy for achieving an outcome' (Lozano *et al.* 2012: 138; see also Hinchcliffe 2002 for an argument on the importance of practicing democratic culture through pedagogy; see also Walker 2003 for the importance of participation in the ownership of knowledge). This reiterates Sen's point that people must not be 'passive recipients' of development interventions, but should play an active role in shaping these and the content and values embedded in development programmes (Sen 1999: 53). The focus on freedom better supports the aims of social justice than competence as 'technical interest [that] does not consider properly practical or emancipatory interest' (Lozano *et al.* 2012: 141³²). Furthermore, a capability-inspired pedagogy could also be used to evaluate the fairness of actual teaching and learning arrangements (Walker 2003: 176). Participatory teaching methods include principles such as equity, diversity, empathy, tolerance and solidarity (Lozano *et al.* 2012: 144), which I argue are more conducive to transformative education as the 'power to reflect, calculate, analyse, draw conclusions and see beyond the immediate environment' (Stromquist 2006: 149).

Finally, Freire's pedagogy aligns with the human development concern with education for socially just ends. This means that graduates who have had access to opportunities to practice democracy in the classroom should become conscientized to the arrangements that shape their learning (Freire 1970) while becoming critically informed about widening global inequalities (Walker & McLean 2013). Critical education towards the ends of a public good,

³² See also Walker (2006: 48) on the importance of participatory freedom in pedagogy.

freedom and social transformation would necessitate graduates with critical literacies, knowledge, and technical competency, who are able to convert these resources into socially just ends (Boni & Walker 2013). In this way, education can be a social product that expands individual freedom while making educational arrangements more enabling for future student cohorts (Sen 1999: 31; see also Gasper 2013).

3.3.6 Agency and the justice of structures

As I have emphasised in the preceding sections, unjust structures have the potential to entrench inequality when they erode individual freedom to participate in deliberative processes (Deneulin 2014: 53). This means that my analysis of structures requires a simultaneous focus on the individual agent who navigates these structures. In the capability approach, agency is concerned with the freedom that an individual has to make autonomous choices. Sen (1992: 56-57) distinguishes between agency *achievement* as ‘the realization of goals and values she has reasons to pursue’ and agency *freedom* as ‘one’s freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce’. Therefore an enabling environment enhances individual freedom as ‘someone who acts and brings about change’ (Sen 1999: 19; see also Deneulin 2014: 25).

A capability approach respects the fact that individuals must be free to make their own choices, since people have different conceptions of what a valued life entails (Robeyns 2005: 101; Crocker & Robeyns 2010: 76). While most people have the potential for agency³³, ‘the freedom to actually become an active agent also depends on social, political, and economic opportunities available to us’ (Sen 1999: xii). In the analysis of student experiences, it was crucial to show how students who had accessed university despite structural constraints had demonstrated agency (Pym & Kapp 2013). For this reason, I am particularly interested in *the degree* of agency freedom that students have to act and make choices in the years leading up to university and during their first years at university. In some sections of the analysis, I have used Crocker and Robeyns’ (2010: 80) participatory model to establish to what extent these four criteria of agency were met: (1) the individual chooses the activity, (2) the individual played a role in performing the activity, (3) the individual performs this activity for reasons of her own choosing, and (4) this activity has an impact on the world.

³³ One exception is based on Nussbaum’s distinction between an agentic human being and people who are in a vegetative state due to profound disability (Nussbaum 2011: 24).

As pointed out in chapter two, amplifying agency as the *recognition* of equal human worth, dignity and potential has been an important response to a deficit approach to first-generation students, while being sensitive to the fact that they might require more resources and support to participate equally. Instead of ‘pathologizing black student experiences and creating a notion of victimhood’ (Pym & Kapp 2013: 273), the analysis shows how individuals used agency as resistance despite structural and personal barriers. The strength of the capability approach is therefore its focus on structural inequality, while not neglecting the individual conversion factors, adaptive preference and agency faced by university students or the ‘forms of othering at work across differences for example of social class and school background’ (Walker 2005a: 82; see also Pym & Kapp 2013; Marshall & Case 2010).

For this reason, an important arrangement identified in the analysis is ‘the development of a successful and powerful learning identity, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect’ (Walker 2003: 176). Because the participants in this research are working-class and/or first-generation students who occupy stratified racial, ethnic and language hierarchies in South Africa’s post-apartheid society, an agency-focused approach recognized the challenges of students negotiating misrecognition within institutions (Fraser 1996). For this reason, the focus on individual agency also enabled resistance of a ‘wellness syndrome’ as:

the twin assumptions that... you can be whatever you want to be; and therefore... if anything bad happens to you, it’s no one’s fault but your own... We are thought to be in control of our own lives, even in situations where circumstances are not in our favour (Cederström & Spicer 2015: 6).

Instead, the centrality of agency highlights the injustice of an environment characterized by alienation and weakened affiliation between students and staff (Walker 2006). At the same time, I suggest that recognition could offer the platform that students need to engage in ‘[t]he identity work they undertook as part of the process of becoming a competent learner’ (Christie *et al.* 2008: 579; see also Reay 2005 on the emotional labour of being a working-class student).

I use Nancy Fraser’s distinction between identity and status to strengthen the relationship between agency and structure in the data analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Fraser defines

recognition as fundamentally different from identity politics by moving away from an individualizing focus on identity:

recognition could involve the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change everybody's sense of self (Fraser 2008: 73).

Misrecognition is therefore a systemic failure to recognize the equal worth of each individual entering the institution, which recreates injustice as 'an institutionalized pattern of cultural value that constitutes some social actors as less than full members of society' (Fraser 2000: 114). Drawing on this nuanced version of recognition as status, my analysis frames recognition of individual resources and agency against the deficit view of students by challenging the structural biases that misrecognize students who face socioeconomic constraints.

Using the concept of misrecognition captured the tension between visible and legitimized forms of exclusion – such as evidence of poverty or deprivation – and the invisible and often delegitimized forms of exclusion, such as discrimination and subtle differences in being treated or perceived as less academically capable. These implicit forms of exclusion are sometimes difficult to recognize or articulate, which means that they influence participation without being given sufficient credit, while also being difficult to 'prove' or report (Fraser 2013; see also Ahmed 2012; 2014).

Finally, Fraser's theory of justice makes an explicit connection between misrecognition not as 'a free-standing cultural harm' [but]... understands that status subordination is often linked to distributive injustice' (Fraser 2000: 119). In the analysis, this integrated focus on *resources and recognition* is critical to understanding participatory equality for students who are misrecognized, while being given a smaller share of educational resources (Walker 2006: 93-95). As I discussed earlier, it was also important to 'value the variety of difference and the cultural resources students bring to learning' (Walker 2003: 176; see also Leibowitz 2009). As such, the framework resists the assumption that students from impoverished homes and poorly-resourced schools have less to offer the institution. It also resists framing students as less worthy members by acknowledging the resources that students bring to the classroom (Leibowitz 2009: 266; Stein 2000).

3.3.7 Misframing the individual within institutional arrangements

I have also incorporated the other two aspects of Fraser's theory – misrepresentation and misframing – into the analysis of student experiences. These dimensions of Fraser's theory are concerned not only with the freedom for political participation, such as student leadership for instance, but with the boundaries that are drawn to include or exclude people in 'authorized contests over justice' (Fraser 2013: 196-197):

Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function to wrongly deny some people the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction— including, but not only, in political arenas (Fraser 2013: 196).

It is important to note these dimensions of economic and social exclusion frequently intersect. For example, the resource constraints of poverty can exclude students from accessing a platform for academic participation or success, while social misrecognition as discussed in the section above, such as discrimination and stigma linked to poverty, can also exacerbate this misrepresentation. The final dimension – misframing – was added to Fraser's theory in the past decade. Framed as the most serious form of exclusion, this suggests invisibility or a lack of presence in which individuals or groups are not included in the framing of a problem. This would be found for instance in the exclusions of minority groups in policy decisions, which denies their existence and makes it impossible to press justice claims (Fraser 2013: 197).

3.3.8 Capabilities and functionings

Capabilities and functionings are another important unit of analysis in the empirical chapters. Development is evaluated not as utilities or primary goods, but as the 'substantive freedoms – the capabilities – to choose a life one has reason to value' (Sen 1999: 74). According to Sen (1999: 75) the combination of functionings indicates an individual's achievements, while a capability set shows the actual *freedom* that an individual has to achieve these functionings. Both capabilities as *freedoms* and functionings as *achievements* are important to understanding individual agency and freedom to participate. In the empirical chapter, I pay attention to evidence of both capability developments and evidence of functionings (Sen 1999: 75).

In relation to human development, the notion of a capability expands the idea of what someone is able to do because of, for example, an inherent talent or state of health. For this reason, 'capabilities are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the *freedoms or opportunities* created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment' (Nussbaum 2011: 20). Nussbaum distinguishes between *combined* capabilities, which are the *substantial freedoms* that an individual has for 'choice and action in her specific political, social and economic situation', and internal capabilities which are 'trained or developed traits and abilities, developed, in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment' (Nussbaum 2011: 21). As an individual unit of analysis, capability is however cultivated within an individual's *social* environment. Furthermore, combined and internal capabilities must be produced together; for example, developing the *internal* capability for a reasoning voice requires the *combined* capabilities, or freedoms, to express this voice in an environment where dissent, free speech and participation are valued and protected (Nussbaum 2011: 22).

Making judgments about capability development in participant experiences focuses on what students are able to do and be within structural arrangements. From a social justice perspective, the 'attitude towards people's basic capabilities is not a meritocratic one – more innately skilled people get better treatment... but the opposite: those who need more help to get above the threshold get more help' (Nussbaum 2011: 24). In the example above, an individual whose school, cultural or familial environment did not nurture her basic capability for confident speech would not be labelled as inarticulate and excluded from public platforms, but would rather be given appropriate support, external conditions and resources to develop her internal capability for voice.

Once the individual has the capability for voice as a cluster of capabilities that gives her the freedom to express her voice, she can then transition from the freedom to the actual being or doing. The realization of capability is therefore *functioning* (Nussbaum 2011: 25). Functioning could be an active 'doing', such as using the capability for voice to speak confidently in a classroom full of people. But functioning is also a state of 'being' where a capability has been realized, such as being a critically-educated citizen. Again, freedom of choice is central to functionings in that people should be free to choose the functionings that they have reason to value (Nussbaum 2011: 25). The young woman in the example above

would not be forced to speak in public once she has the capability for voice; the important thing is that she has the freedom to speak, and real opportunities to speak if she chooses. While capabilities must be prioritized as equal access to opportunities, people should be free to choose how to function from 'a range of possible ways of living' (Robeyns 2006b: 353).

I also use Wolff and De-Shalit's (2007) ideas of *fertile functioning* and *corrosive disadvantage*. Fertile functionings are capabilities and/or functionings that work accumulatively to expand well-being (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007: 38). A fertile functioning could for example be the ability to be educated, which could then lead to decent employment, then to better health and nutrition, and so on. A fertile functioning is determined by 'the interaction of your internal resources with the social and material structures within which you find yourself, [which] determines your genuine opportunities for secure functionings' (Wolf & De-Shalit 2007: 173). Corrosive disadvantages cluster and have negative effects on other functionings (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007: 121). The idea of a fertile or corrosive capability has important implications for the analysis since being aware of corrosive disadvantage could also clarify 'the causal relations between disadvantages, to try to understand why patterns of disadvantage form and persist' (Wolf & De-Shalit 2007: 121). Corrosive disadvantage can also point to areas that require intervention and transformation.

A critical distinction made in the data analysis is that structural arrangements that create capability deprivation should be eliminated instead of making judgments about the inherent ability of individuals who occupy these environments. This reframes freedom within the context in which an individual must choose and act by examining the actual opportunities available for capability development. Injustice is exacerbated when arrangements align with individual 'deprivation', instead of challenging capability deprivation.

3.3.9 Conversion factors

Conversion factors are another unit of analysis. I found conversion factors worked particularly well in combination with a redistributive focus on resource availability to conceptualize how student freedom was expanded or constrained (Sen 1999: 72-73; see also Sen 2009: 66). According to the capability approach, conversion factors are personal, social and environmental differences that explain why individuals benefit differently from the same resource bundle or arrangements (Robeyns 2005). These factors point to the diverse conditions in which people make choices and to the internal factors and external

circumstances affecting these choices. Because the capability approach takes into account how personal and socio-environmental factors influence the conversion of commodities into capabilities and functionings (Robeyns 2005: 99), this offers an interpretative space to investigate how conversion factors can be either enabling or constraining. In resistance to the deficit view of 'underprepared' students explored in chapter two, conversion factors explain why some individuals flourish in a particular environment while others experience capability deprivation. From a social justice perspective, although education is an intrinsic good in itself, education can also 'contribute to capability deprivation... through existing inequalities' (Tickly & Barrett 2011: 7; see also Stromquist 2006; Hart 2009: 393).

For this reason, a focus on conversion factors also addressed the concerns discussed in chapter two that even when resources are made available, they are not converted into academic success or epistemological access (Walton *et al.* 2015). In the analysis of student experiences, I used social or structural conversion factors that interact with an individual's existing resources and capabilities. This confirmed the argument that it is not sufficient to ensure that students have a fair share of resources unless structural arrangements also equally distribute the opportunities to convert resources into functionings (Tickly & Barrett 2011: 4; see also Freire 1970: 66-67).

Therefore, the distinction between 'means such as goods and services, on the one hand, and functionings and capabilities on the other' (Robeyns 2005: 98) frames a participatory trajectory that requires a basic threshold in combination with enabling conditions (Robeyns 2005: 96-97). For example, an unsafe walk from home to campus as a conversion factor could explain why some students do not use the library or computer laboratories after dark. Because of this environmental factor, a student is not free to convert a resource [e.g. books at the library] into engagement with knowledge. Unless resources like books and Internet access are accompanied by development structures that enable students to convert resources into opportunities, these resources fail to address inequality (Pick & Sirkin 2010). Furthermore, understanding how conversion factors work within *pedagogical* arrangements was important to determine not only whether students attend lecturers or tutorials [which offer educational 'resources' as information], but how teaching and learning conditions constrained or enabled a student's freedom to convert transmitted information into actual participation in critical learning. This was an important distinction in response to research on

student behaviour that determines engagement based on time spent on important activities without establishing whether these activities translate to critical education (Wilson-Strydom 2015a).

3.3.10 Adaptive preference

In the analysis of student experiences, I have also paid attention to adaptive preference, defined by capability scholars as:

deprived people [who] tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival, and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible (Sen 1999: 63; see also Nussbaum 2000; Bridges 2006).

Because the capability approach prioritizes the protection of human freedom and agency, the idea that we can evaluate someone's choice as 'deformed' has received significant criticism. It has also, however, been defended in particular by scholars who have attempted to find a balance between values that seek the empowerment of marginal groups with recognition that people who participate in their own oppression still practice agency (Khabber 2012: 303; see also Stromquist 2006). For instance, the notion of adaptive preference applied to the question would be interested in whether an individual has adapted her academic preferences to suit under-resourced or debilitating environments. Although measuring adaptive preference is not a straightforward task, given that people may subconsciously adapt their preferences (Bridges 2006), evaluations about the equality of arrangements could be enriched by understanding how 'habit, fear, low expectations and unjust background conditions deform people's choices and even their wishes for their own lives' (Nussbaum 2000: 114; see also Nussbaum 2001; Robeyns 2010).

In my view, evidence of adaptive preference in the experiences of students who have been deprived of opportunities for critical education can contribute towards an argument for structural transformation. Such evidence could challenge complacency about conditions of deprivation or vulnerability which could be 'made to look justified on grounds of lack of strong public demand' (Sen quoted in Argarwal *et al.* 2007: 441). For instance, instead of assuming that students prefer standardized testing because they do not demand change, an analysis of adaptive preference would ask whether students have ever been exposed to a

different way of learning or had opportunities to experience the benefits of real alternatives (Hart 2009: 394; see also Bridges 2006).

3.3.11 The threshold of substantive freedoms

In order to address the distributive aspect of substantive freedoms, I have integrated Nancy Fraser's economic dimension of justice into the capability-informed analysis of student participation, which sharpens the focus on the equitable redistribution of resources, and to make a case for a basic threshold of resources. Fraser's theory of justice is:

part of a broader emancipatory project, in which struggles against injustices [are] necessarily linked to struggles against racism imperialism, homophobia and class domination, all of which [require] transformation of the deep structures of capitalist society (Fraser 2009: 107).

Her redistributive approach presents a critique of the resource maldistribution that characterizes twenty-first century capitalism (Fraser 2013; Picketty 2015) and makes the case for a redistribution of resources in order to cultivate socially just institutions. Fraser's focus on power complements the capability approach's emphasis on individual agency and the conversion of resources once they are available. I found this theoretical combination particularly useful to organize the egalitarian principles required of a theory of social justice that recognizes agency, while restructuring relations of power and distribution of material and social resources that entrench inequality.

Since the capability approach is 'an open-ended normative language' it is compatible with 'vocabularies from other theories' in order to offer a robust theory of justice (Deneulin 2014³⁴; see also Feldman & Gellert 2006). Using Fraser together with the notion of Nussbaum's capability threshold (Nussbaum 2011: 24) constitutes an egalitarian approach that requires that people at the bottom of the hierarchy gain entry to the minimum threshold before resources are allocated to people with resources above the threshold. The corrosive disadvantage for students from poor families is that scarcity of financial resources compromises the freedom for participation (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007). For this reason, students without a basic needs threshold are vulnerable to exclusion, misrecognition or a

³⁴ See also Robeyns (2003) for an account of critical social theory and the capability approach; see Bozalek's (Bozalek 2004) interview with Nancy Fraser.

weakened form of participation. From the capability perspective, the individual's circumstances must determine the basic threshold of needs required for equal participation.

The empirical analysis investigates whether a minimum threshold is in place to ensure that vulnerable students do not suffer capability deprivation as a result of resource insecurity (Sen 1999). I ground this redistributive assumption as an alternative to approaches that address the symptoms of maldistribution such as disengagement, apathy, low attendance, and poor academic performance that deepen the misrecognition of student ability, yet fail to address policies and cultures at the core of unequally distributed resources or offer remediable injustices that perpetuate the widening gap in participatory parity (Sen 2009). Yet at the same time, resource distribution is relative to the environment in which they are converted into capabilities. For instance, a student from a poor rural family studying at an urban university and competing with middle-class peers now needs comparatively more resources to take part in the 'life of the community' – for this reason, an analysis of resources conversion must take into consideration 'the freedoms generated by commodities, rather than... the commodities themselves' (Sen 1999: 74).

3.3.12 Well-being and the freedom to flourish

The final aspect of the theoretical framework captures a capability-informed notion of well-being, which encompasses the 'rational, emotional, and social dimensions' of an individual's educational processes (Lozano *et al.* 2012: 137). The purpose of development is 'to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives' (ul Haq 2003: 17). Well-being is the intended outcome for each individual regardless of the bundle of resources that they contribute to their environment, so that each person is valued by virtue of their human existence. The capability approach 'takes *each person as an end*, asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available for each person' (Nussbaum 2011: 18). Sen evaluates well-being according to an individual's achieved functionings, not happiness, choice or utility (Basu 1987: 70; see also Khader 2012).

In my analysis, I define well-being as capability development that reflects an equitable distribution of material and symbolic resources aligned to individual needs. Well-being is achieved when the individual has the capabilities to convert equally distributed resources into functionings that reflect an individual's ethical commitment to herself and her social world. Whatever the income, level of education, or status of an individual, the ultimate

measure of her well-being is a quality of life which has achieved the capability freedoms and functionings aligned to her reasoned values, aspirations and inherent potential. In my analysis, I am interested in whether arrangements contribute to the conversion of available resources, to expand the future well-being of the individual.

According to the capability approach, well-being cannot be separated from the pursuit of justice, informed by a gradual shift within the approach from a concern about individual well-being to questions about how to arrange societies (Deneulin 2014: 46). Importantly, this view of well-being is ethically individualistic in that the interest in interpersonal comparisons reflects a broader concern for the well-being of society, instead of an ontological individual that is concerned primarily with the happiness or satisfaction of the individual. In this sense, an evaluation of well-being cannot be separated from questions about whether the arrangements in which students learn are enabling and just (Walker 2006). In my analysis, I take the well-being of participants as the end point of achieved capabilities and functionings.

3.4 A capability-informed definition of equal participation

Before concluding this chapter, I return to the working definition of equal participation outlined in chapter 1, section 1.6, to expand the definition using the principles discussed in the theoretical framework. Keeping in mind the three levels of participation as the following: access to the institution and to a basic resource threshold needed to participate; pedagogical arrangements which enable and/or constrain an individual's ability to convert the available access and resources into success and participation; and thirdly, the capabilities and personal resources that the individual brings to the university, which the student uses to convert available resources and arrangements into participation and success (see **Figure 1** on page 28). The principles for equal participation that have been drawn from the conceptual framing above are organized into the following principles for equal participation:

1. Access to a resource threshold
2. Freedom to participate in decision-making
3. Arrangements that enable conversion of resources into capabilities/functionings
4. Recognition of agency and worth

I approach the analysis of student data in the empirical chapters using this definition of equal participation, which is:

A multidimensional capability that expands access to resources and opportunity freedoms to convert resources into capabilities, recognizes agency and existing student capabilities, cultivates values for the public good, engages critically with knowledge, and opens up participatory platforms for deliberation to challenge inequality at all levels of the institution.

In chapter eight, I expand the definition of equal participation in a final empirical iteration by delineating six capabilities for equal participation that emerged from the data and the student research project. In conclusion, **Figure 4** below summarizes the principles outlined in the conceptual framework:

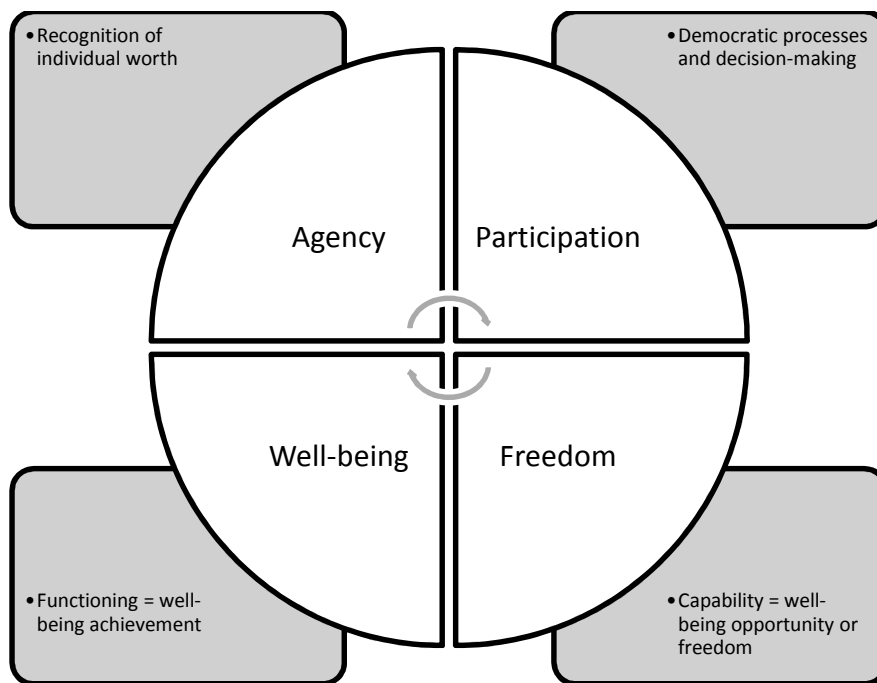


Figure 4: Conceptualizing education as the practice of freedom

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the design and theoretical justifications of the conceptual framework that I used to conduct the research project. This framework guided the collection, analysis and findings in the four empirical chapters.

At the beginning of the research process, my assumption was that both redistribution of resources and recognition were needed to enable opportunity freedom for first-generation students to achieve equal participation. Structural conditions withhold necessary resources,

while also disabling students of the confidence, networks or knowledge needed to convert available resources into participation. Importantly, I also realized that redistribution of resources would have to be accompanied by conditions that were conducive to converting resources into capabilities and functionings. The capability approach in combination with critical theory has enabled me to frame my assumptions into a framework with which to analyse the data.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I use this framework in combination with the data analysis to construct a capability-informed praxis that hopes to expand individual freedom for equal participation to vulnerable university students. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology that I used to conduct the research.

Chapter 4

Research design, methodology and methods

Inquiry has always been... a moral, political, value-laden enterprise.

Norman Denzin³⁵

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology and methods used to design and conduct the participatory research which started in 2013 and for the purpose of the thesis continued until the end of 2014, although data is still being collected as part of the longitudinal project. In addition, it describes how the process of data collection and interpretation intersected with longitudinal participant engagement. The chapter also explores the philosophical justifications for using narrative methods to capture the individual consequences of structural inequality.

The data analysed in the empirical chapters was collected as part of my longitudinal doctoral study that tracks the participatory equality of undergraduate students. The data were collected at three different sites: 1) the academic literacy module that I facilitated, 2) a series of individual interviews and focus groups conducted from August 2013 to November 2014, and 3) an ongoing student research group established at the beginning of 2014. Data collection I also kept a research journal to record observations made in the classroom and during the research process. Because the thesis offers limited space to report on the significant amount of qualitative data collected over two years, the findings focus primarily on individual interviews, although all data collected informs the analysis directly or indirectly.

The main purpose of this chapter is to offer a theoretically informed account of methodological debates and limitations related to the process of engaging with and interpreting qualitative data for research in the social sciences. At the same time, I use the chapter as an 'audit trail' that maps the decisions I have taken regarding methods, data collection, analysis and interpretation, while keeping in mind my positionality as a researcher (Rolfe 2006: 310). Although I present the research process in a chronological way to clarify the steps taken to design and conduct aspects of the study, the research did not follow a

³⁵ Denzin 2010: 425.

linear trajectory (Mertens 2008: 10; see also Kemmis & McTaggart 2008). I also discuss the transformative potential of qualitative research that amplifies excluded or silenced participant voices to argue that voice-based methods can produce an authentic evidence-based response to inequality.

I have structured the chapter in the following way: the first part of the chapter is a theoretical exploration of critical participatory research and the transformative paradigm, where I outline the principles of the methodology that was used. In the latter part of the chapter, I then set out the actual research that was conducted and explore specific challenges and limitations that emerged within the research process.

4.2 Towards a critical participatory research framework

As a preface to my discussion of the transformative research paradigm, I give an overview of the reasons why I decided to use critical participatory research. The purpose of a *critical* approach to participatory research is to ‘change social practices, including research practice itself, to make them more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive’ (Kemmis *et al.* 2013: 2-3). These normative goals are closely aligned to my ethical stance as an educator and a researcher, while also being compatible with the aims of the human development approach. I now discuss some of the core features of this methodology in relation to my research design.

Keeping in mind Sen’s notion of deliberation within the context of widening human freedom, which I discussed at length in chapter three, critical participatory methodology creates ‘public spheres’ in which participants use research to ‘explore whether things are going the way they hope, or whether things would be better if they acted otherwise’ (Kemmis *et al.* 2013: 33). Kemmis’ critical participatory approach employs Habermas’ theory of communicative action to frame research as ‘what happens when people interrupt what they are doing to ask “What is happening here?”’ (Kemmis *et al.* 2013: 34; see also Habermas 1984). Even though digital narrative was included in the original research design, these deliberative communicative platforms emerged as an unintended yet invaluable part of the study.

Concerns about things being ‘not quite right’ are legitimation deficits, outlined as follows:

[P]articipants do not feel that they would necessarily have come to the decision to do things the way they now do them, especially if they feel this way about how they are

now required to do them. Their communication is aimed at exploring ways to overcome these legitimation deficits by finding alternatives that will attract their informed consent and commitment (Kemmis et al. 2008: 39, original emphasis).

In response to these deficits, people can then use research to address these concerns and to create change where necessary, which is what I hoped this research would achieve over time. During the course of the project, the study reflected a concern with power and participatory freedom, although the initial formulation of the design did not directly involve the participants. During conversations with students, observations in staff meetings and my own questions about students' participatory freedom, I became aware of problems within pedagogy and institutional practices that created unequal participation. During these interactions, students reported being stressed by their studies, yet bored with learning; disillusioned by the institution, while also afraid of failure; and intellectually under-challenged, yet overwhelmed by the demands of tests and examinations. These initial observations suggested that students were not being given sustained opportunities to engage as equal participants. For instance, in the classroom dialogues that preceded the final research design, some students were concerned about whether learning grammar would help them succeed in their theoretically challenging mainstream modules, while others did not see a connection between the classroom activities and the forms of reading and writing that they were required to do in other courses. At the same time, I had questions about the academic and cultural relevance of the texts that were used and whether the outcomes of the course were being transferred to students' mainstream modules. I also wondered about the relevance of multiple choice tests as the most appropriate way to measure academic reading and writing.

4.3 The transformative research paradigm

I now turn my attention to the philosophical assumptions embedded within the transformative research paradigm (Mertens 2007). I have situated the research within a transformative paradigm in order to challenge structural arrangements that perpetuate inequality, instead of conducting research in which cultures, norms and identities remain static (Mertens 2008). For instance, the notion of power, which is addressed throughout the research process, is framed as 'a relationship of domination in which the control of

knowledge and its production [is] as important as material and other social relations' (Gaventa & Cornwall 2006: 122; see also Mertens 2007).

Within this paradigm, participatory methodology foregrounded how unequal participation is rooted not only in the logistical arrangements [e.g. class size, resource constraints, or administrative procedures], but is also found within ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded within higher education. For this reason, the political underpinnings of this framework (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008) are suited to research that takes the position that structural transformation requires a strategic as well as a philosophical response to inequality. In the context of a transformative paradigm, changing pedagogical arrangements without a corresponding transformation of institutional and individual attitudes, values and culture will be unlikely to affect long-term and sustained change. In this way, the political and methodological underpinnings of this approach was aligned to my commitment to making a contribution to teaching and learning, institutional practices, and cultures that expand real opportunities and freedom for students who are positioned precariously at the university. This means finding evidence-based, systemic interventions to unequal participation that respond to the complex human experiences and contradictions that underpin persistent inequality within higher education.

In the earlier stages of planning as I grappled with the research problem, it became clear that the design would involve an approach that could position students at the centre of the project. Participatory methodology also challenged the assumption of student deficit while enabling me to question the blind spots and ignorance that I brought to the research (Thompson 2012; Kemmis *et al.* 2008; Gaventa & Cornwall 2006; Mertens 2008). While I was reflecting on my own practice and on the structural limitations of foundational provision and teaching and learning arrangements more generally, I was approached by a student who had conducted informal research with peers, which also informed the formulation of my research problem (see **Figure 5** below).

Figure 5: Student research data

Why are students in other faculties not given an opportunity to absorb these 'direly needed [foundational numeracy and literacy] skills'? Or is it perhaps, an already forgone conclusion that all students who have met the entry points to Medicine, Architecture, Geology or Law do not need to be empowered with these skills?

A 2nd year student, who was registered in the Agriculture & Natural Science faculty, also encountered some complexities. "In my department it seems that a lecturer comes having decided that he is going to tell us. So we just sit there and after the lecture we leave. It almost feels like a retard [sic] session."

A 1st year student studying History indicated that he was a puzzled by the silence in his class. "There was a student who disagreed with what the lecturer had delivered. The lecturer sat him down, and I've never seen any other student having anything to say in class after that incident."

These student-focused contributions played a pivotal role in informing the project design. In 2013, I conducted pilot interviews and focus groups, and used the emerging themes to design interview questions, which shifted the focus towards issues identified by the research participants.

4.4 Identity, oppression and the transformative paradigm

Other ontological assumptions within a transformative paradigm are that reality is not fixed but socially constructed, while social values and privilege create power imbalances between social actors (Mertens 2007: 216; see also Lave & Wenger 1991). This ontological approach makes hierarchies visible within educational institutions (Freire 1970; hooks 2003; Canagarajah 2004). In addition, claims about objectivity are challenged, which means that objectivity is not required to render the data either relevant or legitimate. The transformative paradigm is also methodologically aligned to the narrative and voice-based data collection methods used to represent the relatively silenced voices of socioeconomically vulnerable first-generation students. This decision was taken with the hope that the research could bring these voices into conversation with staff, management, and policymakers. At the same time, the paradigm is also compatible with the Freirian perspective that frames education as a practice of freedom, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Despite this compatibility, I have been wary of identity politics that homogenise working-class, black, and/or first-generation students as an oppressed group struggling to cope

because of structural or personal deficits (Bruner 1996; Mertens 2009; Pym & Kapp 2013; Wilson-Strydom 2015). I was also influenced by analysis that cautioned against applying a simplistic interpretation of an oppressor-oppressed dichotomy to power relations, which are complicated by fluid and invisible forms of power between groups and institutions (Fraser 2009; 2013). The contradictions in student narratives brought the interconnected origins of injustice into sharper focus and helped me formulate a more nuanced approach to injustice that examined individual lives within the context of economic, social and political forces that shaped freedoms and aspirations in complex ways. As discussed in chapter two, students did not value being framed as victims but rather as survivors of inequality (Tema & Vilakazi in Boughey 2010b). This finding was confirmed by data where student experiences offered convincing evidence of agency and not of victimhood (Josselson 1996: 32-33). This informed my decision to write a separate empirical chapter focused on the agency of students despite institutional injustice, to avoid creating another form of deficit framing (Boughey 2010b; Leibowitz 2011; Bangeni & Kapp 2007; 2011; Janse van Rensburg & 2015; Marshall & Case 2010).

For the reasons discussed above, I have focused on *status and recognition* instead of identity to interpret the way that students are misrecognized within cultural structures, as discussed in the conceptual framework in chapter three (Fraser 2008; see also Ahmed 2012). Although the initial research design framed an interpretation of race, gender and socioeconomic class at an individual level as central to exclusion, I later adopted a more structural approach to the problem of unequal participation. Even though I still consider identity *misrecognition* as a pivotal aspect of exclusion, I interpret injustice as rooted in systems over which individuals frequently have limited control, and about which people are often uninformed (Klein 2014; Bauman 2013). This view of injustice was developed as I engaged with critical social theory, human development literature and various iterations of student data.

4.5 The value of narrative research methods

In this section, I discuss the justification for using qualitative methodology to capture the individual consequences of structural inequality on student participation. The participant quotation below confirms the primary reason for using narrative data collection methods, which was to amplify the voices of marginalized undergraduate students. Her quotation also

pointed out a significant limitation that despite elements of participatory research, the ownership of the project still rested with me as the researcher:

As much as this is Talita's research, we feel part of it because to me, most researchers when they ask you to participate then it's either a survey or a questionnaire. You fill it in but you never get the feedback. And this has really opened a platform where we are allowed to say what we feel and share our stories with other people (Clarice, May 2014).

This quotation reflects the power and resource inequality between researchers and participants, even where the researcher explicitly seeks to break down these boundaries, which also confirms how real opportunities and freedom for participation and agency in higher education are hierarchical and unequally distributed (Mertens 2008). The research process also reflected the traditional authority structure of teaching and learning, where I was perceived as the 'expert' who had the 'right' answers. It was my intention that participatory methods offered a platform to challenge this limitation, which was facilitated in particular by the creation of digital narratives, discussed later in this chapter.

The *narrative* construction of lives has been defined as 'the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified, goal-directed processes' (Polkinghorne 1995: 5; see also Lieblich & Josselson 1995; Norton & Toohey 2004). Narratives created a multidimensional view of participation by enabling students to focus on academic, social and personal factors that influenced their freedom and agency within structural arrangements (Salmon & Reissman 2008: 80). These methods enabled me to make sense of student experiences by balancing out an overemphasis on abstract theory in favour of student voices (Wood & Deprez 2012: 490; see also Cousin 2009: 93; Bathmaker & Harnett 2010; Roberts 2002; Zou & Trueba 2002), while being sensitive to contextual differences between students (Walker 2003: 177).

As embedded within co-constructed social contexts, narrative methods also offered a way to highlight student agency in resistance to a deficit approach (Danielewicz 2009: 439; Roberts 2002). In this way, participants constructed meaning through the production of their narratives (Josselson 1996; see also Stein 1998), which illustrates how both agency and structural influences determine the shape of a human life (Waller 2010). Moreover, I hoped

that despite cultural differences, narratives could enable collaboration between myself and participants 'where at least some meanings and conventions are shared' (Salmon & Reissman 2008: 81). This method therefore created mutual spaces where participants could make sense of knowledge about the social, educational and political contexts in which the freedom for participation was shaped (Richardson 2007: 141).

Despite an emphasis on individual stories emerging from the digital narratives, interviews and focus groups, for the purpose of the thesis, the interview and focus group data were coded thematically and not converted into 'storied' experiences or individual narrative analysis (Bailey & Jackson 2003; see also Polkinghorne 1995). I made the decision to use thematic analysis in order to draw out the commonalities of experiences and lessons across the stories rather than focusing on the nuanced detail of each narrative. I then aim to use these commonalities and shared experiences to construct a qualitative, evidence-based response to institutional conditions that constrain students' freedom to participate, which can be communicated to a diverse research community and form a basis for action for change.

4.6 Listening to student voices

As I mentioned in the introduction, an important aspect of narrative methods was relying on *student voices* as the primary data source to understand what was happening to students in their day-to-day navigation of university life (Brooman *et al.* 2014; Burke 2008; Canagarajah 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011; Nkoane 2010; Nussbaum 2011; Paxton 2012; Seale 2009; Sellar & Gale 2011; Thesen 1997). The literature review, case studies and biographical approaches offered evidence of where the student voice was audible, instead of expert opinions about the student outside of her social context (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015; Kapp 2014; Marshall & Case 2010; Walker 2006; Janse van Rensburg & Kapp 2015; Wilson-Strydom 2015a). While the status of staff and administrators give them some legitimate platforms to voice concerns, students are often silenced by their lack of measurable achievement and their novice status.

I also selected listening as a research tool because I knew from my experience working with marginalized communities that careful listening was an important way to gauge subtle or invisible forms of exclusion (Brown 2009). In this study, it was crucial to listen to student

voices before being absorbed by the policy discourses and counter-arguments that could be made against student claims. Although I was aware that what students were saying was incomplete, inaccurate and at times often uninformed, but this was part of the point, to show the disjuncture between student experiences and institutional goals.

In my research design, it emerged that qualitative data has the potential to foreground complexity and contradictions in a different way from large data sets, where nuance could be lost within generalizable claims (Kahu 2013). I have found that the subtle differences between students offered evidence about the distribution of resources and the ability to convert these resources into functionings, which may have been less clearly defined in a quantitative study. For instance, the detail within qualitative case studies could explain why a mature student from an impoverished home, instead of being more marginalized than her younger and more affluent peers, achieved a greater degree of participation. The inequalities and agency that emerge within individual case studies can also offer important insights that can inform the design of larger research studies (Walton *et al.* 2015; see also Hennink *et al.* 2010; Luttrell 2009).

Although it was important to relate these experiences to the policy environment, another aim was to avoid *interpreting* student contributions using a pre-existing framework with assumptions about ability, struggle and agency. This was challenging because as a researcher and lecturer I have been influenced by institutional discourses around student deficit and meritocratic performance and worth. It was my hope that a student-focused research design would challenge these discourses as the research process evolved, summarized as the following:

[s]ome of the most enlightening texts about social events do not present a researcher's interpretation of events but tell the stories of perceptive human beings around the social and educational situations in which they have found themselves
(Bold 2011: 16).

Using this student-centred approach to research, I wanted to understand constraints from the students' perspective by taking into account the interconnected structural and individual conversion factors that decreased participation. As an important caveat, it was not my intention to elicit a set of 'truths' about pedagogical and institutional arrangements from

student experiences or to make any generalizable claims (Mertens 2007). I hope that my research contributes to existing student narratives around questions of university experience, academic participation/exclusion and the interconnected issues of socially just higher education. Negotiating the limitation of student experiences being filtered through my interpretative lens as a researcher required listening to students 'as authorities about their own experiences' to reveal the 'limits of power of the researcher's interpretations and generalizations' (Rogers 1993: 150; see also Gilligan 1993). This also challenged my ignorance about the lives of students and offered an 'insider' perspective into the interplay of social, economic and academic challenges that constrain student participation while cultivating narrative imagination (Nussbaum 2010).

Furthermore, these qualitative methods also enabled students to seek *participatory solutions* to structural problems. The student research group which was formed prioritized an ongoing dialogue about issues and created ways to become more active in finding solutions (Lozano *et al.* 2012: 144). When students identified problems during interviews and focus groups, I could then interrogate how they would imagine a solution, which deepened my understanding of possibilities and constraints. Participants reported that these platforms enhanced their freedom 'to reflect, calculate, analyse, draw conclusions and see beyond the immediate environment... to analyse their realities and subsequently to devise means to transform their lives' (Stromquist 2006: 149).

4.7 The potential of qualitative and longitudinal research

In my study, I have applied a qualitative approach both as a set of data collection methods and as a philosophical approach, which I discuss in more detail below. The benefit of longitudinal research was the ability to track how structural arrangements enable or constrain the capability for equal participation during an extended period. As I discuss below, longitudinal methods are better suited to understanding individual freedom than approaches designed to measure access to goods and outcomes (Hart 2009: 398; Kahu 2013).

However, judgments about freedom are difficult to assess because it means understanding the real opportunities to which an individual has access, which may or may not be reflected in their actual lives, depending on the choices made. In response to this limitation, a longitudinal qualitative study helped me to investigate real opportunities for participation as

student experiences developed over time. Therefore, the freedom to participate was not measured using assessment outcomes, but by comparing the freedom to participate as an equal member and to benefit equally from resources during their time at university (Fraser 2008). Because of the doctoral grant I received over three years, I also had the opportunity to immerse myself into participant experiences both as a lecturer and as a researcher. This experiential knowledge helped me understand the complexity of exclusion beyond the interview transcripts and also enabled me to track students' experiences over an extended period.

The purpose of using digital narrative methods was not only to give students a platform to construct stories for the sake of sharing life histories, but to also to elicit biographical information that was relevant to their equality of participation in higher education. The rationale for using narrative methods was that the process of narrative construction is participatory, longitudinal, and allowed the development of rapport and trust between myself and the participants. These aspects of narrative research will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. I assumed that a longitudinal approach was more likely to elicit the in-depth responses that would get to the core of structural barriers to student engagement, rather than a single interview process, since a series of platforms could offer a more nuanced account of participant experiences. To allow the research process to deepen over time, I interviewed each participant a number of times over a two year span, while the digital narratives allowed extended periods of interaction during the editing process, as I discuss in sections 4.9.5, 4.9.6, and 4.9.7.

In retrospect, a longitudinal approach enabled me to compare the content that emerged in digital narratives with the version of their lives that students had presented during interviews. Because student data do not 'speak for themselves' (Josselson 1996: 29), I wanted to ensure that before interpreting student experience using a capability lens, that participants had *multiple* opportunities to share their experiences. Using longitudinal design methods was also a way to validate student experiences. Instead of relying on a single interview or one method of data collection, which could be distorted by contextual factors (an interview conducted before test week or a shy student not participating in a focus group), participants were given access to multiple platforms to share their experiences, including public spaces at the institution (McCormack 2000: 295).

4.8 Relationships, trust and validity

Qualitative research also enabled research relationships that expanded participants' critical voice against structural inequality. Building relationships with participants enabled the process to evolve from, for example, listing skills that had been learned, in what appeared to be students responding to what was expected in the interview, to a more critical process that created research platforms to elicit information about what students 'really think' (Mertens 2007: 218; see also Gilligan 1993). I observed an important distinction between student responses early in the research process, where students were often anxious during interviews and appeared intimidated by the process. As engagement with the participants intensified through the course of the project, I was able to gain participants' trust and establish mutuality with an 'insider' approach where students revealed structural inequality, while I shared the challenges of working within institutional constraints. In this way, student responses challenged my ignorance about unjust institutional cultures and practices, which I had been familiar with theoretically, but which only became tangible through the experiences of the participants.

4.8.1 Longitudinal research and validity

A significant benefit of the longitudinal process was being able to cross-check the qualitative results over time and in different domains, which added validity to student experiences. For example, instances of discrimination or exclusion narrated during an interview that emerged repeatedly in focus groups and later during the undergraduate research platform increased the legitimacy of experiences. I could also establish that exclusion was a lived reality over time, and not a once-off instance shared during an interview, which helped me track and analyse patterns of ongoing exclusion, and look for connections between experiences. For example, I discovered how participants – who during the first interview had reported how foundational modules were useful – were later struggling to cope with academic demands once they entered the mainstream programme. I could also establish how socioeconomic vulnerability reported during the first series of interviews deepened over time and how, for example, an unplanned pregnancy made relatively secure functionings increasingly precarious, as the added pressure of this individual conversion factor made a participant more vulnerable to exclusion.

4.8.2 Qualitative triangulation

Another technique used to increase validity and rigour was a form of triangulation that 'combines several different qualitative methods, for example, interviewing, observing, and collecting and interpreting documents' (Denzin 2010: 422). I addressed Denzin's concern about the methodological compatibility of different research instruments in my study by aligning the ontological assumptions for all the methods used. This means that I have interpreted interviews, focus groups, digital narratives and any other data collected as socially constructed within a set of structural conditions and individual subjectivities and not as a reflection of 'truths' or an agreed-upon reality.

4.9 Data collection

I now turn to the process of data collection, focusing firstly on research design and then on specific sites of data collection, which included interviews, focus groups and digital narrative production. Participants were recruited from the academic literacy module, where I used a presentation to introduce the research to all 40 students in the class.

The planned time frame for data collection was 13 weeks, running from July to November 2013 (see **Table 1** below). During this time, student-participants were asked to participate in two individual interviews (50-90 minutes each), with a possible follow-up interview in 2014, and two focus groups (120 minutes each). These sessions were scheduled at times that suited the students' individual timetables and university assessment and curriculum demands to ensure that the research did not impact on their academic responsibilities. The second part of the data collection was producing one digital narrative per participant (a short three to five minute digital 'story' in a video format). The time frame for the digital narrative was an estimated two hours per week for 13 weeks, which was negotiable depending on students' other commitments.

Table 1: Data collection time frame

Methods	Time
2 individual interviews ³⁶	July – Nov 2013
2 focus groups	August –Oct 2013
Coordinating the digital narrative project	August – Nov 2013

4.9.1 The participant sample

Because of the in-depth nature of the study, it was important that participants were committed to the process and were keen to participate. I also planned to collect data using narrative methods, which meant that I had to limit the sample size to keep the data manageable for this project. Ideally I would have preferred to include all 40 students in the literacy class as research participants, in order to draw comparisons between a more representative group, but this was not possible given the time constraints. In retrospect, a small sample of participants was the most appropriate choice for the participatory research design and it is my contention that a larger sample might have compromised the depth and quality of data collection. Since I dedicate considerable space to discussing student biographies in the empirical chapters, particularly in chapter five, I only present a brief introduction to the participants in the table below.

³⁶ For logistical reasons, some participants were interviewed a third time in 2013; see Appendix 1 for a complete list of all interviews and focus groups.

Table 2: Participant biographical information

Pseudonym/ Home language /race /sex/age	Before entry into HE	Home province	High school	Degree	Other information
Aziza Tswana, black female, 25	Adolescent pregnancy	Rural Northern Cape	State urban	B.SocSci Extended	Single parent of two sons (born at age 16 and 25)
Clarice English and Afrikaans, Coloured female, 22	Worked at her aunt's catering business	Suburban Western Cape	Former Model-C	B.SocSci Extended	Parents both have full-time employment
Condorrera Sesotho, black female, 29	Worked in the USA as an au pair, studied US sign language and Spanish/ worked as a cleaner/started education and IT engineering degrees before university	Peri-urban Free State	Township	BA Lang Practice Extended	Mother recently completed matric, works for minimum wage Hearing impaired relatives
Dante Sesotho, black male, 22 (not a first- generation student)	Aspirations for student leadership	Urban Lesotho	State urban	EMS, changed to BA Extended	International student (Lesotho)
Kea IsiXhosa, black female, 21	Worked as a petrol attendant to fund matric	Rural Eastern Cape	Township	B.SocSci Extended	NSFAS bursary Orphaned during primary school
Naledi Sesotho and Tswana, black female, 21 (not a first- generation student)	Experienced bullying at school	Rural Northwest	Township	EMS, changed to B.SocSci Extended	Father employed at an FET college Older sibling attained HE qualification
Techniques Sesotho, black male, 21	Did not aspire to higher education after matric	Urban Northern Cape	Township	B.SocSci Extended, changed to BA Political Science	NSFAS bursary Last of four children, no other HE qualifications
Thuli Sesotho and English, black female, 22	Worked in medical administration and promotional retail before entry into HE	Suburban Free State	State urban	BA Law, changed to LLB	Reported gender- based violence at home

4.9.2 Interviews

The questions for the first set of interviews (see **Appendix 2**) were designed to investigate student experiences before and during their entry into university, while the second interview focused on the conversion factors experienced at university³⁷. Following the pilot interviews, which were relatively structured, I decided to follow a less formulaic approach in the next

³⁷ See Appendix 2 for a sample interview transcript.

round of interviews, so that student experiences could emerge without being restricted to the pedagogical and institutional aspects of participation that I assumed were important. The set of questions for the second round of interviews was designed based on preliminary data analysis that emerged from the first interviews and was intended to intersect with the creation of the individual digital narratives.

Before being guided towards a biographical approach to student participation, I had expected to collect data that was predominantly centred on student experiences at the university; however, my theoretical engagement and early iterations of data analysis enabled me to reframe student biography as a pivotal aspect of capability development at university (Colley 2010). In this way, student responses in the first round of interviews guided the development of interview questions for later interviews and focus groups. This marked a theoretical shift in my approach to the project, complemented by the agency-focused capability framework and the participatory critical pedagogy that I was developing in collaboration with the participants.

4.9.3 Focus groups

The focus groups were guided by questions about pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university which had been addressed in the interviews, while also focusing on conversion factors at home and in the community (see **Appendix 2**). During the first focus group, students were asked to bring symbolic items to their interview, which were used as points of discussion during individual interviews. The aim was to learn more about students' life histories, their aspirations, the challenges faced within a higher education environment, and their participation with teaching and learning, while becoming acquainted with students, before moving to discussions around access and participation in their university experience. Focus groups were conducted after the first round of interviews, where key themes that emerged in the interview responses were discussed in a small group setting. The focus groups emerged as a research tool that also deepened student participation in a similar way to the series of individual interviews.

Focus groups offered participants the opportunity to share their biographies with the rest of the group, allowing time to comment and reflect on the narratives. During interviews and focus groups, the structure was increasingly focused around issues of access, in particular how literacy practices were interconnected with identity, power, epistemological access, and

socioeconomic/political factors. Using this platform, students constructed their experiences in relation to peers who faced similar and different challenges. During individual interviews or production sessions following the focus groups, it was striking how some participants reflected for instance on their relative privilege in contrast to peers who struggled to afford basic living costs. I also found that focus groups were research spaces in which significant emotional expression and development occurred (Gachago *et al.* 2014a; Gachago *et al.* 2014b; Beard *et al.* 2014; Nussbaum 2010; Pekrun *et al.* 2012; Christie *et al.* 2008; Burke 2015).

4.9.4 Digital narratives as qualitative data³⁸

The third site of data collection was the production of digital narratives, which are short multimedia productions in which participants create a themed narrative about their lives using a variety of digital resources (Lambert 2012; Robin 2008). The digital narratives were designed and created in a series of workshops, which were organized according to the ten principles listed below in **Table 2**:

Table 3: Microsoft’s 10 principles to creating a digital story³⁹

1	Find your story
2	Map your story
3	Capture your audience’s attention
4	Tell your story from your unique point of view
5	Use fresh and vivid language
6	Integrate emotion
7	Use your own voice, in the script and in the audio
8	Choose your images and sounds carefully
9	Be as brief as possible
10	Make sure your story has a good rhythm

³⁸ See Appendix 8 [attached CD-ROM] for three sample digital narratives.

³⁹ Source: Microsoft 2015.



Figure 6: Digital narrative storyboard

While an increasing numbers of university teachers use digital narratives technology to enrich and enhance their classroom practice (Braden 1999; Hull 2003; Hull & Katz 2006; Kajder 2004; Kearney 2011; Lankshear 2003; Lovell & Baker 2009; Matthews & Sunderland 2013; Nikitina 2011; Robin 2008; Sadik 2008; Smeda *et al.* 2012; Underwood *et al.* 2013; Vinogradova 2007), I also found significant research benefits to using digital narratives. This included students taking an active role in learning, the development of reflexivity and critical thinking (Gachago *et al.* 2014a; see also Gachago *et al.* 2014b; Nikitina 2011: 7; Gee & Hayes 2011).

The workshops were organized loosely around these principles, with a particular focus on creating a multimedia storyboard (see **Figure 6** above), which was then converted into a digital narrative using Microsoft's Windows Live Movie Maker. The workshops were used as connection points between myself and the participants over the course of four months, running from August to November 2013. Although I had scheduled two-hour workshops, most participants requested extra individual sessions to spend discussing the narrative or to edit technical aspects. An unintended yet positive outcome of these additional sessions was the opportunity to track student experiences of learning and student life.

During later stages of the research, participants reported that digital narrative production as a process enabled them to develop capabilities like confidence, affiliation, reflexivity and the ability to conduct research (Walker 2003). For this reason, the qualitative research process itself became a site of capability development. This was one of the most significant, albeit unintended, consequences of my research design. Yet in addition to this benefit, the process

of digital narrative production offered space for engagement which in some cases developed students' critical thinking, empathy, research capabilities, reading, curiosity, confidence, affiliation, and motivation to learn, as participants reported during evaluations of the research. **Figure 7** below shows a participant in the process of editing his digital narrative.

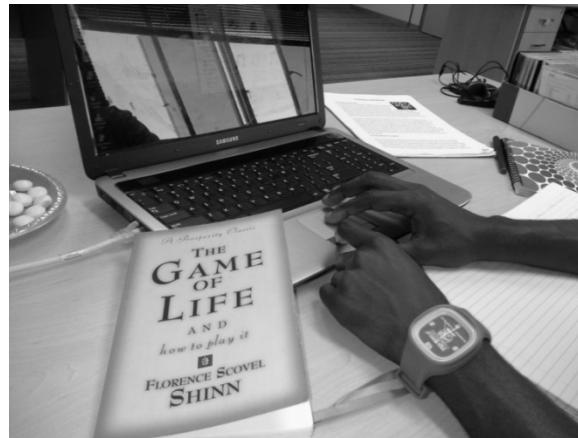


Figure 7: Digital narrative production

4.9.5 Digital narrative data analysis

Using multiple qualitative methods resulted in rich and extensive data which proved especially valuable during the process of data analysis (Marshall & Case 2010; see also Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015). As I started transcribing the interviews, I was simultaneously engaging with in-depth biographical material in the narratives. This concurrent analysis of the interview data and the digital narrative material allowed me to make interpretative connections between students' experiences before entry into university and the equality of participation they reported during interviews and the digital narrative production. Using the digital narratives as data, I could investigate emergent themes around capabilities and/or functionings for higher education, which deepened my understanding of structural and individual conversion factors that influence the freedom to participate (Stein 2008; see also Gee 2005a).

Although I have not included multimodal analyses of the digital narratives in this thesis due to space constraints, the digital narratives analysis is reflected in the empirical chapters and informed by the analysis of student participation. For instance, the analysis in chapter five

would not have been possible without the information provided by the digital narratives, since the 'thick description'⁴⁰ of experiences across the empirical chapters was enabled by the digital narrative material (Kress 2011).

4.9.6 Digital narratives as a research process

Although not initially envisioned as part of the research design, the digital narrative project evolved into a student-focused research project at the beginning of 2014. I had planned to conduct a follow-up interview in 2014, but the participants requested that we extend the project into the subsequent year. As a result, it was possible to establish an informal research team with assigned roles for each member. In May 2014, we organized a seminar where the digital narratives were screened for the first time, which was attended by senior members of the university and a visiting colleague from the Institute of Education in London. This offered the participants a platform to share their experiences, followed by a question and answer session with the attendees. In the weeks leading up to this event, we met regularly to discuss the preliminary findings in the data, which involved students in some aspects of data analysis. In this informal research space, individual responses were deepened, and new insights were added as most students had completed their foundational courses and were being challenged by the expectations of the mainstream programme. The sessions leading up to the seminar were initially informal focus group meetings, but became increasingly structured as students prepared their narratives for public viewing and selected a thematic focus for the seminar. During this process, the capability for voice was developed, as participants practiced their presentations in a supportive yet critical environment.

In July 2014, we were invited to participate in an institutional colloquium *Building Just Universities: What can pedagogies do?* At this event, each student had the opportunity to present their digital narrative and make a short presentation around a theme that was selected within the research group. This opportunity was an important platform to discuss the importance of incorporating student voices within institutional spaces. The preparation sessions for the colloquium were valuable opportunities to discuss the conversion factors that had been identified in the interviews with students, and to enable them to participate in

⁴⁰ Thick description is defined as a rich and detailed account of individual and field experiences, where the researcher is intentional about drawing out embedded relationships within their social context (Holloway 1997).

the formulation of capabilities presented in chapter eight. Participants reflected on the value of student research for academic participation, and the development of capabilities and functionings as summarized in **Appendix 4**⁴¹.

The research group was also invited to make a video for the 2014 HELTASA conference, which incorporated student responses to these two research questions:

1. *What has helped your abilities to be successful at university?*
2. *What has hindered your abilities to be successful at university?*

In the weeks before the production of the video, we met several times to discuss student responses in relation to ongoing research and the data collected during interviews and focus groups. Later in October, we collaborated with a colleague who was involved with the Reach Our Community (ROC) project at a local township school. The participants had expressed the intention to use their knowledge and experience gained in the project to share with vulnerable learners. In March 2015, the team collaborated with the SRC First-Generation on her First Generation Succession mentorship project. Two of the participants applied and were selected to become mentors on the programme.

4.10 The iterative process of data analysis

In moving from data description to analysis, I was guided by Pat Thompson's (2012) three stage process of analysis, interpretation and theorization. This process was not a linear process, but rather multiple iterations of coding, analysis, and rewriting. Since themes and codes were emerging from the raw data, this meant that I was moving back and forth between the transcripts and theory while trying to establish manageable and coherent codes with which to conduct the final analysis. At the same time, engaging with the capability approach in combination with critical social theory produced a more nuanced understanding of student experiences, particularly as I made the interpretative transition from micro analysis to a structural critique of unequal participation [see also discussion in chapter 1].

The challenge was to construct meaning from students' experiences to reflect the complexity of individual participation within structural arrangements. Using an iterative process of

⁴¹ Only five participant responses are captured in this table because the other three participants had graduated and where unable to attend the colloquium.

organization, coding and interpretation, the data were analysed inductively to extract themes from the transcripts, guided by the four research questions within the broader context of the research problem. In order to reflect the participatory design, it was important that the codes were drawn from student narratives, instead of imposing a fixed theoretical framework onto student experiences. By doing my own transcription, I was able to use the process as the first site for analysis. I then used McCormack's narrative methods to view the transcripts through multiple lenses, which included:

immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of active listening; identifying the narrative processes used by the storyteller; paying attention to the language of the text; acknowledging the context in which the text was produced; and identifying moments in the text where something unexpected is happening (McCormack 2000: 285).

Using these methods, I identified structural constraints expressed across the narratives, while at the same time trying to retain individual experiences throughout the three data chapters (Colley 2010: 191).

4.11 Ethical conduct of the research

Given the normative nature of this research, the process of engaging with participants required constant reflection on important ethical dimensions of data collection. For instance, the research process involved an on-going engagement and negotiation with participants about contentious matters such as conflict with lecturers and unfair treatment by staff. Furthermore, the research process required accountability to the participants, which at times meant having to make compromises within the research, given time and resource constraints, and the power imbalance between the researcher and participants. In later sections of this chapter, I discuss these ethical aspects in greater detail.

The ethical principles underlying the study were broadly informed by the research paradigm, which included no harm, respect for diversity and persons, beneficence, and justice (Mertens 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart 2008). Ethical clearance was sought using the guidelines provided by the School of Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State, and a three-year ethical clearance was granted for the project (*UFS-EDU-2013-031*). The most important ethical concerns were issues of fair and unbiased treatment of student-

participants who had volunteered for the study. Therefore, ongoing reflexivity about power relations between researcher and participants was necessary. Students were voluntary participants and their participation did not affect the formal processes of assessment with the curriculum. Secondly, confidentiality and the protection of identity and information were provided using pseudonyms, and students were given the option to withdraw at any time. The measures taken to protect student identity were also stipulated in the participants' letters of consent (see **Appendix 4**), where contact details for the supervisor in charge of the study were provided if participants experienced any concerns during the duration of the research. Finally, consideration was given to the protection of collected data, which would be stored in a securely locked office space, and protected electronically by a password-enabled computer.

During the presentation of the digital narratives in public screenings, the issue of confidentiality was negotiated in consultation with students, who were given the choice of participating in the screening or not. Students were also given the option to remove identifying information from their narratives (such as photographs and to rather use cartoons) or to opt out of the screening if they did not feel comfortable sharing their narrative. As part of the participatory process, these ethical questions were always addressed in consultation with students.

4.12 Organizing data and producing codes for empirical analysis

In concluding this chapter, I give a brief overview of the process of data coding and analysis. During transcription and preliminary analyses, I returned to the conceptual framework to help me determine which codes would be most suited to the interpretation of the narrative analysis. This inductive process was guided by the capability language outlined in chapter three, although at this point the theoretical framework offered only a rough guideline. Drawing on the capability language outlined in the conceptual framework, I coded for student experiences of home, school, the community and university broadly as conversion factors that either enabled or constrained future participation in higher education. I also included codes for agency, opportunity freedoms or capabilities, and achieved functionings.

As illustrated by **Appendix 5**, in the initial analysis of transcripts for the first interview, which focused on student experiences before entry into higher education, I listed emerging themes

under the *three domains of home/community, primary and secondary school, and higher education*. At first, I listed all aspects emerging from the interviews, focus groups and digital narratives, and then clustered these preliminary codes into a capability framework, by moving theoretically from general factors to conversion factors broadly organized into individual and structural factors. I had started to conceptualize these themes into conversion factors that either enabled or constrained capability development, which I incorporated into the later stages of data analysis.

Following a process of theoretical engagement and re-conceptualization, I produced refined iterations of data analysis and thematic codes (see **Appendix 6**). As I engaged with theory, I refined the codes to reflect principles of the capability approach and Fraser's theory of justice, as discussed in chapter three. In the next iteration of data analysis, I organized individual experiences using refined codes that framed conversion factors as neither negative nor positive but as arrangements which could be enabling or constraining to equal participation (see **Appendix 7**).

A methodological decision that I had to make was whether to present each participant's life history and educational experiences as an individual narrative or to slice individual histories and experiences into thematic analysis. During the early stages of transcription and analysis, I experimented with constructing narratives using the individual transcriptions; however, given the unique experiences of each participant, this resulted in unwieldy texts less suited to the interpersonal comparisons that I intended to produce in the empirical chapters. Yet even though data were being organized thematically in the chapter, the interpretation of data in the final analysis allowed a focus on individual experiences within the thematic categories, in order not to lose the richness of the student stories.

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological decisions that have guided the research design. I now move to the four empirical chapters in which I present the analysis of the qualitative data described above.

Chapter 5

School, home and community: conversion factors and participation

[T]he failure to provide decent education, especially to the disadvantaged, is one of the most spectacular failures of the past [21] years.

Aubrey Matshiqi⁴²

5.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the backdrop for individual students' participation at university by mapping their experiences of school, at home and in the community in response to the first research question:

How do structural conditions at school, in the family, and the community enable and constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

By separating student experiences before university from experiences at university, I intend to show how the distribution of resources and recognition enable and constrain the capability development needed to participate equally in higher education. The chronological arrangement of the three empirical chapters is intended to depict how capability development before university enabled or constrained participation at university.

In the first half of this chapter, the analysis of student experiences frames school, the home and the community as social structures that enable and/or constrain an individual's freedom to access resources, convert resources into capabilities, and achieve well-being (Hart 2012; Leibowitz 2011). These experiences also illustrate how students use agency to convert scarce resource into capabilities by resisting structural barriers. It was important to understand the school context because it is not 'possible to fully understand access to university... by researching only one of either the schooling or university sectors' (Wilson-Strydom 2012a: 1).

The response to this question aims to capture the resources and opportunity freedoms available at school, at home and in the community, how participants use their agency to

⁴² Matshiqi 2007.

convert these resources into opportunity freedoms, and which structural constraints prevent students from converting resources into functionings.

Participant experiences are organized into two evaluative sites – education and aspirations – (see **Table 4** below) that I use to analyse how resources and recognition are distributed and converted into capabilities. I stress the importance of individual agency in converting resources and argue that despite severe structural inequalities, some participants are able to convert scarce resources and support provided by families to aspire to and access higher education.

Table 4: Organization of analytical codes

Evaluative sites	Structural conversion factors	Agency	Freedoms
<i>Education</i>	Access to resources Learner identity development Aspirational development Language as educational capital	<u>Agency as:</u> deliberative reasoning creative production resistance/subversion compliance/assimilation	Agency freedom Opportunity freedoms
<i>Aspirations</i>	Access to resources The role of women The role of school The role of family/community The role of work		Capabilities

5.2 Schooling, resources and recognition

5.2.1 Introducing South African schooling: the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities

As an introduction to participant experiences of schooling, I now offer an overview of the challenges facing the South African public school system, in order to contextualize the findings and analysis in the chapter, and to set the scene for students’ opportunities for equal participation at university. Although a nuanced discussion of the complex issues related to schooling is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to outline the realities of an intensely dysfunctional system, which have been widely researched and documented (Bloch

2009; Chisholm 2004; Jansen & Blank 2014; Fleisch 2008; Taylor *et al.* 2008; Taylor 2008; Van der Berg 2008; Wilson-Strydom 2015a).

In a nutshell, South Africa's present-day public school system reflects the uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure created by three and a half centuries of colonial exploitation, and the social engineering of the apartheid regime, where education was used to reproduce oppressive and race-based ideologies (Taylor 2008; Bloch 2009; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Fataar 2012). Apartheid era (1948-1994) education policies ensured that schools for black, Coloured and Indian populations were severely under-resourced, while their administration was stratified according to racial classification (Christie *et al.* 2007).

Despite a number of major structural overhauls since 1994, the current system reflects these inequalities. A small number of schools – most of which were previously reserved for the white population – are well-resourced and offer relatively good quality education. The remaining majority of schools are 'black schools in relatively poor socio-economic circumstances [which are] often under-resourced in terms of laboratories, computers, sportsfields and opportunities for extra-curricular activities' (Christie *et al.* 2007: 4; see also Bloch 2009; Fataar 2012). With between 60 and 80% of South African schools that could be identified as dysfunctional, this creates an extremely concerning gap in the quality of education for the majority of learners in the system (Bloch 2009). This 'high cost, high participation, low quality system' (Taylor 2008: 4) shows evidence of:

massive disparities in performance between schools... to a large extent structured by a history of poverty and deprivation, with African schools overwhelmingly represented in the poor performing category (Taylor 2008: 3; see also Van der Berg 2001).

Another concern, directly related to the first research question, is whether conditions at schools are conducive to the conversion of available resources into educational outcomes (Van der Berg 2008: 145). Despite the introduction of a school quintile system, which is an intervention aimed at allocating more resources per pupil to poorer schools, this has been criticized for failing to address the complex mobility patterns of South African learners. For instance, many students from poorer communities travel to schools in higher quintile areas, which means they do not necessarily benefit from this investment in resources. At the same time, only a small minority of students have access to schools that have the ability to set

higher fees, offer a rich variety of extracurricular activities, employ more teachers, and resource libraries and other teaching and learning infrastructure (Taylor 2008).

A related area of national concern has been South Africa's persistently low performance in regional and international tests in strategic areas such as numeracy, literacy and science, given the fact that South Africa is outperformed by much poorer African countries (Taylor 2008: 2; see also Van der Berg 2008: 2). This suggests that unequal resource distribution is not the only factor responsible for the failures of the education system. Another significant constraint to creating a robust, functional school system has been dramatic and disruptive changes to the school curriculum. For instance, the introduction of outcomes-based education, introduced without well-trained teachers, led to a neglect of disciplinary content that exacerbated the gap in academic quality at poorly resourced schools (Wilson-Strydom 2015a: 9).

Therefore, in addition to resource maldistribution, the public school system faces serious logistical, administrative and management barriers. For this reason, the management of schools has been scrutinized to investigate the structural cause of dysfunctional schools (Bloch 2009). This foregrounds for instance the professionalism of teachers and school management structures in creating or inhibiting environments which are conducive or detrimental to teaching and learning (Taylor 2008: 4). These concerns have also emerged: the problem of absenteeism and late arrival amongst teachers, and low teacher motivation and morale, exacerbated by the low status of the teaching profession in South Africa (Bloch 2009; Wilson-Strydom 2015s). One critical evaluation summarizes these issues as 'a culture of complacency and low expectation [that] permeates the entire South African system, including those schools which were privileged under apartheid' (Taylor 2008: 2).

There are also deep-seated problems created by persistent social inequalities, such as school violence, sexual exploitation of learners, race-based discrimination, and poverty. A report commissioned to investigate functional state schools in the middle quintiles confirmed the finding in the 1961 Coleman report, that even though schools cannot compensate for broader social failures of inequality, poverty, and violence, the freedom to attend a functional school makes a significant difference in the lives of vulnerable young people (Christie *et al.* 2007: 20). While in its ideal form, education offers resources which enable

mobility to pursue higher education and employment opportunities; in reality, socioeconomic class intersects with race in creating a school underclass within rural or township schools where resources and infrastructure are inadequate to enable capability development for many learners, leading to a systemic failure of educational provision for a large percentage of South Africa's youth.

Within the context of this landscape, participant voices illustrate how experiences at school are influenced by structural arrangements across the intersectionality of socioeconomic class, gender, and race. Their experiences confirm that 'while South Africa has improved access to schooling, it has not provided access to quality schooling for the majority of the population', even though the minority receiving quality education now represents a more diverse mix of population groups (Christie *et al.* 2007: 28).

5.2.2 Negotiating resource and recognition at school

Keeping in mind the realities of the school system discussed above, I now turn to participant experiences of schooling. While taking into account the serious consequences of under-resourced schools and community environments in which the students had to learn, the analysis also draws attention to evidence of individual agency with narratives, as a way to resist a deficit approach to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I also focus on agency to argue that student participation at university is also not necessarily a reflection of existing ability or potential, but in many cases the consequences of the corrosive effect of unequal distribution of resources and recognition at home and in the institution, such as the harsh conditions within schools discussed above (Leibowitz 2011; Boughey 2007a). I also hope to demonstrate how unequal conditions at school and in the community make it difficult for some students to participate equally in higher education, to gain recognition as valued members of the institution, and to participate in decision-making processes. Importantly, the analysis is guided by students who frame themselves as agentic actors within their experiences of school and university, while remaining realistic about the barriers that they face in participating in higher education.

I now turn to the eight individual biographies, which will be discussed in terms of resources and opportunities available to the individual student (See Table 4 on page 93 for the brief overview of participant details). The aim of this section is to understand how students negotiated resource constraints at school, and how they used agency to reach university

despite structural inequality. By listening to student experiences, I also wanted to find out how structural arrangements at school were complicated by unequal access to resources and recognition, and how these arrangements enabled and constrained participants' conversion of resources into participation later in their academic trajectories. My analysis intends to balance a structural critique of unjust conditions with recommendations for transformative action without either pathologizing students educated in unjust conditions or romanticizing their aspirations and struggle to access and participate in higher education. As much as the dysfunctional system continues to exclude and marginalize millions of South African children and adolescents, there is a danger of imposing a deficit discourse onto individual people because of systemic failures. So while I stress the importance of redressing structural inequality in the provision of resources, opportunities and infrastructure, I have also been influenced by research that suggests that despite disabling circumstances and structural injustice, adverse conditions can cultivate capabilities in resistance to inequality (Marshall & Case 2010).

In Aziza's narrative, school emerged as an important site where she was able to access resources for future participation at university. She explained her uncle's decision to send her and two male cousins to a well-resourced primary school:

I am one of the few in the family that is privileged enough to have gone to a 'white' school. That opportunity kind of also put pressure on me, 'cos the cousin that I was always with was in the normal black school... For me it, how can I put it, it shaped the way I look at things, the way I view things, the way I view my intelligence as well, and work, work in general, books. And my view of the world [INT 1].

Being recognized as a relative who is 'worthy' of the scarce resources needed to send children in the extended family to a better school increased her status in the community. In contrast, the academic and personal development enabled by these resources was not available to her cousins who attended a township school. The status and worth inscribed onto this selection is material and symbolic: Aziza was able to convert resources at school into valued academic and social functionings, while also developing recognition as a young woman who is capable of academic achievement and who holds a privileged position within her family and community. Having physical access to a well-resourced, formerly 'white'

school means that Aziza escaped both the stigma of a township school and the material reality of poorly-resourced facilities and fewer qualified and motivated teachers. She explained that these early experiences of a well-resourced environment:

helped me focus in a sense... I also think it helped broaden my horizon more than the black schools, 'cos the black school was initially just school, homework and everything else [INT 1].

Aziza explained that there was fierce competition for limited space at elite urban high schools; however, when she did not gain entry into the well-resourced girls' school, she was forced her to attend a high school that was not aligned with her educational aspirations. Aziza described her entry into a 'Coloured mixed school' as an unsettling adjustment that negatively affected her experience of education:

First I didn't wanna be there, I totally... I just felt like, this is not where I am supposed to be. I hate this school... because I came from this high standard of learning and we had sports and we all these things that... shaped the way I behaved... And this school had nothing [INT 1].

In contrast to her experience at her primary school, Aziza was then forced to adjust to a 'very, very different' academic standard, which she experienced as teachers who lacked the will or the passion to teach:

[I]t was because they had to teach. It was because they had to. There was never really a teacher who stood out for me in my first year while I was there [INT 1].

She struggled to adjust to a student culture defined by prevalent ill-discipline and disengagement with learning, so she isolated herself to maintain academic focus:

I valued learning and I wanted to learn. They were 'just' [accented slang suggests passivity and laziness]. And I didn't like that. And I ended up being more alone. I wouldn't say a teacher's pet, but I did my work and I asked questions. I'm a person who loves asking questions [INT 1].

Within an enabling primary school environment, Aziza had developed confidence in her ability to convert her intelligence into reasoned judgments. She also used her agency to

convert her aunt's advice against partying into aspirations for an independent life and made a conscious decision to abandon substance abuse to prioritize her education. Although she was demoralized by the dramatic shift in educational quality and teacher engagement at her high school, Aziza used this reasoning ability in a constraining environment to isolate herself and resist assimilation into a culture of mediocre disengagement modelled by peers at school.

Condorrera attended a poorly-resourced township school in the informal settlement⁴³ where she lives. Her family is a one-parent household where her mother's severely limited income provided the basic needs for her siblings and unemployed and disabled adults in the extended family. She described the school as a strict environment that lacked the educational resources available to develop capabilities. For example, a science experiment performed at her school failed because of inadequate laboratory equipment, while the same experiment performed during a field trip to an elite girls' school in the city was performed successfully by a teacher who had access to proper laboratory facilities. This experience sharpened the contrast between her education and the opportunities available to privileged peers:

Because [the pupils] took it as [the teacher] didn't know what she was doing. Only to find out that lack of equipment didn't support the whole experiment to work out. So we left that school [after matric], not knowing whether they're going to improve on that or not [INT 2].

For Condorrera, the intersection of maldistribution and misrecognition and the opportunities provided by the school compromised her freedom to convert resources into capabilities and functionings. Their teacher was also misrecognized as incompetent because of the lack of adequate facilities that she needed to teach:

Black schools and [former] Model Cs⁴⁴ they are different; they were taught differently than how we are. Our background from which schools we have been to, is not easy. If

⁴³ An informal settlement, also colloquially known as a township, more pejoratively as a 'squatter camp', refers to human settlements which are not formally recognized and usually develop as homeless or destitute people build shelters in non-designated areas, usually on the fringes of urban areas.

⁴⁴ 'Model C schools are quasi-government schools that are administered and largely funded by parents and alumni bodies. The schools receive government subsidy and fall under the jurisdiction of the provincial education department. In most cases these schools are those that, under apartheid, served white children only. The term Model C is no longer used officially and it has thus become commonplace to refer to these schools as ex-Model C schools' (Wilson-Strydom 2012a: 62).

you go to [elite girls' school], compare [elite girls' school] with [township state school], it's just top class. They take drama, music. We don't have that [INT 1].

One tragic consequence of this structural injustice was a distorted belief that students value education based on their race. Condorrera's quotation below illustrates how this discourse blames individuals for not successfully pursuing education, while masking the structural root of unequal participation:

It's believed that most black people do not like learning, and Coloured people. So I think white people are just fortunate. You guys believe in school [INT 2].

Despite the inequality of township schooling, Condorrera used her agency to create opportunities for employment and entry into university. However, she was reflective about the historically-embedded inequality that constrained her peers' capability freedoms:

So I feel like they [the school system and teachers] should have done more. Most of the people who have completed high school, some of them they are not studying. They are working at Pep Store⁴⁵; most of them they are taxi drivers. They were brilliant, but if some things were instilled in them, then, as young as they were, they could have done something with their lives [INT 2].

While Condorrera is able to develop aspirations and an academic identity through opportunities after school, she is concerned that many of her peers at school were unable to exercise agency in the same way, and are trapped outside higher education in low-paying menial work or unemployment. While she managed to escape the limitations of the system, many of her classmates were not able to convert scarce resources into employment and education after school. This is significant because even though Condorrera was able to participate in higher education, her peers were failed by the public school system, which left them particularly vulnerable to growing youth unemployment and the consequences of extreme socioeconomic inequality (Vally & Motala 2014).

⁴⁵Local, low-cost retail store.

Techniques was also raised by a single parent, as the youngest of four siblings. His experience of the township high school was boredom and little motivation to attend school or engage with learning:

Before I came to varsity, I used to just go to school, just like, you just learn what you have to learn, you don't go beyond... what you were given... At school I never studied [Laughs]. No, really, even my matric years, I didn't study [INT 1].

He explained that his older siblings were not successful in pursuing higher education which increased the pressure on him as the youngest child to obtain a degree. But his home environment did not offer resources that encouraged the capability development needed for participation at university. At school, the maldistribution of resources framed education as an obligation disconnected from his lifeworld or aspirations for employment or higher education. Techniques was demotivated by the instrumental logic of school, but in rebelling against the system was misrecognized by teachers as a 'naughty' student, but had disengaged to cope with a stressful home environment and his family's poverty:

I grew up whereby I didn't have a father... why should [I], like, be a man, when at home there is no man. So I always did funny stuff to forget where I come from. But now, ja, I think I've changed, whereby I see myself as a better man. Not only for me, but the future. Should I have kids, they should have a father to be proud of [INT 1].

An important agentic move was the way he converted experiences of a poorly-resourced, alienating school environments into critical reflexivity about social inequality more generally. Using his precarious position at a township school, Techniques developed narrative imagination that enabled him to convert experiences of maldistribution and misrecognition into an empathetic understanding of young people who are excluded from formal structures of education and employment. This other-regarding agency (Walker 2015) shaped his aspirations for transformative action once he entered university. However, resource constraints are profoundly challenging, and Techniques was left vulnerable to exclusion throughout his academic journey.

Kea described her township school as a challenging environment that she negotiated despite extremely difficult personal circumstances. Kea was orphaned during primary school and was

raised by her grandmother who supported an extended family facing pervasive unemployment and poverty. Following the death of her grandmother, she found a job as a petrol attendant and managed to pay her school fees and apply for a university bursary. The scarcity of resources in her extended family made her vulnerable and shaped her aspirations to become financially independent:

So my grandmother passed away in 2008. I was doing Grade 10. And from that year, I started working, actually from the day that my [grand]mother passed away, that was my first day at work... 'Cos when it comes to serious things that contributes towards my education, I feel that I don't want to burden my family, so much, 'cos they have done so much for me. So if I can do something for myself, then why not? [INT 1].

Kea explained that these harsh conditions made her determined to resist the deficit view of students who attend township schools. So despite the constraining environment, Kea developed the ability to communicate fluently in English, which became a valued resource for participation at university:

And then in high school, I was this girl who was from... a black primary school... I started speaking English, by the way. I started speaking English from Grade 4. And a lot of my friends were in white schools, so I was the only one who was in a black school. But I did not tell myself that, 'I'm not gonna not learn English just because I'm in a black school'. I told myself, 'I'm gonna learn English, no matter how many times I make a mistake'. That's how you learn. And my primary teachers, they used to love me! [INT 1].

The scarcity of resources at home inspired Kea to pursue higher education, which she believed could help ease the poverty in her extended family. Two important parallel threads running through her narrative were an agentic resistance to unfair conditions on the one hand, while on the other hand, she had internalized the meritocratic discourse in which the lone individual must achieve success despite unequal arrangements and limited support. This made Kea vulnerable to inaccurate judgments about her potential that ignored structural inequality:

I'm not clever; I'm a hard worker. And when I put my mind to something, I just make sure that I excel in it [INT 1].

She negotiated the school environment using personal resources such as the ability to plan her future, her determination to contribute to the family income, and a highly-developed sense of responsibility shaped by early hardship and loss. She also drew on social resources like encouraging teachers who supported her efforts to learn and speak English:

I keep pushing. I don't get intimidated easily; that's one of my strengths. And I really am proud of that I don't let people get to me [INT 1].

While Kea demonstrated extraordinary resilience in navigating her environment, years of stress in balancing work and school, combined with the loss of her parents and grandmother and little family support, escalated into precarious participation at university, as discussed in the next chapter.

Naledi attended a boarding school and recalled the psychological effect of relentless teasing by male peers. She described an environment where harsh treatment and punishment by teachers and management constrained her ability to convert educational resources into academic functioning. The staff at times used abusive disciplinary practices, which alienated and demoralized Naledi and her peers. Naledi also described a lack of encouragement from teachers in formulating aspirations:

...the teachers, you know, they were that awful. They told us: 'By the end of the month we will be earning, and you guys are just gonna be here and failing'. And they were saying discouraging things [INT 1].

The lack of recognition or support from teachers was combined with pressure from Naledi's parents to pursue subjects to ensure an economics major at university, even though she is passionate about writing, journalism and literature. Naledi experienced school as an instrumental focus on assessment and performance, with few opportunities to develop critical academic capabilities:

I think teachers were there to teach us and leave. I don't think there were teachers who would say to us: 'Go and do it' [INT 1].

Naledi's agency was constrained by structural conditions where teachers focus on the instrumental value of memorization and study, while hierarchical teacher-student relationships produced a climate of fear, punishment and coercion. While her home community was severely impoverished, with few libraries and other opportunities for capability development, Naledi's parents encouraged her to read newspapers and books, and she converted these resources into an interest in politics and journalism. She also converted the routine imposed at school into the discipline needed for university study, and her love for reading into literacy capabilities. Yet, Naledi's freedom was ultimately constrained by her parents' insistence on her pursuing an economics degree for the sake of future employability, which compromised her capability to participate equally in higher education.

In sharp contrast to the previous narratives, Clarice's parents had enough resources to send her to a well-resourced, elite high school. Both she and her younger sister had the freedom to choose between their local public school and the private school that Clarice chose to attend. She attributed her capability development and participation at university to the quality of education and the abundant resources available at school:

That's what changed my life, the school environment, the teachers... sports. That kept me busy. 'Cos I seriously think that if I was at what we call a Coloured school, I would be exactly the same as everyone else. My sister is there right now, and she doesn't have any ambition to go to varsity, or to do well at school [INT 1].

Besides access to excellent resources, Clarice's parents helped her to convert these educational resources into capabilities and functionings for participation. Her father played an active role in her extracurricular activities and encouraged her to study hard and to sacrifice time with friends and family to achieve university entry. She described a supportive and well-resourced family environment within the context of an impoverished neighbourhood where the majority of adults suffered unemployment and substance abuse. As the outlier in this environment, Clarice was able to convert available resources into aspirations for higher education. The resources that Clarice's father and mother were able to provide – both parents have full-time employment – enabled her to attain recognition as a capable student with the potential for higher education. However, while Clarice's sister had access to the same supportive home environment, she chose to attend the poorly-resourced

government school. Although it was not clear why she chose to attend a different high school, Clarice explained that her sister was demotivated and influenced by peers who did not aspire to post-school education, although she was encouraged by her parents to pursue a university education after matric.

Enabling pedagogical arrangements at school also cultivated critical academic capabilities that Clarice transferred to university. While developing a love for knowledge and learning was not dependent on a well-resourced school, participants who attend such schools appear to have significantly more freedom to pursue opportunities for meaningful engagement with knowledge and learning. The classroom was an engaging space where Clarice was nurtured by teachers who were able to dedicate ample time and resources to good quality teaching. Individual attention, supportive relationships between teachers and students, and a rigorous learning environment were valued resources that shaped her experiences of education as a positive and engaging process:

We were never more than 25 at all. From Grade 1. I've always been used to that. And my Grade 1 teacher, her husband taught me science. I had a bond with the two of them. They were already 70 [years old] when I left school [INT 1].

Clarice had the freedom to choose from a wide variety of subjects, which enabled her to develop an appreciation for history. Clarice then converted her historical knowledge, enriched by trips to museums and historical sites, into the capability for critical engagement with knowledge at university. She also developed high expectations of and a critical approach to pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 6.

Thuli attended a well-resourced urban boarding school where opportunities to participate in debating, travel with the choir, and a diverse student body were converted into participation at university:

I really liked choir, to sing. Because we used to travel a lot ... And debating. It helped me improve my English a lot. It helped me to like think effectively, like in terms of critical thinking. And not always give what the question... I must just think way beyond.

It improved my essay writings as well and finding research. Not always talking about research as what 'they' said, it's more about what you think of it [INT 1].

These opportunities gave Thuli the freedom to travel and to network across different social groups. The school offered career guidance that Thuli supplemented with her own research into different careers. The detailed advice offered at high school was an enabling structure that helped Thuli make accurate decisions about university. Thuli used her agency as reasoned deliberation in choosing subjects that aligned with her aspiration to study law, which she was able to achieve. The diverse student body at Thuli's school was another positive resource that she converted into an appreciation for diverse cultures, another capability that was transferred to university:

And she [career counsellor] told us that with maths and science, we can get into anywhere, provided you have those requirements. You can study law, even if you did maths and science [INT 1].

Even though her high school offered the freedom for capability development, teachers still misrecognized student potential. Thuli explained that while she was able to resist these negative messages because of her academic achievement and parents' encouragement to pursue higher education, many of her peers did not have the same resources and support:

And then you get other teachers that discourage you, that tell you, you're not gonna make it. Like if you are getting in the 50s now, they say: 'What's gonna happen in Grade 11 or your final year?'. They tell you you're not gonna make it [INT 1].

The combination of resources and recognition mean that Thuli entered university with confidence in her ability to cope in a challenging environment.

Dante's experiences at school were constrained by his exclusion from a preferred well-resourced boy's school, since the school only accepted a small number of top-performing international students, and the struggle to adjust to an urban state school. He described the experiences of moving between a private school in Lesotho and an urban state school:

It [state school] was not that good. For the smart people who were already equipped [it was ok], but for me, I needed a lot of time. For me, the teachers didn't really care

much about you. It's either you passed or you failed. It was a different environment. My grades fell; it was too much. With the private [former Model C] school you get to interact with the teachers more; they see your problems and they tell you 'This is a problem'.

The teachers at [the well-resourced independent school] came to us sometimes at hostel. They said to us: 'Hey, are you free? Do you wanna talk about something?' They were very cool [INT 1].

Dante's travels across different school spaces highlighted the elite resources required for access to private schools:

When you say private [independent] school, people think it's diverse. But it was all black, all black. It was not really what I wanted. I wanted to go to Saint Andrew's or Grey College in Bloemfontein. They take very few international students, and obviously they take the best international students in terms of academics and grades and mine were just average so I didn't get into that.

I've had friends that went to... these nice private⁴⁶ [former Model C] schools... and they have sort of have like a thing, they have an aura. And it lasts for a very long time, because they teach them manners, and a lot of things that you don't really notice. And that's exactly what I wanted; I wanted to be groomed in that way. When you apply at Rhodes or UCT, they actually take the Saint's guy... more into consideration. It's not fair, but I understand. They don't know our facilities and if we'll be able to cope [INT 1].

The arrangements that enabled and constrained Dante's agency and freedom are distinctively aligned with his middle-class identity⁴⁷ and an affluent two-career family. As

⁴⁶ Neither of these schools is private, and Dante's inaccurate assumption is informed by the fact that they are considerably better resourced than townships schools, due in part to some schools' ability to employ more and better qualified teachers. In this case, his perception about private schooling is informed by the resources and status rather than by the school classification, and speaks to the gap in provision between poorly resourced and understaffed state schools and schools whose middle class and elite students provide a more stable resource base to ensure quality provision.

⁴⁷ While neither Dante nor Naledi are first-generation students, their experiences have been included in the analysis to illustrate that structural conversion factors that constrain equal participation are not limited to working-class or first-generation students.

another participant who is not a first-generation student, Dante's educational trajectory was strategically mapped out with the help of his parents. While other participants found a combination of limited resources and under-resourced school constraining, state schooling offered a different set of constraints for Dante's aspirations to upper middle-class identity and the 'grooming' offered by elite schools. His narrative revealed the way that Dante uses available resources to navigate the university environment even though he struggles to compete academically, compared to Naledi who is isolated off campus and does not have the same mobility. Yet despite not being a first-generation student, Dante struggled to participate academically at university and had trouble adjusting to the demands of unfamiliar academic discourses for which he was not adequately prepared.

As he transitioned between different schools, Dante used his agency to resist the middling education offered at an urban state school. This occurred after he was not accepted into the highly competitive and well-resourced state school of his choice. The structural arrangements offered at his state school included low teacher involvement, large classes with minimum individual attention, and a meritocratic system that offered high-achieving students more resources. Despite constraining structures, Dante converted extra-curricular opportunities into valued capabilities for public speaking and student leadership, which he transferred to university:

I was an orator, and did public speaking, for Grade 8 and Grade 9. And I won best junior male orator for 2009. And then I was also a newspaper editor for the school. I did a lot of poetry, cultural and arty stuff [INT 1].

While Kea, Techniques and Condorrera's experiences of township high schools reveal a struggle against a constrained socioeconomic environment, Dante's account of schooling directed attention to the connection between school and middle-class identity. His freedom to convert an elite school education was constrained by the rigorous selection process that admitted only a small number of international students. Dante's failure to gain entry into the school of his choice limited his agency freedom, and resulted in a transition between a less prestigious private school and a state school. His freedom to pursue a valued educational trajectory was also constrained by his perception of an 'average' academic ability, which made him more vulnerable to exclusion from valued higher education institutions. According

to Dante, the unfair structure of this selection process meant that students at private schools have an unfair advantage in accessing elite universities.

5.3 Resources, recognition and developing aspirations

Another important aspect of participatory parity that emerged in student narratives is the development of aspirations for higher education. Nancy Fraser's principle of participatory parity brings together the distributional and social dimensions of justice to investigate the equity of structural arrangements (Fraser 2013: 11), as I discussed in detail in chapter three. The focus of this section is the freedom that students had to develop aspirations for university. In particular, I wanted to understand the social conditions in which resources and recognition provided by the school, family members and the community environment were converted into aspirations.

Student narratives showed how aspirations are constructed in relation to available educational, material and community resources. Most participants lived in communities where the consequences of extreme socioeconomic inequalities are visible. The participants shared experiences of unemployed relatives, friends and peers who had dropped out of school, and the physical and psychological effects of unemployment. These narratives suggested discourses of failure, mediocrity and low aspirations: social relations were structured around the binary of someone as either a failure or a success story. Students made comparisons between themselves and family or community members to reveal unjust arrangements where access to educational resources, social support, and opportunities for capability development were highly competitive and excluded the majority of citizens from the freedom to participate in higher education.

Yet even these participants, who are framed as 'success stories', were not immune to the systemic injustices that reproduce social, educational and economic participation. They relied on scarce resources and precarious family and community structures to provide the support they needed for entry into university. Their narratives revealed how resources enabled the development of aspirations, without necessarily offering the sustained support required for university participation. I also found it significant that some students developed aspirations in resistance to unjust structures within their family and community structures; hardship was

the catalyst to pursue opportunities that might help them escape poverty and unemployment.

5.3.1 Developing aspirations at school

Resources and recognition at school was the first site that developed aspirations for higher education. Condorrera attributed her pursuit of work overseas to an inspiring maths teacher:

We had a math teacher from London. I would look at her and think, 'Wow she's a mathematician; she has money'. So I took maths, but I didn't do so well. I was very good but... The love for schooling was built from then. She even told us about programmes that would take you overseas. And I would write it down. And then later on I applied for an au pair programme and I left for the US [INT 1].

Interestingly, while inspiring her to apply for au pair work in the US and cultivating her love for learning, this teacher also inspired Condorrera to associate mathematics with success and a stable income, in line with the education department's strong emphasis on scarce skills in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subject areas. Condorrera was constrained by the policy-driven focus on STEM subjects because her school could not provide the resources she needed to develop capabilities for creative writing and art-based subjects that she has reason to value. Condorrera eventually chose to focus on mathematics, but eventually accepted that her interest and talent lay with the humanities and social sciences:

I remember I wanted to be a mathematician because I thought, wow, maths is the only way to go [INT 1].

While Condorrera was passionate about the arts and creative writing, her freedom to choose a career as a writer – which she explained is her first choice – was constrained by the socioeconomic pressure to support her impoverished family. This freedom was also compromised by an economy that offers few educational opportunities and precarious employment for the creative arts. She explained how her peers were similarly discouraged by the absence of resources and the pedagogical neglect of languages and the arts. However, Condorrera converted her aptitude for writing into a novel written during her undergraduate degree:

[T]his teacher came to us and... addressed us about maths, science, and biology, and you know, which is very good. But was only looking at those who could do well in those subjects. She forgot about those who were more creative, in terms of writing, singing, expressing themselves. And I kept wondering how come school promotes maths and science, except creativity? I loved writing [INT 1].

Her aspiration for university was shaped by her experiences while working and studying overseas, where she had access to opportunities to learn Spanish and American Sign Language, which cultivated her aspiration to pursue sign language as a career:

I was working with autistic children. I was based in Washington but travelled between New York, New Jersey, and I've also been to Texas. It's like you see it on TV. It really changed me. When I came back, I wanted to study [INT 1].

She resisted being assimilated into a degree programme for instrumental reasons and decided to drop out of a bursary-sponsored computer engineering course because 'it was not what I wanted to do'. Instead, she converted her work experience, her experiential knowledge of Sign Language, and her interest in African languages into educational and career aspirations. Her narrative in chapter six illustrated that this decision enabled Condorrera to participate more equally at university than students who were coerced into degree courses that misrecognized their academic talent and interests.

Kea valued teachers and motivational speakers at school who encouraged her to draw on her experiences of hardship at home, together with her confidence and strong verbal abilities to develop career aspirations:

So I felt like I can motivate those children in primary school to tell them that, 'Do not look at where you are right now, do not limit yourself'. And my teacher used to say that I should be a motivational speaker... 'Cos I've been through most of the challenges that most people my age have never been through.

There were motivational speakers every now and then, people that encouraged learners to work hard [INT 1].

The fact that Kea's mother was killed during political protest action, as part of the struggle against the oppressive apartheid regime, shaped Kea's aspiration to become a female business leader who empowers black women to discover their potential. Kea converted this loss into an aspirational trajectory that was evident throughout her university experience. This personal aspiration extended to Kea's dream to empower women in her community who are vulnerable to social and economic exclusion.

Aziza also experienced enabling arrangements for aspirational development at school when a career guidance counsellor tried to help Aziza connect her existing capabilities to a specific career trajectory:

'Cos this other guidance counsellor in high school [said], 'Your voice and your bubbiness, go into radio. You talk a lot!' So I was like, mmm, radio...? But radio, you need to be doing something to get in, you can't just jump into radio. That's when I looked at the courses that [the university] has, and I thought marketing [INT 1].

Clarice described how her aspirations shaped the knowledge she encountered in high school history class:

I think the first time in history class when I read his 'I have a dream' speech; I think that's when my life changed. That's one of the speeches that I remember a lot about. Where he says, 'I have a dream', it stuck with me, and made me wonder what my dream was, what I want to achieve. And I think I've drawn a comparison, not that you can really compare because our lives are different. Not like changing the world or something, but it kind of makes you wonder what you want to do [INT 1].

She had access to both the knowledge and educational and social structures in which to convert this knowledge into the capability for critical literacy.

5.3.2 Family, resources and developing aspirations

The analysis of student narratives shows that school is neither the only nor the primary site where aspirations are developed. Instead, family and community are influential in developing and directing individual aspirations. For students from working-class families and communities, this foregrounds the interrelated issue of access to *resources*, and how access to resources shapes aspirations.

Naledi experienced the role of family in creating aspirations as intense pressure to pursue a career that would earn her a stable income. The difficulty for Naledi was that she was drawn to a career in political journalism, which her parents were reluctant to support because of their own beliefs, the discourse around employability, skills and higher education, and the reality of living in poverty:

... when I chose the thing for accounting, I think it was to please my parents. 'Cos they were like, 'Choose a career that you gonna get a job after'. But I was like 'People, I don't want to do accounting!' They'd be like, 'Are you going to get a job after doing this degree [media studies and journalism]?'.

He's [her father] always emphasizing the fact that 'Oh we are dying, we are dying, you have to have an income'. Yoh! Ja⁴⁸, that's a lot of pressure [INT 1].

The lack of ownership or a sense of importance in what she would be achieving through this degree constrained her freedom; education was framed as a means to a financial end, which limited Naledi's freedom to choose a degree aligned with her aspirations. Unlike other participants, Naledi did not have the freedom to take a gap year after school to make a reasoned decision about her options.

Techniques explained that he did not aspire to higher education during school, and was encouraged by his uncle to attend university. Both a lack of resources and recognition constrained his ability to aspire to higher education, and the capabilities⁴⁹ he needed to prepare himself for university study:

Maybe I thought I couldn't do it... But, uh, I don't know. Ja, I never took into consideration to say, that one day I'll go to varsity and study further. For me, it was always, after matric, go look for a job, do something [INT 1].

⁴⁸ Afrikaans word for yes.

⁴⁹ Wilson-Strydom's pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university includes the following seven capabilities: practical reason; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional health; and language competence and confidence (Wilson-Strydom 2015a: 115).

When his uncle encouraged him to attend university, Techniques uses his agency to prepare for this transition by reading books and newspapers in preparation for a different academic environment.

Aziza entered university with the support of a network of women in her family who guided her towards aspirations for higher education. During the turbulence of adolescence, a close relationship with a supportive aunt cultivated aspirations for the expanded independence that university education could offer:

'You know Aziza, I understand the stage you're going through... but imagine you having your own car, your own house. Having to go on holiday, having to do all things without the pressure of someone else telling you what to do'. She just put that image in my mind of mmm, that's the kind of life I do want. And from that day again, got back to my books, studied [INT 1].

Aziza relates how her father, who offered limited support and care throughout her childhood and adolescence, abandoned her after a move to Gauteng, which resulted in an unplanned pregnancy:

During that time, for me, that was the most difficult year of my life.... I had to get myself up amongst strangers, amongst people who really didn't care whether I went to school or not. And the worst thing that my dad was like 30 minutes away. He didn't check up on me. There was a time I didn't speak to my dad for almost a year because of what happened. I was like really, really mad. And he got mad at me for getting pregnant. What did you expect? I mean [this was] the jungle [city in Gauteng]. I mean how else am I supposed to? I actually [did] well under the circumstances. I went to school every day.

I ended up... my dad couldn't pay my flat, my mom couldn't keep up with school and she was paying my school fees and the only thing he was responsible for was me, my food and my flat. And he couldn't even keep that... So I didn't know where to go. So I ended up moving in with my son's father [INT 1].

Following the move to the city, Aziza was isolated from the enabling structure of female support at home, which as an unsupervised minor left her vulnerable within a risky social

environment. At the intersection of gendered vulnerability and socioeconomic scarcity, Aziza's freedom to make a reasoned choice was severely compromised when she was forced to choose between homelessness and accommodation with an older male partner.

Aziza explains that after the birth of her son, her aspirations were shaped by the necessity of finishing school, and providing for him financially. This responsibility was intensified by an extended family that relied on an educated, first-born family member to provide financial support:

There was a time in high school... I was just feeling heavy. And when I sat down and I was thinking a lot, the whole thing came: I'm the first born in my family, and I got a son, my mom has a child, my brother, my dad has always been, what can I say, a half dad, he's never really contributed to my success, in a way like my dad was there for me. So in a way, this pressure of saying, if I don't succeed now, what's gonna happen? I'm the only person who could help me, my son. It felt like the whole world was on my shoulders [INT 1].

Despite these early challenges, Aziza's supportive network of relatives and mentors offered career guidance in the gap years between matriculation and university, and she converted their advice and encouragement into aspirations for higher education that aligned with her work experience, career interests and school subjects. Like Condorrera, Aziza also worked and studied for a few years after school, which gave her time to pursue a number of bursaries for post-school education before she began university. It is evident throughout her narrative that the knowledge and resources offered by these experiences expanded her capabilities to participate at university.

Although material resources in her family were severely limited, Condorrera was inspired to value education because of the transformation that education brought to their lives after her mother achieved her matric:

We were told back home that school is important and the only way to make it is through school. And I saw that when my mother went to school, then our lives started to change. So which was, it gave me confidence to say 'oh well, if I go to school, chances are I'm not going to live below the poverty line, like I grew up' [INT 2].

Condorrera described how her mother struggled to afford basic needs and education for three children while earning a minimum wage. Yet her mother's resilience also cultivated her aspirations to respond to urgent needs within her extended family. Condorrera's aspirations and career choices were shaped by her concern for her deaf cousin, who is vulnerable to exclusion because of his disability, exacerbated by unemployment, violence and poverty, and the difficulty of accessing legal and medical services. Condorrera's intimate knowledge of the consequences of disability and poverty inspired her to qualify as a sign language expert:

And then one day my grandmother was saying, someone should take this as a profession. 'Cos who's going to interpret for him when he's in court? 'Cos we very poor; we cannot afford an interpreter... So who is going to explain to the doctor? [INT 2].

Unlike participants who are manipulated into choosing degrees associated with high incomes, Condorrera's reasoned decision to study sign language aligns with the four conditions of agency identified by Crocker and Robeyns (2010). Firstly, she plays an active role in pursuing and completing this degree course; she is reflexive about how her knowledge of sign language will impact positively on the lives of her family and on the deaf community, and she has chosen this degree after a process of deliberation of its value and function.

Yet Condorrera is one of the only members of her community who is privileged enough to access this level of agency in pursuing aspirations that she has developed through a process of reasoned deliberation. A recurring thread in her narrative was the consequences of poverty and unemployment, where structural conditions deny access to the services and resources that enable capability development. Although the picture she paints of youth aspirations in North America was idealistic, the point is that the severity of inequality in South Africa is eroding the aspirations of a large proportion of South African youth:

Those people there [in the US], they follow their dream. If they want to do music, they study music. If it's acting, then go to Hollywood. They do something about their dreams. They don't just sit at the corner and wonder what would it be like if they were there [INT 1].

Kea's experiences of poverty and vulnerability shaped her aspirations to secure resources that enabled her to attend university. The scarcity of resources inspired her to convert education into financial support:

But I did manage to get a bursary. 'Cos if I sit at home, who's gonna pay for my fees? My family don't have money to take me to varsity, so I need to make sure that I pass well and I get a bursary. And I had this thing, mentality of 'I am going to go to varsity'. I even told my friends... that I'm going to go to varsity [INT 1].

Her precarious position within the family meant that Kea was reliant on external funding to participate, which was the main source of the pressure that led to her eventual collapse at university. While her agency and determination are evident in her educational trajectory, the pressure of pursuing these goals with limited financial and social support compromised her freedom for equal participation:

I had this idea of like trying to better my community. I wanted something that could make them see how important bettering them self is. Like how they should stop having this mentality of, 'I failed. There is nothing I can do'. If ever you failed in the road of education, can't you try something else? Can't you find your skill, your thing that... makes you better, that makes you, like, you. Because many black women do not see themselves as being leaders or bringing changes in other black women's lives [INT 1].

Kea's experiences confirmed that economic maldistribution leaves many black women in South Africa triply vulnerable to gender, class and race-based injustices (Mail & Guardian 2013). Her aspirations remained connected to the empowerment of black women throughout her degree, and she converted available resources into opportunities at university to prepare herself to achieve this aspiration, which I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Thuli's aspirations were shaped by violence and abuse experienced at home, where she experienced how gendered inequality, money, power and exploitation are connected. Even though Thuli had greater access to finances than some other participants, the abusive situation at home shaped her aspirations for independence:

Things at home weren't very nice. My dad is like the breadwinner, he always has been. He's one of those people with a lot of money and, ja, he treats people like dogs. You have to beg him for everything. I saw how my mom is always stranded for him; whenever my mom needs something, she always has to comply with whatever my dad does. And I was like 'no, I don't wanna live like this'. And yes, being all independent on myself [INT 1].

Within this constraining environment, Thuli used her agency to find employment while finishing school.

Another site where aspirations were developed is through work experiences during high school and gap years before entry into university. Clarice was encouraged to save for her registration fee before deciding on a degree, although it was assumed that she would attend university. Unlike other participants, Clarice was not dependent on a bursary to attend university. Clarice had worked at her godmother's catering company, which she identified as a valuable opportunity to gain work and life experience:

... it's made me realize... that there's more to life... but I think it matured me in the sense that, I can personally say that I grew up, my parents gave me everything, and I had to save and pay my registration fee... As a child you don't really realize everything your parents give you and that you take for granted... You kind of have to plan first. It's not just, 'I'm getting my money', 'cos you have to plan for the 'what if's' [INT 1].

Although Clarice's parents had moved into the middle class, they live in a relatively poor community close to her extended family where the effects of unemployment and poverty are visible. Clarice described how her aspirations were shaped by her concern for the girls and women in her community whose lives and opportunities are constrained by unemployment, violence and exploitation:

I don't want to put a race card on it, but just the sense for us, like I explained in my journal, the 'matchbox' living, for us as Coloured people. Just to kind of make my story that there is more to life than pay cheque to pay cheque. Especially for women, 'cos I think that's where women find their independence or their sense of empowerment.

If I could change most of my neighbours or my friends who I grew up with, if I could change their minds, it would at least be a start [INT 1].

Because of her family's relative affluence, Clarice's aspirations are not directed towards providing financially for her family. She therefore has more freedom than other participants to use time, energy and resources to pursue valued goals instead of meeting basic needs such as food and transport.

Another significant thread running throughout the student narratives is the development of aspirations *in isolation* from the people at school or in the community. In some cases, the separation from community members also correlates with the development of academic identity, while entry into higher education creates a barrier between friend and relatives in the community. Aziza's mother controlled her interaction with community members, which Aziza explained as a way to create a routine aligned to the values of her elite primary school:

I didn't have friends at all in the location [township]. She just felt they are not in par [emphatic tone] where I am, so she just felt that they will influence me again in a bad way [INT 1].

Condorrera's separation from the community during high school was because of her mother's fear of pregnancy. She limited Condorrera's movements to school, church and home. Although Condorrera did not have many friends, she claimed that this isolation was a good thing that kept her focused on her school work. Clarice also explained that she has no friends at home because most of the young women her age had children, and so she felt that they had nothing in common.

Techniques also explained that when he returned home for university holidays, his friends viewed him with suspicion, and would accuse him of being 'different' and speaking too much English. He explained that it was difficult to prove his belonging to his community while he was making the transition to becoming a university student. Similarly, Kea explained that some school friends and neighbours at home were jealous of the opportunity she had to attend university, which damaged her relationship with them and informed her decision to avoid visiting them during the holidays.

5.4 Conclusion

The aim of this first empirical chapter was to demonstrate how educational and social structures enable and constrain individual agency and freedom. I presented an analysis of student experiences across two evaluative sites, which were schooling and aspirational development, which illustrated how conversion factors, agency and freedom emerge at the sites of education and aspirational development in student experiences. The analysis showed how participants used agency within structural arrangements to negotiate different conditions of schooling, while relying on resources at home and school to develop aspirations for higher education, and how structural constraints played a significant role in shaping educational trajectories. My intention was to offer an account which highlighted students' agency within constraining structures while not downplaying the systemic conditions that compromised students' equal access to resources and opportunities for equal participation.

I concluded this empirical chapter with an overview of patterns emerging in student narratives related to resource and opportunity distribution as students made the transition from school to employment and university. While each participant brought resources to university that enabled the negotiation of pedagogical and institutional structures, such as work experience, knowledge from earlier studies, the ability to learn and work under harsh conditions, and aspirations for the public good, some participants entered higher education with significantly fewer capabilities aligned with the demands of higher education structural arrangements. In particular, the secondary school system maintained an unequal distribution of educational resources based on the level of tuition that parents can afford, with some exceptions in the case of low-fee private schools (Case 2013; see also Wilson Strydom 2014: 60-61).

Another finding was that socioeconomic scarcity, in combination with constraining school environments, narrowed the capability sets available to students to choose from a range of alternatives. Although students used their agency to pursue opportunities, these opportunities were constrained by structural injustices that limited the freedom that they had to pursue real alternatives. Despite these structural constraints, the evaluation of freedom and agency above suggests that each student achieved the capability for entry into higher education, although as I argue in subsequent chapters, entry into the system was not sufficient to enable equal participation.

Furthermore, the struggle to meet basic needs also compromised aspirations for broader community concerns. This constraint was complicated by the tension between individual aspirations that demanded resources, and the ethical commitment to share resources with family members. Another significant finding across narratives was that the transition to university created a relational distance between the students and their community (Reay *et al.* 2006).

I have structured the next two empirical chapters as follows: in chapter six, I discuss student responses that reflect arrangements that *constrain* equal participation. Chapter seven is an analysis of student responses that point to *enabling* arrangements that are more conducive to expanding equal participation.

Chapter 6

Structures, resources and constraints in higher education

Any situation in which some [people] prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate [people] from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.

Paulo Freire⁵⁰, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

6.1 Introduction

Having presented a biographical overview of participants' school education and family lives before university entry, I now turn to their experiences of pedagogical and institutional arrangements in higher education. The aim of this chapter is to determine how pedagogical and institutional conditions at the university constrain the real freedoms that students have to engage with knowledge and pursue their aspirations for learning, in response to the second research question:

How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

The experiences analysed in this chapter foreground conditions within classrooms and other institutional spaces that were not conducive to capability development, and that decreased student agency, and constrained their freedom to participate as equal members of the institution (Walker 2008a; Walker 2012; Fraser 2008). Student narratives drew attention to the way that resources, recognition, power and knowledge were unequally distributed, while genuine opportunities to convert available resources into capabilities and functionings were also not available to most participants. Structural arrangements in the analysis refer to the conditions within classrooms and across the institution, such as pedagogy and curricula; residence life; management structures; relationships and hierarchies between students and lecturers; the distribution of opportunities and resources; and the cultures, values and practices inherent in the institution.

⁵⁰ Freire 1970: 73.

The chapter has been organized to reflect five distinctive aspects of constraining arrangements as identified by participants, framed as *structural conversion factors*. These subsections were established using the analytical interpretation of arrangements that constrained students' freedom to participate equally within higher education. These five conversion factors include: 1) *individualizing failure*, 2) *uncritical engagement with knowledge*, 3) *lack of participation in decision-making*, 4) *alienation from lecturers*, and 5) *misrecognition of ability*. Across these five factors, student narratives presented evidence of conditions that made it difficult for students to access resources that enable learning, or to convert available resources into valued academic capabilities. The analysis of student experiences was based on a structural approach to individual failure and low achievement, as discussed earlier in the review of literature and the conceptual framework. I also paid particular attention to the impact of institutional resource constraints on participants' freedom for equal participation. Based on the findings within the data, **Table 5** below summarizes the estimated impact of each conversion factor on the individual participant, with 0 representing no negative effect on equal participation, and 5 being a significant negative effect on the freedom for participation.

Table 5: Conversion factors that constrained participation

	Conversion factors	Estimated effect on individual student capability							
		0 – no negative effect on participation 5 – significant negative effect on participation							
		Aziza	Clarice	Condorrera	Dante	Kea	Naledi	Techniques	Thuli
1	Individualizing failure	3	5	3	3	5	4	5	3
2	Uncritical engagement with knowledge	4	3	2	3	3	4	4	3
3	Lack of participation in decision-making	4	5	3	2	5	4	5	2
4	Alienation from lecturers	4	5	2	3	3	5	5	4
5	Misrecognition of ability	3	5	3	2	3	5	4	2

6.2 Individualizing failure

The first aspect of unequal participation was located at the intersection of socioeconomic disadvantage and low academic performance during the first years of adjusting to university. Participants who struggled to access the basic resources needed to participate as students, such as food and textbooks, while making the transition from high school or employment to university, were susceptible to a discourse in which their low achievement and struggle to adapt was framed as personal deficits. As a mature student, Condorrera was reflexive about the pressure of being a university student despite poverty at home, as evident in her comment below:

It depends on background. Some students are here to do better, to benefit themselves, and maybe they know that back home they are the breadwinners. They have a whole burden to look after [INT 2].

However, less experienced and younger participants tended to blame themselves, and showed evidence of self-doubt, anxiety and fear. This discourse of individualized failure made structural barriers invisible, which was evident in students' experiences of academic 'success' as a reflection of their ability and worth, while they did not recognize the conditions that eroded their freedom to learn. Individualized failure reproduced the:

culturally marginal place of working-class students in higher education [which] might result in self-evaluations of inadequacy that distort what they believe themselves to be capable of, so that they come to locate the problem in themselves and the belief that they are not capable of thinking intelligently or what they have to say is important (Walker 2006: 101).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Kea entered university as a first-generation student who was dependent on financial aid and placed on an extended degree programme. During her first year, the pressure of residence living, adjusting to an urban environment and the academic demands of her degree course resulted in significant health problems:

My first year wasn't that good. Actually, it was terrible. I collapsed in three months. In two months I was admitted [to] hospital three times. I had fits. After that, I collapsed in class during a tutorial and they called an ambulance. They told me it was stress because I was putting so much pressure on myself. So I was admitted at a psychiatric

complex for a month. Last year was also a hectic year for me. Failing during my first year was so much tension on me that I even had two operations last year in less than six months [INT 1].

Although Kea recovered sufficiently from these early setbacks to continue her studies, it was evident that besides the provision of counselling, there was a limited institutional response to the need for sustained academic and psychosocial support that could help her adjust to university life (Kahu 2013). At the same time, her family's poverty limited the resources that Kea needed to access services that could improve her health and help her cope with the stress of university. Because the institution did not take into account that her access to resources and the freedom to learn were connected, her health crisis was a problem for which Kea had to find a private solution, as she reiterated throughout her narrative:

But then again, I feel like I can't keep on being so weak. Because I'm not a weak person. I'm not a weak person. I've never been a weak person [INT 1].

Kea also framed her academic failure as individual weakness which could be overcome with determination and hard work, instead of recognizing conditions that constrained her freedom to access knowledge, such as overcrowded classrooms and unsupportive lecturers:

Every year, first semester, I have to fail a module or two. And I'm not proud of it. I'm not going to say I'm blaming my family or blaming everyone who's in my life, no. I'm blaming myself, and this year I'm working past it [INT 1].

She explained that in order to escape the shame of being a 'weak' person meant succeeding without putting pressure on her family or her partner. This individualized notion of success associated with a neoliberal preoccupation with performance and meritocracy is especially unjust when students do not have access to the same resources and privileges as the middle-class peers with whom they are competing (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015).

Because Kea was a first-generation student, her family's support was constrained by scarce financial resources created by unemployment. Yet resources needed to cope as a university student were not only material, but included the guidance of people who understand the demands of the institution, who had access to strategic networks, and who could give insider

information about the challenges of university life (Reay 1998; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 2004; Walker 2008a; Hart 2012):

I'm not going to blame my family for it. Because my family is like that. They are not too involved. They don't ask you, how are your studies? They'll just ask you if you are ok. And then I'll say, I'm fine. I don't want to stress them [INT 1].

Furthermore, since Kea occupied a relatively privileged position in her family as a university student, instead of receiving support, she was expected to begin supporting her extended family. In her second year, Kea shared her bursary with a cousin to help her attend university, which decreased the resources Kea needed for basic living costs. This material scarcity exacerbated the pressure on her to retain her bursary⁵¹, without which she would be unable to continue her studies:

Because if I fail one module, I'm gonna be required to add another year. I can't afford it. So now I'm feeling if I don't sleep that much, it'll be worth it. I know it's gonna drain me, and I still have problems within me that I need to sort out. And at some point during my first year I felt like dropping out. But then by the grace of God I didn't. I just felt like it. But then again I thought to myself if I drop out, what's my second option? [INT 1].

At a structural level, Kea was trying to access higher education as an individual who must succeed against all odds, but with limited support. Because she lived in a campus student residence, she had some social support, yet her degree programme did not offer dedicated opportunities or resources that helped her make the academic transition to successful learning (Pym & Kapp 2013; Pym 2013). Instead, given the constrained resources and the pressure of coping, her experience of learning was an isolated struggle to study and pass formal assessments. Although Kea used her agency in coping with these academic pressures, she also showed evidence of a thin version of epistemological access since much of her time was spent trying to cope with the minimum demands of the system, which did not offer the freedom to develop critical academic capabilities.

⁵¹ NSFAS requires that a bursary holder pass 50% of her courses in order to continue to receive funding for the next year of study, and also requires completion within the timeframe stipulated by the institution (NSFAS 2015).

Techniques also relied on a government bursary and identified the fear of failure as his greatest challenge at university. Similar to Kea, his narrative framed failure as an individual weakness that would disappoint people who had invested in his education:

I think. It's for me, like my biggest fear, and I always tell everyone I engage to, like my personally, my biggest fear is failing. Not failing literally, failing like failing. But failing the people who have invested a lot in me, and who believe I can become something better. So I think that's one of my toughest and difficult things that I'm still trying to overcome. Every day when I wake up, that's the first thing I have to think – am I really going to finish this race? [INT 1].

His freedom to participate was constrained by poverty and complicated by a family who was uninformed about the challenges of university, and the lack of money for textbooks and basic living costs like food and accommodation. Although he identified structural failures in other aspects of the education system, like Kea he did not connect these failures to his own academic struggle and felt compelled to find personal solutions to his problems:

I'm the first in the family to come to varsity. So it's a bit difficult because they don't understand. When I tell my mother I'm struggling with one of my modules, she'll say, 'Just study hard'. But I am studying, but I'm still struggling [INT 1].

At the same time, Techniques had to navigate financial scarcity and pedagogical conditions that compromised his ability to convert academic resources into participation:

I was speaking to my sister and she asked me how I am doing. I told her I need money for a textbook, because my bursary didn't pay all my tuition fees. So I can't go to admin and get credit to buy the textbook. So she said she will make a plan. But now she asked me, why don't I copy the textbook from someone? And then I told her, how can I copy it if I don't have money? [INT 1].

Instead of university being a space in which he could develop critical academic capabilities, Techniques explained how perpetual stress about money for textbooks, accommodation and transport limited his freedom to develop and engage with knowledge. Furthermore, his narrative illustrated how the institution did not offer support structures that helped him cope with this resource scarcity. His precarious position also meant that his expectations of

university life were constrained. Similar to Kea's experience, his participation in learning was focused on passing tests and examinations, and there was little evidence of real opportunities to critically engage with knowledge.

Academic failure also emerged as a barrier to equal participation for Naledi during her first two years of university. She disappointed her family by changing from accounting to a humanities degree, which she interpreted as an individual failure to cope with the academic demands. Despite needing more time after school to consider her degree choices, financial pressure to contribute to her family income did not give her the opportunity to take a gap year as some of the other participants had the freedom to do. As a consequence, Naledi was forced to study accounting because her parents associated a degree in finance with stable employment, although this choice contradicted her own career aspirations (Archer & Hutchings 2000; Vally & Motala 2014). The instrumentalism of the choice also diminished the autonomy and ownership, which are crucial conditions for agency (Drydyk 2008; Crocker & Robeyns 2010).

Naledi described how making the transition from the university preparation programme to the extended programme was a major challenge for which she did not have adequate resources or support:

During my studies in 2011 here I'm struggling. I have to admit it, and I can't continue with this... I would always be studying and studying, the next thing you write a test and fail. And I'd think I don't want to do this anymore. I was stressing about this module, did I study enough? Should I wake up and do stuff? [INT 1].

Naledi's participation was thus compromised by the lack of choice in pursuing a valued goal, while pedagogical conditions did not enable her to convert resources into equal participation. Although she interpreted this failure as a personal weakness, there was no evidence of structures that enabled her to succeed on a degree programme with some embedded academic or social support which did not help her access complex disciplinary knowledge. Under these conditions, her experience of learning was only an attempt to pass tests and examinations, without the freedom to develop critical academic capabilities.

Even though her family was not as poor as Kea's or Techniques', financial resources also constrained Naledi's freedom to participate equally. She lived in cheaper accommodation far from the university, and relied on public transport to access campus. The distance from campus alienated her from academic and social support structures, and made her more vulnerable to exclusion. Other participants living off-campus reported that travelling time and the lack of finances to afford regular trips to campus contributed to decreased participation in campus life. Some students reported being mugged when walking home after class, which made them reluctant to attend evening lectures.

Aziza also identified being a first-generation student as a constraint on her ability to participate equally:

When it comes to university, I think a lot of us black people don't know what it entails, 'cos a lot of our parents have not been here. So when you come here you kind of feel lost. And with the day-by-day experience, you ask, 'am I learning something, am I gaining something?' I do have that fear that I might not make it [INT 2].

Aziza was registered in a degree programme that did not offer resources or support to develop academic capabilities to enhance her participation. In the quotation above, she described the expectation that students need to cope on their own without knowing where to seek support. At the same time, there was evidence that lecturers misrecognized first-generation students' need for opportunities that facilitated the transition from poor quality schools, as she identified in the quotation below:

So I think again some lecturers don't understand that we coming from a community who don't know what it entails for us. As much as we have learned from high school, our high school is substandard, we all know that. And it's not up to scratch. And we do study in a different way [INT 2].

Fear of failure was closely related to the self-doubt that students expressed in their ability to participate academically, which was complicated by an environment that misrecognized students' academic potential. For Aziza, this was expressed as doubt in her own ability to perform well, despite evidence that she was in the process of developing academic capabilities:

I would always read my article again and be like, did I really write that? [Laughs] I would just check my marks again – is this me sometimes? I just doubt myself a lot. But I go like, when I look back I can do this hey, if I can write this then, hey, there must be something in here that's working, right? [INT 1].

Even when resources were less constrained, the precarious status of being a first-generation student means that for Clarice, the pressure to prove her ability was constrained by an instrumental view of success as the ability to pass standardized assessment:

I failed one module last year, but I can't say I didn't put everything in. But I'm still disappointed in myself [INT 3].

As a relatively privileged student in the sample who attended well-resourced schools for a part of his high school career, Dante also struggled to adjust to the academic demands of his accounting course, and later changed to a social sciences degree. He interpreted this academic failure as a reflection of the state school that he attended, which did not prepare him for the demands of university study.

In this analysis, the first cluster of conversion factors was centred around a neoliberal discourse of individual effort and failure, with the onus on the individual to find personal solutions to structural problems even when structural support was inadequate or absent (Bauman 2009). Throughout the narratives, students were critical of institutional arrangements in these aspects of student life that related more directly to political engagement, but then reverted back to self-blame when describing their own academic failures. At the same time, individual academic failure was connected to pedagogical and social arrangements that framed learning as the ability to pass tests and examinations, while constraining student freedom to develop critical academic capabilities.

6.3 Uncritical engagement with knowledge

Another cluster of structural conversion factors that emerged in narratives were related to pedagogical arrangements that failed to create critical engagement with knowledge. In the analysis, I keep in mind that these arrangements reflect the resource constraints faced by higher education institutions, which is detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning. These structural concerns are evident, for example, in crowded undergraduate classrooms and insufficient availability of qualified lecturers and tutors. As participants struggled to meet

assessment requirements with limited access to resources and support, they reported that developmental or foundational programmes offered low quality arrangements that were misaligned with the demands of their mainstream courses, which also points to inadequate resource commitment, departmental support and infrastructure needed to embed these programmes into faculties (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Boughey 2010b). Even though participants expressed the need for teaching and learning that would enable them to become engaged and critical students, they explained how these courses were more likely to teach them how to summarize and regurgitate information for assessment, or to learn decontextualized, generic skills that they viewed as unimportant to help them access complex disciplinary knowledge (Hockings *et al.* 2007). There was little evidence of opportunities where discipline-specific ways of thinking, writing and reading were made explicit to students (Kapp & Bangeni 2009; Leibowitz 2004). At the same time, uncritical access to information was frequently associated with pedagogic distance between students and lecturers, which further decreased the availability of 'structured opportunities for students to learn how to learn in a university setting' (CHE 2010: 104; see also Wingate 2007).

Clarice explained how facilitation sessions for students on the extended degree programme misrecognized her ability to participate as a valued member of the institution, and therefore compromised the freedom to convert academic resources into meaningful engagement with knowledge. Instead of having access to tutorials, the quality of the foundational provision was a structural conversion factor that constrained her freedom for equal participation:

I'm in the extended programme. So for every module I have to go to the facilitation sessions. The tutorials are for the mainstream people. The facilitation sessions are basically where you're telling me that I'm stupid. I feel so stupid in those classes. I listen and my brain switches off after they make me feel like I'm stupid [INT 2].

As was discussed in chapter two, the structural limitation of differentiated provision – mainstream students attend regular tutorials while extended degree students attend facilitation sessions⁵² – is dividing educational resources into challenging environments and a

⁵² The academic facilitation sessions (AFS) were designed to enable students on the extended degree programme to access information, with particular emphasis on preparing for tests and examinations, while

simplified version for ‘underprepared’ students (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Boughey 2010b). This division created an experience of being stigmatized while devaluing the resources offered by these sessions (Hlalele 2010). Despite access to a well-resourced school, Clarice entered the university with school-leaving results that were a few points lower than required for entry into the mainstream degree. This is a source of contention amongst students who interpret this as an affirmative approach that separates and stigmatizes them from the rest of the student cohort. At the same time, while Clarice and Condorrera entered the university with the same university admission score, their graded level of language proficiency was significantly different with Clarice as a home language English speaker on the highest level 5 and Condorrera on level 3, which may also explain why Clarice found no value in the literacy module.

The important point is not an evaluation of the selection criteria for the extended degree module, but the status injury associated with being separated from peers on the mainstream. In addition, Clarice’s experience of being forced to attend sessions that she found patronizing and misaligned to the demands of her mainstream modules also decreased her motivation to participate, and diminished the perceived value of foundational resources on offer:

Although it obviously helps those people who are struggling to connect life skills with academic literacy skills, so for them it will be the summarizing of content. But for me, personally I feel like I don’t need to be there. But now you have to attend 80% of the lectures otherwise I don’t qualify to write exams, even if I have an average of 80%. So I just go to class to go sign my name. I’m so tired. I’m frustrated. The people in the mainstream tutorials sessions get more information, whereas you’re limiting me to this page, summarize this chapter, or this paragraph, highlight the important words. I think, really now? So I just sit there for the hour. I’m so mad [INT 2].

She described a facilitation session that was designed to teach students the skills associated more commonly with rote learning, framing academic success as the ability to absorb, summarize and reproduce the contents of the curriculum during summative assessment.

tutorials are offered to students on the mainstream curriculum. In Clarice’s experience, the AFS are a ‘dumbed-down’ version of tutorials that are designed to remediate gaps in content knowledge instead of offering academic challenge.

Although Clarice valued opportunities for rigorous engagement with knowledge, the foundational provision on the extended degree programme offered the opposite:

That's why I say it's low expectations. Basically in life skills and in academic literacy you're still spoon-feeding me. You're giving me a worksheet like I used to get in high school: fill in the blanks, or match this column with that column. And I'm just sitting there thinking, how is this going to help me remember the work that I have to study for the test? [INT 2].

It is concerning that Clarice was the only participant who recognized and criticized the low quality of foundational modules, whereas the other participants accepted these arrangements as the norm and uncritically defined their academic struggle as the acquisition of study skills and gaining access to class notes and summaries provided by lecturers. Yet during later stages of the project, other participants commented that they had found some aspects of the foundational courses helpful. This suggests that Clarice's school background and her strong English proficiency developed as a home language meant that her academic needs were misaligned with the structure of the course. Her critique can therefore be understood as intersecting structural factors that made it difficult to benefit from this provision.

Throughout the project, it was evident that participants were being assimilated into practices demanded by a banking system (Freire 1970). Most students explained that they approached university study with the memorization techniques they had learned at school, since summative assessment was framed as the primary indicator of success or failure, and getting to know 'what the lecturer wants' and the scope for the test or examination emerged as more important than a deep or sustained engagement with knowledge or a critical synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.

There was silence amongst most participants about critical ways of processing information, or practices of writing and analysis that transcend lecturer expectations. Furthermore, reading was limited to the summaries of prescribed textbooks or PowerPoint slides provided by lecturers. In the analysis, these arrangements reflect the pedagogical consequences of unevenly distributed resources.

Aziza describes the cycle of memorization and testing as her dominant experience of learning in higher education:

Some of us cram and by the time we write exams, we don't know jack shit [sic]. When we are done writing, ask us anything about the book and we would say uhhhhh... [Mimics thinking]. I remember that chapter but most of the time we are cramming. We won't actually be studying [INT 2].

Although Condorrera was critical of unfair practices and compared pedagogical approaches, she also assimilated lecturer expectations and framed compliance to assessment instructions as the measure of academic success. Her ability to master the rules helped her navigate the system, yet also constrained the expansion of her critical capabilities that enhanced academic participation. This arrangement reflected the limitations of the banking system and poorly designed assessment, which would work to the detriment of quality learning for all students. Condorrera explained how she sought help from white peers who she perceived as more committed to learning, and explained that their advice was on how to memorize information for tests more effectively:

Because you must adhere to instructions, otherwise you're going to get it wrong. The topic is about marriage and how marriage fails. And that's what the lecturer expects and that's what they want to see in the essay. If you don't do that, then you're not going to get it right [INT 2].

Other students commented on the lack of control they had in challenging unfair arrangements because of fear of punishment, lecturers protecting each other, or not being taken seriously. Despite feeling disillusioned by the instrumentalism of this system, students who occupied a precarious position at the institution could not afford to risk exclusion by challenging these arrangements. The power imbalance compromised students' freedom to access alternatives or to use reasoned deliberation to influence conditions not conducive to learning (Sen 1999: 4).

For this reason, students like Kea and Techniques, who both struggled to pass enough modules to retain their NSFAS bursaries, approached university study as learning how to pass tests and examinations. The structural injustice of this diminished form of learning is that

students are unfairly burdened by the pressure to pass so that they are not excluded from university. Under the pressure of poverty, student narratives suggest that there are limited opportunities to cultivate a critical approach to learning. As participants discussed in chapter five, opportunities to develop critical capabilities at school were eroded by impoverished material conditions, poor teaching practices, and unstable curricula that had not prepared them to expect a critical approach to education, which means that the vocabulary with which to demand an alternative was constrained. When students were then confronted by the uncritical arrangements in developmental modules that Clarice described above, some students did not have the capabilities to recognize, let alone resist, arrangements that perpetuate uncritical ways of learning. In my analysis, these are remediable institutional failures and not a reflection of students' ability to develop critical academic capabilities.

The banking system also distorted opportunities to develop critical academic capabilities. Clarice identified history as her favourite subject at school and was disappointed by the narrow approach taken at university to develop 'critical thinking'. The module she described below was an interdisciplinary module designed to teach critical thinking across the undergraduate student cohort:

*They give you 'our unjust past'. It teaches you to think 'critically', but in the way **they** want you to think. Everything that the unit says, that's what you have to do. It's not critical thinking as what actually happened in our past. The questions they ask you are specific to what and how they wanted you to think. That's why I feel like it's just doing the right thing in the wrong way [INT 3].*

In the comment below, Clarice contrasted her experience of small classes and individual attention at high school with pedagogical arrangements at university and connected the lecture-and-leave approach to students' regurgitated learning and assessment practices:

When lecturers wonder why we've only studied to get our degrees and we've learned nothing else it's because they don't share their knowledge with us either. They've been through the whole process. But if you have the whole perception 'let me just lecture and leave', I'm gonna have the whole perception, let me just listen to you, do what I have to do, pass, and I'll leave too. Then my study method would be, study study, or cram, do it the night before, get 50%, I don't care. If lecturers start breaking that gap, I

think students will start thinking more critically. And the fact that most of the content you have to study, you have to study in a parrot form. It has to be like it is in the textbook. And if it's not like it is in the textbook, I'm going to lose those five or six marks [INT 2].

In the situation above, the lecturers' instrumental approach to teaching constrained Clarice's freedom to engage critically with knowledge. Although she was frustrated by assessment that required her to uncritically regurgitate information, she did not have the opportunity to access an alternative way of learning and was therefore forced to assimilate to advance through the system.

While there was evidence that selective courses like law and medicine develop valued capabilities using intensive pedagogical support structures, student narratives suggested that oversubscribed degree courses unevenly distributed resources and opportunities for development. Student narratives suggested that crowded classrooms and high lecturer-student ratios were not conducive to converting academic resources into the capability for practical reasoning and other valued capabilities. Naledi attributed the absence of sustained mentorship as a conversion factor that made it difficult to enter a new academic discourse:

Lecturers, I think they were there to teach us then leave. Then we'd have practicals and there'd be a single person for the practicals. And we'd always have to wait for the question, so it was a bit discouraging [INT 1].

It was also evident that students had to work independently to access knowledge, while the academic mentorship reserved for selection courses⁵³ was not available to the majority of students, who struggled to create meaningful connections with abstract theory without sustained guidance from qualified and committed lecturers (Terenzini *et al.* 1996). As mentioned earlier, this discipline-specific engagement was crucial to make the discourses and rules of academic participation explicit, and to avoid leaving students overwhelmed, demoralized and alienated.

⁵³ For example, courses in the medical faculty which have more stringent admission criteria and a selection process, and which in some cases are also better resourced with dedicated, embedded support in the departments. While the academic requirements are sometimes more demanding, embedded support is provided to the smaller cohort of students.

Another conversion factor was the low quality of foundational modules presented by underqualified staff unfamiliar with the disciplinary discourses and who resorted to generic skill development (Boughey 2010b). While Techniques struggled to articulate why he did not engage with a foundational literacy module: *'There's just something about [the module] when you get here, it's not nice'*, Clarice offered a more detailed analysis of the constraining pedagogical environment:

I know it's class and it's not supposed to be that fun, but you at least supposed to look forward to coming to class, and to learning something. But you walk out of there, and you're like, today we learned about teenagers, or today we learned about this, and that's it. You don't go home, like I'd never open my textbook unless I had to study for a test. I never touched it again. I'll never go back and think 'wow, that topic was so fascinating'. 'Cos [the lecturer] would never bring extra information, 'Guys I found this article!' I felt more like I was in a box. I wasn't being me in [this module] ever. I never spoke in class because there was nothing for me to say. It was that bad [INT 3].

Other students expressed ambivalence about developmental modules, with some believing they are unchallenging yet important, while others were unclear about the value of these modules, which Clarice summarized as constrained freedom to cultivate critical capabilities:

I think most students were scarred by [the developmental module] last year, so they think you're just going to do the same thing [in the second year of the module]. I know, potential wise, I think most people can write better. I think it's because of how we started varsity, after a while you just want to do this to leave [INT 2].

In other cases, these modules were perceived as too easy and did not develop the capabilities that students needed to access knowledge. For example, Condorrera did not find either the first or second year level of academic literacy modules challenging or relevant to her course. Because academic literacy has been identified as a fundamental area of student underpreparedness (Leibowitz 2011; CHE 2010), there should be cause for concern when literacy interventions at university are reported by 'underprepared' students as unchallenging, 'like high school English' and 'too easy'. It is also worrying when students find ways to avoid potentially important developmental modules: a number of participants postponed these modules until their final year because of negative reports from peers, which

would defeat the purpose of modules designed to develop crucial literacy, numeracy and other capabilities in the early stages of an extended degree programmes.

The evidence in this section found that students who are not given sustained opportunities to cultivate capabilities for practical reasoning, who are crammed into large classes, who are not nurtured by qualified lecturers and tutors, and who are not explicitly taught to read, write and think beyond assessment rubrics will be less likely to develop the intellectual freedom, curiosity and imagination needed for equal participation. In this sense, higher education treads a precarious line between the provision of resources that graduates need to compete in a globalized knowledge economy, without education regressing into assimilation that leaves the individual with uncritical access to information (Freire 1970: 34).

6.4 Lack of participation in decision-making

The third cluster of structural conversion factors was decision-making processes about both pedagogical and institutional arrangements. Even though the political function of the SRC [student representative council] has been eroded by university management⁵⁴, student leaders still contribute to decision-making, even when their function is symbolic. However, very few students reach leadership positions and many students are uninformed about policies that influence their participation. The research participants expressed disillusionment with student leadership, and most agreed that student voices were not taken seriously in decision-making. The entry point into consultation is generally at an advanced state of decision-making, which creates a thin version of student representation (Crocker 2008; Kosko 2013). The broader student population therefore has a limited role in determining or influencing decision-making, although the recent student protests have introduced a significant wave of student-led activism around tuition fee increases. Despite the evidence in this chapter that students had reasonable and justified opinions about the process of their education and the choice that influenced their engagement with knowledge, they were not free to contribute to conditions that would have enhanced their opportunities to learn (Sen 2004).

⁵⁴ This is partly because of concerns about campus-based protests and violence, together with concerns about negative publicity created by violence and conflict associated with politicised student movements.

The evidence in this section suggests that misrecognition of student potential and an overemphasis on students' measurable academic performance creates a vicious cycle of exclusion from decision-making platforms, as a form of misrepresentation (Fraser 2013). Since 'one thing which is not for choosing is the condition under which the choices are made' (Bauman 2013: 23), unequal opportunities for decision-making are misinterpreted as disengagement, lack of interest and apathy. However, participants explained that structural conditions played a significant role in constraining their freedom to pursue leadership and other strategic student positions, such as the fear of academic failure (Fraser 2009; Bozalek & Boughey 2012).

Arrangements that silence student voices and that do not allow for decision-making limit the freedom to convert resources into participation. Clarice and other students who expressed discontent with these developmental modules felt powerless to influence or transform arrangements; it was accepted that if you were 'unlucky' to be allocated an unfair facilitator, then you could either accept it or try to change classes, which was almost impossible given the problem of timetable clashes:

When I got to [developmental module] I was like, what is this? And why am I doing this? It was more frustration, and now I understand why. I don't think they explained why you're doing what you're doing. They just give this thing to you, and tell you to do it because you're in the extended programme, or because you need to do it [INT 3].

Yet no participant showed evidence that they had the freedom to change the environment or contribute towards a more egalitarian way of learning. In my view, this also reflected the apolitical, corporatized culture of the neoliberal university, which offers educational services for purchase (Giroux 2015). Since teaching and learning arrangements were frequently perceived as an extension of an uncritical high school culture, lecturers were framed as powerful members of the academic hierarchy, who could at best be resisted by skipping class or complaining of unfair treatment to peers and friends (Bloch 2009). This hierarchy, entrenched in South Africa's authoritarian social structures, means that the provision of education is being framed increasingly as a commodity, which creates a uncritical approach to learning that silences dissent, forces compliance and hollows out the critical traditions of higher education (McKenna 2015; Klees 2004; Badat 2010). Participants were troubled by

reminders of school culture and felt patronized by lecturers who insisted that *'we stick the label on the left hand of the book like at school'* because it forced them to be complicit in reproducing this culture of low expectations, as Clarice explained.

The contradiction of a university that retains practices such as forced attendance which are reminiscent of school pedagogy, while forgetting that the 'services' a university provides to its adult 'clients' are not free, and therefore the student as client should arguably be free to decide whether class attendance is worth her time (Marginson 2011). For example, Clarice was deeply unhappy about being forced to register and buy expensive textbooks for a compulsory computer literacy module although she was already proficient⁵⁵. From a capability perspective, the needs of the individual must be taken into account when prescribing resources, and then the individual must still be consulted in a deliberative process about the value and nature of this provision (Feldman & Gellert 2006). I discuss the practical application of consulting students in chapters 8 [8.5.4] and 9 [9.4.2; and 9.5.2]. It is deeply problematic that students should register and pay for modules without a process of deliberation that justifies the purpose and value of these courses. I base this statement on the concerning finding that foundational provision was not being adequately introduced, which contributed to its devalued status. Also, these courses were presented by staff members who were underqualified as lecturers, which raises questions about the quality of pedagogy for which students must pay the same fees as for modules taught by qualified academic staff (see UFS SRC Memorandum, October 26 2015). At a minimum, there should be more robust quality assurance measures in place and a clear justification for the aim of these provisions. It would also be necessary to allow exemption for students who can demonstrate their proficiency, to prevent wasted time and resources.

In Kea's experience, the lack of resources described in the previous section forced her to abandon aspirations for student leadership:

I don't think I can manage to become an SRC member whereas I can't manage my studies and SRC it's gonna to be too much work for me. I have to focus on my studies [INT 1].

⁵⁵ She was not aware of the test that she could have written to be exempted from the course.

She explained her dependence on a bursary and her academic struggles made her vulnerable to academic exclusion, and so she could not risk participating in demanding leadership without financial stability and social support. The hierarchical structure of pedagogy creates an artificial distance between the individual and the process of learning.

Because of the requirements of the official and selection-based leadership structures, students on extended programmes had an unfair disadvantage and were more vulnerable to exclusion from leadership structures without appropriate alternatives that are open to students who do not meet these requirements. Although Dante aspired to student leadership, students require an appropriate bundle of resources and capabilities, to which Dante did not have access:

I would have loved to balance my varsity life better. I had to take an extra year. I knew I wanted to be on the RC [residence committee] and the SRC. But things changed because academics become like your money for everything⁵⁶. So any form of leadership, you needed a 60 average. Which was not good, because I was always average in the 50s. From first year you must have at least 60%. I only had 58. So I wish I had concentrated more on my work rather than on extramural activities [INT 1].

Dante framed his aspiration for leadership into the broader reality of an academic environment where the ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings enable the 'competitive edge' for future employment:

For me, what was important was experience at varsity, your marks don't count that much, just pass and get a degree. But the thing is things are getting very competitive. Everyone has a degree, what sets you apart? [INT 1].

Aziza and Clarice also aspired to leadership, but felt that it was not even worth trying to access the leadership trajectory, because some programmes were not open to students on extended degree programmes. Aziza also reported being excluded because of her age, and because they did not have the leadership, sport and cultural achievements at school that the university required for entry into these relatively elite programmes.

⁵⁶ Which means that academic performance is the 'currency' with which to gain access to the trajectory of leadership positions.

Lack of consultation was not limited to opportunities for student leadership. Another pattern emerging across student narratives is the absence of decision-making in pedagogical arrangements, which decreased the incentive to attend lectures and engage with knowledge. Techniques found developmental modules beneficial in developing valued functionings at university, but the lack of opportunities to negotiate conditions were experienced as coercive arrangements:

I think the only problem is the approach that they placed the whole modules and stuff... It's a nice module but I don't know. There's just that something that makes you not want to go to class... And they are too much. Like they force the module on you. If you don't attend, if you don't participate, if you don't do this, you gonna fail. So you end up just going because you, you have to go... It shouldn't be like, you have to do this, even though you don't want to [INT 2].

The problem with making attendance compulsory for foundational modules was that the purpose of these modules was not explained to students. As discussed in the previous section, there was also misalignment between these courses and the mainstream work required by students. But given the lack of participatory processes or consultation of students, these modules were perceived as additive and irrelevant courses. For this reason, Techniques does not experience the pedagogical arrangements as valuable or enabling. The experience of coercion is complicated by low quality conditions, crowded classrooms, inexperienced tutors and uncritical forms of teaching, as Clarice described below about the same module:

That's why [they] are pushing the module. [They] want us to think critically, but it's no use preaching it to the students. No one listens in that class, and everyone sits on their phones. So I read a book, and got kicked out. It's so boring you don't know what to do [INT 2].

The module that Clarice described above is a potentially valuable resource with high operational costs to the university (UFS Integrated Report 2014⁵⁷). But when lack of consultation about pedagogical arrangements constrains students' ability to benefit, this is a

⁵⁷ In 2014, this module cost the university R7.9 million to operationalize.

tragic waste of resources and reproduces the inequality that it tries to address by offering additional resources to academically 'vulnerable' students. If these resources are to have a measurable impact on students' ability to become equal academic participants, then it would be crucial to ensure that students understand the purpose of these modules and that the pedagogical arrangements are sufficiently enabling so that these resources can be converted into critical capabilities and functionings, as Kea explained below:

Like I said, if the teachers don't show the worth in what you are studying... you do not see it, you really do not see it. You don't kind of want to do what you were supposed to do. You know you're supposed to do it, but kind of like, oh gosh, this thing. And you get frustrated, you don't go beyond and seeing the bigger picture in what you studying [INT 2].

The absence of consultation points to an interesting contradiction in pedagogical arrangements: while autonomy, independent learning and the development of 'critical thinking' are pervasive learning outcomes and policy goals, students often have very little or no agency in choosing their degree course, contributing to course content, or participating in decisions that influence the structure of the curriculum. Hierarchical pedagogical structures where students exert little control or decision-making, and depend on a lecturer to outline the purpose of learning, thus alienate students from the process of learning.

A lack of participatory freedom was also evident in the structure of the extended degree programme. The lack of flexibility built into the programme meant that Clarice's academic needs were not taken into account when allocating academic resources:

I just feel like when I get to university, can you first assess me, and figure out do I want to do this? Do I need to do this? Because they just put everyone in this bubble: you guys on the extended programme – just do this. Because I feel like I would have benefitted more if I had taken English or another language than academic literacy.

I know it's hard when you think that there are so many students on this campus but I feel like if you can motivate or back up why you want to, and if they see that at the end of the year you can or you can't, then you can go back to your method [INT 2].

This raises an important distinction between a 'one size fits all' approach that does not align to individual academic needs and a flexible approach that takes diverse capabilities into account (Pym 2013; CHE 2013). In this case, increased agency and ownership in the design of her degree programme could have been more enabling for Clarice.

For Techniques, a lack of agency also extended to choices about his degree course. Because he entered the university with a lower entry score, the assumption was that he was not able to cope with his choice of degree, which forced him into another discipline which he did not value:

I'm not trying to criticize, but I don't think [this] is an institution where you can do what you want... They give you what they think is what you want. Like, I told you, when I came here, I wanted to study something in economics. And then they told me, no, my points are low, so I should study social sciences. Why don't they refer me to an extended programme of economics, [instead of] giving me something new? [INT 2].

The systemic constraints that decreased his agency to pursue a valued goal became a structural conversion factor that eroded his ability to engage with knowledge.

Another critique from students is that ineffective consultation processes between university management and students create anger and resentment, which not only decreases the freedom to choose between alternatives but also diminishes students' ownership of the process of decision-making, as Kea expresses below:

So now we thinking that every time he wants to change something, maybe the vice chancellor or the board, they change it without consulting students... I have a problem with them not consulting with students. I feel that this university makes decisions for us, and then we just implement them [INT 2].

In describing a peer mentor, Kea identified that she valued this student's freedom to challenge unjust structures, although Kea did not have the same opportunity to do this:

And she's not scared to challenge the varsity, the directors, the leaders here; she's not scared to challenge them. She feels like she has that capability of challenging her superiors [INT 1].

Increasingly coercive pedagogical structures are uncritically assimilated or resisted by students, depending on their position in the institution, thereby compromising the freedom to participate. Students who negotiate uncritical learning arrangements to pass and 'get it over with' also decrease the critical capabilities needed to position students as equal members of an academic community. Unequal participation translates into decreased epistemological access, which is exacerbated by the absence of exposure to conditions that these structures ought to provide.

Student experiences also suggest that decreased agency in one area of participation translates into decreased agency in another area. According to Crocker and Robeyns (2010), as soon as one aspect of agency is compromised, then other dimensions are also diminished. The pattern emerging across student experiences of pedagogical arrangements is that when attendance or participation is explicitly forced by threat of exclusion or failure their 'reasoned agency', which Sen and Dréze & Sen (2002: 258) define as 'the freedom and power to question and reassess the prevailing norms and values', also decreased. The compliant mode of learning into which students are socialized by schooling structures is reproduced within higher education, compromising the development of critical capabilities needed for equal participation. Freire imagines a critical education in which people 'perceive themselves in a dialectical relationship with their social reality' so that people can transform this reality (1973: 34), while the capability approach positions education as a valued process that expands individual freedom.

6.5 Alienation from lecturers

The fourth cluster of conversion factors is related to the uneven distribution of faculty time, energy and commitment to students' need to connect meaningfully to knowledge, given the range of teaching, research and administrative demands that lecturers have to negotiate. According to participant responses, this maldistribution created alienation and prevented students from converting educational resources into the capability for equal participation (Case 2007; Pym *et al.* 2011; Mann 2001; 2005). Students identified different degrees of alienation across institutional and pedagogical arrangements, particularly in relation to lecturers and tutors. A significant aspect of alienation was evidence that lecturers did not enable students to develop a critical approach to learning. In some cases, supportive lecturers spent their time helping students reach assessment standards. For this reason, most

participants defined a good tutor or lecturer as someone who helped students achieve better results for tests and examinations, while there was little evidence of interactions with staff that enabled critical academic capabilities.

The analysis was focused on understanding whether the pedagogical distance between lecturers and students could be constraining students' freedom to convert available resources into academic participation. Condorrera was the only participant who believed that lecturers offered sufficient resources to help students participate:

Lecturers assume that we're adults, so we know what we're supposed to be doing here. It's not the same as high school. You're not here to baby us. So I think you are restricted from some of the things that you should be doing. If lecturers go to class, they go prepared to give class. But the students' underpreparedness is the one thing that is causing them not to perform and not to attend classes. If they don't understand, they don't go for consultation hours. Not taking an extra mile to do something about that particular subject. It's causing us not to do well. And maybe when we see another student passing, some of them will wonder why are they doing well? But they are attending class, they research, they make time, they go for consultation hours, they attend tutorials. I believe the university is doing enough. You provide tutorials; we're doing this extended programme. It's something to help us get somewhere. But it's up to us to do something about that [INT 2].

Condorrera's comment above outlined the distinction between resources that are available and the conditions required to convert these resources into actual capabilities and functionings. In contrast to the other participants, she is a mature student who accumulated valuable resources while studying, working and travelling overseas before university entry, which she converted into the confidence to access support structures and develop supportive relationships with lecturers. At the same time, she was registered on a relatively small selective course where she received sustained individual guidance and mentorship from lecturers and tutors for the duration of her degree. She also brought significant life and work experience to the institution, which made her confident in approaching lecturers and demanding fair treatment by her department. Because she is confident in her approach to learning, she attracted the interest of lecturers, which increased her confidence in seeking

guidance and pursuing her career aspirations. Given these enabling conversion factors, she was able to convert available structures and resources into equal participation despite an impoverished background and under-resourced schooling. To some extent, these fertile capabilities (Nussbaum 2011) also helped Condorrera mitigate the constraints of poor quality courses and underprepared lecturers, since she had access to enabling alternatives.

However, younger and less experienced participants did not have access to these pre-university opportunities, and therefore did not have the same freedom to convert available resources into capabilities and functionings, or to navigate poor quality pedagogical arrangements as successfully as Condorrera managed to do. Clarice explained that alienation from lecturers in large classes, combined with lecturers' lack of availability, or poor relationships between lecturers and students decreased her freedom for academic participation:

I don't think I was struggling per se with something that was different. It was more lack of interest. Yes, it's a big class, but at least make your consultation hours longer. You can't have two [consultation] periods of two hours per week and you have 800 students. And you don't give your email address so people can ask you questions, and after the test there's no memo [INT 3].

The interest in history and politics that emerged in her digital narrative, cultivated by a well-resourced school environment, was misrecognized where uncritical ways of thinking and reproduction constrained her efforts to participate as an equal member of the university. During the course of her degree, Clarice became increasingly less engaged in her studies, eventually echoing the acceptance of mediocrity in claiming that '50% is enough' (Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Taylor 2007). This is a tragic systemic failure that negatively affects a student who had the potential to develop critical capabilities.

Closely related to an equal distribution of faculty time was participants' need for relational affiliation with lecturers (Walker 2006: 95). Student experiences showed that affiliation with lecturers expanded their freedom to participate and made learning more accessible and meaningful, as Clarice explained:

Are they really listening to me? Are they paying attention? Because in my very first class for [a mainstream module] last year, we were about a thousand students. The lecturer said, she doesn't care, you're just a student number to her. If we don't want to be here we can leave. And they don't encourage you to come to them, so you're never going to come to them [INT 2].

These conditions limited their freedom to convert resources into participation which eroded Naledi's motivation to approach her lecturers for assistance, as she described below:

I think it's a dog-eat-dog environment there. I don't think one feels part of the department. I don't think so. I think it's lecturer teaching, then they move to another class [INT 3].

In the examples above, pedagogical arrangements excluded students who had not yet developed the resources to navigate the academic environment, or who were vulnerable to exclusion because their confidence to challenge these unfair conditions has been compromised. Naledi did not enter the university with the confidence to resist lecturers' dismissive approach to teaching, or to demand more enabling alternatives. As a consequence, she did not have the freedom to convert assistance from lecturers and tutors into equal participation, and struggled on her own with a compromised degree of participation. Although she was agentic in her independent approach to learning, this was not a fair distribution of resources, especially for a student who lived off campus and had limited personal resources for other forms of participation which could compensate for unengaged lecturers. At the same time, this alienation contributed to the perception of being excluded from the university, which compromised the ability to form an identity as a valued member of the institution (Tinto 2014b).

In making the transition to university, Kea explained below how she was also alienated by arrangements that offered 'no support' in contrast to the teachers at school who pushed students to learn:

It's just lecturer, lecturer, talk, after that, test. If you fail that, you fail it. I'm not going to lose my salary at the end of the month. It's just like that. So I felt here was a bitter

world... people were bitter. So I didn't like varsity that much. I didn't feel like I was in an environment where I was welcome [INT 1]⁵⁸.

Clarice was discouraged by a lecturer who failed to engage students in dialogue and who seemed disinterested in her students:

Our [...] lecturer never cared. She never asked questions so we never answered her. She was just there. Gosh, I just sat in the class, can this just end? That was my attitude towards it. And I'm not saying I regret it, but it was just wasting my time. She never offered to help or asked if we were OK. After class she just packed her bags and left [INT 3].

Clarice's critique of a disengaged lecturer points to an accumulative lack of interest and engagement that created a systemic cycle of disengagement where less engaged students were unlikely to attract lecturer support and investment. Yet without enabling structural conditions, students were less likely to become engaged enough to attract this support. Given the resource constraints faced by support structures, it is understandable that lecturers had to make judicious decisions about investing time and energy in student development and were less likely to commit time to students who appeared to have little interest in learning, who were failing, and who did not show initiative in pursuing engagement with knowledge. For this reason, my analysis suggests that students who were denied opportunities for critical alliances with teachers and other authority figures at school or at home adapted their expectations for affiliation and were therefore less prepared to initiate engagement with lecturers. I also suggest that most participants had less confidence than Clarice or Condorrera to initiate contact with lecturers. There was also evidence that students misunderstood the value of affiliation for academic engagement and success, and therefore failed to pursue available opportunities to communicate with lecturers, which maintained the unequal distribution of lecturer affiliation.

6.6 Misrecognition of ability

The final cluster of structural conversion factors was related to the misrecognition of students' academic ability and resources. This misrecognition created the assumption of

⁵⁸ See also Nkopo 2015.

student deficit that contributed towards low expectations and decreased engagement. In the analysis below, students found it difficult to resist misrecognition because stereotypes of deficit potential and ability were coupled with resource constraints that made it almost impossible to challenge faculty beliefs about student potential. Students described pedagogical interactions where a deficit approach, combined with weak or non-existent relationships with staff, de-contextualised foundational content, and poor quality teaching practices constrained their freedom to develop capabilities that could challenge deficit beliefs. For instance, Dante described this situation as *'wanting to run with the big horses but being held back to learn grammar rules I had been taught at school'*. Students' passive resistance to alienating, boring and misaligned developmental modules also fuelled an uncritical crisis discourse around student 'illiteracy' that failed to take into account the range of social and personal factors that detach millennial-era, working-class students from traditional academic and textual practices (Leibowitz 2011; Gee 2003). Furthermore, faculties were making assumptions about academic ability based on achievement in foundational modules in which students were not invested, thereby misframing student disengagement as poor performance, illiteracy or underpreparedness.

Students identified misrecognition within pedagogical arrangements that limited their freedom to participate equally. On a spectrum of exclusion, these incidents ranged from verbal discrimination to implicit forms of silencing and marginalization. For working-class students in particular, misrecognition acted as a corrosive disadvantage that intersected with socioeconomic injustices that decreased student freedom to participate (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007). Kea described an incident where she was confronted with pedagogical arrangements that misrecognized her existing capabilities based on her lecturer's judgement of potential, race and class.

The [developmental module lecturer] would write 'Where did you pick this from? Where the hell did you get this?! Who wrote this?! Where did you uplift [copy] this?! Whose words are these?! Are those your words?!' It's like we're not capable of writing such [an essay]. If ever something sounds intelligent, or it sounds like it makes sense, it's not yours. Because if ever she reads your essay, and she looks at you, and how you speak in class, she's like, 'That person can't write this essay'. Because we wrote our

essay at home instead of writing it in class, so that's why she didn't believe us. I almost got crushed emotionally [Group members agreeing] [FG 2].

Another aspect of misrecognition occurred when students were not taken seriously or listened to within hierarchical relationships between lecturers and students, which was complicated in particular by the race and class distinctions between black working-class students and white middle-class lecturers. Condorrera recalls an incident where she felt misrecognized as a student who does not belong at the institution because of poverty and the struggle to adapt to university:

[T]he lecturer said, one of the doctors ... 'Some of you when I'm sitting here, I can see that you have a lot of problems. Hence, you cannot even perform well'. Then I said: 'No, how come you're saying you see problems? You are supposed to see beyond that. If you can make it to this point, whether we have problems or not, hungry or not, it means we are willing to do something about our lives, regardless of what. It means we are able to put aside any problems that we have, to make it here. But if you can still see that [the problems], it means now we're not going to achieve what we came here for'. So, that has always been my question about, what do they see in us? Because that's what he saw in us [INT 2].

The lecturer identified socioeconomic barriers to participation without acknowledging the potential that students have to resist these barriers, and more importantly, to provide the institutional and pedagogical support that would ensure that socioeconomically vulnerable students are able to participate alongside privileged peers. This form of status injury reflected patterns of institutional value that frame working-class students as less likely to succeed and reach equal participation (Fraser 2008).

There was also evidence that maldistribution was exacerbated by pedagogical practices that ignored or devalued existing student capabilities, instead of focusing on capabilities that students are in the process of developing. Condorrera's concern with lecturers' perception of students was that misrecognition eroded the capability for belonging that could enhance participation and deepen student motivation. In her experience, the freedom to feel connected to academic mentors helped her navigate resource deprivation. However, this

freedom was thinly spread amongst peers who had less freedom to resist the damaging effects of misrecognition, as she described below:

The lecturer once said to us, 'I don't think one of you is going to get 35% out of that test. It is so complicated that I don't think even one of you is going to make it'. Wow... That's low expectations.

But for me, I wouldn't see it as him discouraging us. I want to study hard. Because it's in a way of saying, 'It's so complex, that if you're not going to be prepared, you're not going to do it; you're not going to make it'. But other students, they'll never go back. So lecturers should watch their approach they bring to students. It can make or break them [INT 2].

She was also critical of lecturers who failed to prepare students for assessment, while dangling success as an unattainable goal, instead of helping students access the resources they need to meet academic requirements:

Our lecturer said, 'Well, you're going to write this test and I don't feel that one of you is going to pass. I don't see even one of you getting five percent for this test'. So when we left this class, this guy said, 'I didn't like the comment he made. It means he doesn't have confidence in us'. So he should have actually told us what to do to nail the test. But in fact, he didn't. And if you see a person is getting 50 percent, or a 60, at least that is something that they can still improve. So it's not like we were failing. And the test that he was referring to, none of us failed that test. It's just that the passing rate was not what he expected. But had he told us what he wanted, and how he prefers us to answer his questions, maybe we could have done better [INT 2].

A pedagogical environment that exploits the misrecognition of student vulnerability to maintain students' fear of failure is unjust. As Condorrera pointed out, there would have been more value in preparing students to access the unfamiliar discourses required for academic achievement rather than producing fear of failure in less-prepared students (Kapp & Bangeni 2009; Paxton 2007).

Another aspect of misrecognition was evident in Kea's example of peers who mocked her attempts to engage with a lecturer in the classroom. This misrecognition created a double

bind in which asking questions was an important tool that could increase her participation, while the fear of being mocked silenced students like Naledi and Techniques who had less confidence than Kea to resist derogatory treatment:

The thing about students [is] they don't want to ask. Immediately they regard me as the one whose is always asking questions, 'You [are] boring!' If the lecturer is asking, 'Do you understand?', and you raise your hand, they'll say, 'Ahhhhhh, booooo!' You are regarded as the 'boring' one in class. But then at the end of the day, you are helping them. You want to understand more, so you are helping them in a way. Some people get discouraged because when they ask a question in class, people just do whatever and say silly things in class [INT 2].

This vulnerability also constrained Thuli's participation, whose well-resourced school had made her confident in her ability to access knowledge:

Because [when] I am in one of those big classes, like 700 people, and I am shy. Whenever I put a hand up, people just look at you and I can be very insecure and I can stutter. Oh my gosh! What do I say? Is this relevant? Is it stupid? [INT 1].

Even before entering the institution, students described their fear of failure embedded within discourses about university that excluded students who are not recognized as suited to university life. Aziza explained that she feared university because she was told, *'It's so theoretical, and am I gonna cope with this studying? Am I gonna cope, am I gonna make it?'*

There was evidence that lecturers and professors also maintained this hierarchy by reminding undergraduates of their inferior position within the institution. Condorrera described classroom engagement with a lecturer who foregrounded misrecognition as differentiated status:

There's this other lecturer who once said to us: 'You see I'm a doctor and I don't associate with people who aren't doctors'. And then I raised my eyebrows and said, 'What do you mean?' And then he said, 'Well, I cannot go out with people like you and then sit in a restaurant. It's not going to look good for those who know me'. And then another student said, 'Do you belittle students who are not as educated as you are? Do you think that they are ripping something out of you, because you are a doctor and

they are not?’ And then his response was: ‘You see people who are not educated, who are not doctors, they don’t have the same mindset as us doctors’. So that could be one of the things that could be discouraging to a student, if students are discouraged [INT 2].

While Condorrera was confident enough to openly challenge this lecturer, other participants were intimidated by this hierarchy, which worked by using racial stereotypes about intelligence and ability, but also class-based distinctions about accent, school and community of origin, and family position to decrease the freedom to participate, as reflected in her comment below:

It’s believed that most black people do not like learning, and Coloured people. So I think white people are just fortunate. You guys believe in school. You go to school. For me, it has always been the case. This high school that I went to, most of the teachers they were white and we were black students [INT 2].

At a structural level, it remains difficult to challenge the assumption of academic superiority based on race or class when the majority of lecturers and students in programmes with more stringent admission requirements reflect the inequality of the school system, as Condorrera explained below:

I think most white students are medical students; they get into law. Let me tell you something. In my department, language practice, I get taught only by white people and they teach me about my language, how to apply my own language [INT 1].

Another consequence of misrecognition was lecturers who expressed low confidence (Walker 2006: 94) in students’ capability to participate, which made students afraid to contribute in class for fear of being humiliated and misrecognized as incapable of learning, as Aziza explained:

I always asked the question and the lecturer would explain. And then afterwards, students would come and ask me to explain to them. And I would tell them, but you can ask the lecturer a question. You know, there is no stupid question. If you don’t understand something, you don’t [INT 2].

While she had negotiated the system using her confidence to ask questions in class, students like Naledi and Techniques were intimidated by peers who ‘*make remarks*’ and mocked students who asked questions. A pattern emerging across the narratives is that students from township schools who spoke with a recognizable accent⁵⁹ were treated derisively when they spoke up in class, thereby misrecognizing students who are not judged to be articulate enough to contribute to academic discussions. This meant that a small group of students dominated discussions while less confident students did not have the freedom to develop the capability for voice, as Naledi described:

When you get to varsity there’s 300 students in a class. So it’s difficult to ask questions; don’t know how to ask a question. I don’t know some of the people, some people are making remarks, so we are afraid of asking questions, and people are doubting themselves [INT 1].

The language issue was complicated by its association with intelligence and academic status, with ‘rural’ English accents perceived as less intelligent, forcing students to change their accent, as Kea explained:

When it comes to English, I think people want to teach themselves how to build your voice to be something else when you are speaking, instead of using your original voice [INT 2].

In concluding this chapter, I want to emphasize the fact that discriminatory treatment of students in pedagogical spaces was a reflection of broader social inequality. These systemic barriers preclude the autonomy of students who imagine the university as a transformed space, and misrecognize students as agents who play a role in social cohesion⁶⁰ on campus. In her experiences at residence, Kea reported that racial discrimination imposed by hierarchical decision-making deepens social divides along both race and class:

⁵⁹ This refers to the distinction between a ‘proper’ English accent associated with middle-class schooling and some urban environments, compared to accents associated with township schooling, rural geography and working-class identities.

⁶⁰ See CHE 2010: 104 on the significance of race, engagement and achievement at a historically white institution.

And if there is a mentality with white people in one corridor, and black people in another corridor with labelled corridors, where this corridor is called 'city of class' or 'corridor of class' and the other corridor is called 'corridor of ghetto students', or kasi⁶¹. It's saying black people should go that way, white people should go that way. And really? Is that really life? Is that really the generation that we want to transfer to our kids? [INT 1].

Secondly, an important step towards countering the stigma of developmental modules like academic literacy is to recognize, as Naledi commented below, that most students enter university unfamiliar with the discourses, practices and capabilities associated with university study. Extending the provision of critical capabilities such as the multimodal literacies required by engagement with twenty-first century knowledge systems could level out the student hierarchy, and challenge the deficit stigma fuelling the misframed 'illiteracy' discourse (Gee 2003; Stein 2000; McKenna 2010):

I think academic literacy is for all students. Because when they have it for specific students the feeling is that they are much better than you. Because with physics and accounting and economics – what about the language they are actually using to learn those things? [INT 3].

The structural failure of receiving educational resources that are misaligned with the development of capabilities that students need for equal participation is alienating students from pedagogical environments which should cultivate such capabilities (Pym & Kapp 2013: 273).

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on students' experiences of pedagogical and institutional arrangements that constrained their freedom to develop as equal and valued members of the institution. The consequences of uneven resource distribution that emerged were individualized failure; uncritical engagement with knowledge; lack of participation in decision-making; alienation from lecturers; and misrecognition of agency.

⁶¹ Informal description of township.

While the arrangements described in this chapter paint a relatively bleak picture of teaching and learning and other institutional conditions, the data were not selected to present a reproductive account of arrangements, but rather to emphasize the disabling consequences of unequal participation for these participants. This is not, however, the complete picture, which is why the next chapter presents enabling conditions at the institution that were conducive to learning. In order to facilitate transformation within pedagogical and institutional structures, it is important to understand the alienation and complexity underlying the transition to university, while acknowledging that the university cannot address all the social inequalities that inhibit learning. As such, the research value of this analysis could inform the redesign of pedagogy, curricula and other institutional spaces that are able to mitigate exclusion and patterns of unequal participation more effectively to enable more students to convert educational resources into capabilities and functionings.

I also keep in mind the systemic constraints that hamper lecturers' ability to offer good quality teaching and learning conditions, such as classrooms with up to 1 000 students. Even though there was significant critique of courses on the extended degree programme, it is also important to acknowledge the invaluable work they are doing in providing access for students who would otherwise not have gained university entry. In some cases, students who have progressed to mainstream programmes have performed better than their peers, which suggests that these programmes have offered not only access but improved academic outcomes for some students (UFS Integrated Report 2014).

In addition, some of the critique by students was directed towards individual lecturers or management when in fact these structural barriers are an indictment of broader failures not within the control of individuals or even universities, such as the shortfall in state funding or inadequate resource allocation to foundation provision. Nevertheless, while resource constraints influence all actors in the system, the analysis in this chapter has illustrated that the first-generation students, working-class students, and/or students on extended degree programmes were particularly vulnerable to unequal participation because they faced a cluster of socioeconomic and structural challenges, which made it difficult to find alternative pathways to participation.

In conclusion, I now offer a brief overview of themes that have emerged from the data in this chapter. There was evidence that most participants experienced learning as an uncritical assimilation of content for the purpose of standardized assessment. This was particularly evident in foundational modules that taught generic 'study skills' and were misaligned with the epistemological demands of mainstream modules (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015). The data offered evidence that these programmes were fragmented and in some cases devalued by students (Walton *et al.* 2015). There was evidence that the alienation created by developmental modules had a negative effect on critical participation and created apathy towards learning and mistrust of the institution and its structures. These dynamics would need to be researched across a broader sample of the student body to determine whether pedagogical conditions constrained the freedom for participation in a similar way for other students. This observation does not intend to diminish the important work being done within foundation programmes, but to draw attention to systemic barriers which may be making this provision less effective for some students.

I also found evidence that uncritical pedagogical arrangements decreased agency and compromised students' epistemological access. Students framed participation as measurable assessment outcomes, which limited their freedom to develop critical academic capabilities. At the same time, unequal structures limited engagement with institutional support, affiliation and networks on campus, opportunity to access student leadership, aspirations for work and study, and the freedom to plan a valued life. Structural conditions that decreased agency directed student effort away from activities that could expand capability development through meaningful engagement with knowledge. The analysis in this chapter suggests that the conversion factor that is most detrimental to students' opportunity for participation in higher education was lack of participation in decision-making and consultation. This absence is a socialized arrangement brought about by accumulative conversion factors including unequal power structures at political and personal level, unequal distribution of resources, historical patterns of race, class, language, ethnic and gender-based discrimination and exclusion, in combination with the meritocracy of a neoliberal higher education system.

Another pattern emerging in student narratives is a tentative critique of the institution and hesitation to demand just arrangements, even when narratives demonstrated structural injustice and persistently unfair distribution and unfair treatment by staff. Students who have

experienced diminished quality of education at school level may not be prepared to demand quality education and may not know what quality conditions should enable, compared to middle-class peers who attended private schools (Bozalek & Boughey 2012).

Chapter 7

Structures, resources and agency in higher education

Higher education which equips men and women as critical and challenging thinkers, as intelligent and active participants in learning, which engages imaginations and emotions, enhances their capability.

Melanie Walker, *Higher Education*

*Pedagogies: A Capabilities Approach*⁶²

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the analysis now shifts to the way students used their agency and existing capabilities to navigate the systemic resource constraints, constraining structural arrangements and misrecognition described in the previous chapter. The focus of this chapter is student experiences of arrangements where pedagogical practices and institutional spaces made resources available and also offered opportunities to convert resources into capabilities and functionings in response to the third research question:

How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enable the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

This chapter attempts to capture the enabling factors that contribute towards equal participation, and as such stands in contrast to the conversion factors identified in chapter six, as summarized below. It is important to note that these two sets of conversion factors mirror each other in a binary relationship, although this relationship is at times blurred by individual and institutional complexities.

⁶² Walker 2006: 111-112.

	Chapter 6: Constraints	Chapter 7: Enablers
1	Individualizing failure	Affiliation with peers
2	Uncritical engagement with knowledge	Distributing access to knowledge
3	Lack of participation in decision making	Platforms for student voice
4	Alienation from lecturers	Affiliation with lecturers
5	Misrecognition of ability	Recognition of capabilities

The aim of this chapter is to show the complexity of arrangements that fostered participation within structural limitations, while interrogating how these arrangements could be made accessible to more students. Another aim was to foreground student agency and to suggest that more attention be paid to the ways in which undergraduate students negotiate structural inequality. The chapter is organized using five clusters of conversion factors that were found to increase participation, namely: 1) *affiliation with lecturers*; 2) *affiliation with peers*; 3) *the platform for voice*; 4) *access to information*; and 5) *recognition of capabilities*. **Table 6** below summarizes the positive impact of these conversion factors on students' freedom for equal participation.

Table 6: Conversion factors that enabled participation

	Conversion factors	Positive effect on individual student capability							
		0 – no positive effect 5 – significant positive effect							
		Aziza	Clarice	Condorrera	Dante	Kea	Naledi	Techniques	Thuli
1	Affiliation with lecturers	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	4
2	Affiliation with peers	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	4
3	The platform for voice	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	3
4	Access to information	4	5	5	3	4	4	5	3
5	Recognizing capabilities	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	4

7.2 Enabling affiliation with lecturers

Students identified lecturer affiliation as a structural conversion factor that enabled them to convert educational resources into participation (Pym *et al.* 2011; Pym & Kapp 2013). In some student narratives, positive alliances with lecturers challenged the deficit discourse

participants described in chapter 6. Yet as discussed in the previous chapter, opportunities for mentorship were a scarce opportunity freedom that was unevenly distributed across the academic programmes. In this section, participants describe interactions with faculty members who confronted the student-lecturer hierarchy. However, students identified relatively few instances of staff support, while the constraining and marginalizing interactions described in chapter six remained the norm (Mann 2005). At the same time, these supportive interactions were usually based on serendipitous opportunities which made the freedom for development precarious and unsustainable.

In the narratives, it was evident that participants who had been socialized at school to recognize the value of mentorship pursued associative connections with lecturers. In this way, pedagogical arrangements offered the freedom to develop a relational alliance where students could benefit from the experience and capabilities of the lecturer. Drawing on her positive experience with teachers at a well-resourced school, Clarice pursued affiliation with supportive lecturers, as she explained below:

I like theory. And when I understand it because [the lecturer] explained it properly, I actually remember it. After the exam I went to [the lecturer's] office, and she asked: 'How did you write?' And I [said]: 'So cool!' I had my exam paper in my hand, and I had highlighted and scribbled in pencil. And she looked at it and said: 'Wow, you actually used the Vodacom {mobile network} example to explain!'. [I replied]: 'But you said it in class. Why was I going to break my brain and come up with my own?'. And she [replied]: 'Wow, you actually listen' [INT 3].

The interaction described above was a resource that Clarice converted into meaningful participation with knowledge in her course. Another positive functioning was being recognized and acknowledged for her effort as a capable student, which Clarice valued within an institutional context where there were limited opportunities for engagement between lecturers and undergraduate students. In contrast to the classroom environments identified in the previous chapter, this instance of affiliation with a supportive lecturer expanded Clarice's freedom to use her agency to convert available resources like consultation hours into valued functionings. Clarice also valued an opportunity to be known and recognized by the lecturer, which expanded her engagement with knowledge in this module. This enabling

interaction appeared to be a fertile functioning in that one functioning led to other positive functionings (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007).

However, in her approach to affiliation there were important barriers to cultivating critical academic capabilities. In the example above, Clarice framed academic achievement as the ability to reproduce the lecturer's example that was given in class, instead of critical processes of synthesis and interpretation to construct her own example. In the quotation below, Clarice explained that being connected to a lecturer helped her understand what she was doing 'wrong', which prioritized her focus on finding the 'right' answer or taking the 'right' approach to learning, instead of being guided to independent thinking:

I'm forever there [at her office]; that's just me. I want to know. I need to know where I'm going wrong. She knows me now [INT 3].

Instead of cultivating an independent approach to learning, she became dependent on guidance from the lecturer to show her the 'right' way to learn. I interpret this not as a personal deficit, but as a reflection of arrangements that failed to offer discipline-specific guidance to help her gain entry into complex disciplinary knowledge. In the previous chapter, Clarice had emphasised how her foundational modules were misaligned to the demands of her degree course, whereas in this instance uncritical dependence on a supportive lecturer was a substitute for the absence of critical engagement with knowledge. At a structural level, it would be crucial to ensure that students have access to arrangements that cultivate critical academic capabilities while simultaneously offering the psychosocial affiliation necessary for becoming an engaged university student (Pym & Kapp 2013; Barnett 2007).

Condorrera believed that the confidence to seek affiliation outside the classroom distinguished successful students from those who struggle to engage:

I think this university [has] a platform [where] underprivileged students can go and get help... like developmental modules. Now there's that Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Writing Centre which is really good. So I think they are trying, they are doing something. I don't think that Centre [the Write Site] existed before... But it's up to us to seek that help [INT 2].

While Condorrera's approach to converting available opportunities and resources into participation helped her to achieve academic success and to make the transition into postgraduate study, there was little evidence that other participants had been able to convert these support structures into academic participation. In the other narratives, it was evident that access to these resources was not linear or evenly spread across student experiences. As discussed in the previous chapter, Condorrera was registered for a specialized degree course that enabled her to connect academically with her lecturers, tutors and peers while she also used her knowledge of institutional cultures, acquired through travel and study abroad, to network with staff members affiliated with these programmes. Her description of a supportive faculty reflected intellectual engagement amongst peers more than the lecturer-student hierarchy in younger student narratives:

I only took these developmental modules from my third year with Ntate⁶³ [lecturer surname], who also taught me linguistics. I've always known him, so it was not difficult to get academic literacy from him. I know his style of teaching and what to expect. However, academic literacy is not a very difficult module; it was an easy ride. I got a distinction for it [INT 2].

It is significant that Condorrera resisted the extended degree programme's requirement of two years of literacy modules in the first and second year. She found an administrative loophole and only registered for these modules in her third and final year. By her third year, Condorrera was familiar with the practices and discourses of the academic environment, and experienced the course as an 'easy' experience. Unlike Techniques who was anxious about the writing requirements of the literacy course, or Clarice who was frustrated by the perceived irrelevance of the content, her familiarity with the requirements of essay writing meant that she converted the opportunity into affiliation with her lecturer, intellectual development and appreciation for learning:

One lecturer from the sign language department would explain something so you absorb it. Only [lecturer's name] can do that. She's just a friend. I compare lecturers;

⁶³ Sesotho word for Mr or Sir; used to express respect for an older male who may be a relative or elder. When used by a Sotho speaker to describe a non-Sesotho person, this suggests a positive relationship based on mutual respect and trust.

the approach depends on the type of module. I don't want to be too judgemental. Some modules are too complex compared to the others... so in terms of complexity, I have to take extra effort to understand [INT 2].

The experience above suggests that Condorrera converted affiliation with supportive lecturers in her department to the capability for navigating academic challenges. Once she had access to staff members who made knowledge accessible, she had the confidence to critique different teaching styles instead of projecting a deficit belief onto her ability to learn. In contrast to Techniques' confusion about lecturer expectations, Condorrera was confident to navigate different academic terrains, while creating opportunities for resource conversion and recognition outside of formal pedagogical interactions. But as the only mature student, Condorrera was also the only participant who reported predominantly positive conditions for learning. Other participants did not know about or had not used resources like the writing centre. Most courses in their degree programmes served as electives for thousands of students, which meant that overcrowding and alienation from lecturers was the norm (Hockings *et al.* 2007). These interpersonal comparisons are indicative of important differences in structural arrangements that resulted in unequal opportunity freedoms for individual students.

An important aspiration that emerged from student experiences was the need for conditions that could enable participation. Students constructed these aspirations after being exposed to lecturers who created affiliation, despite resource constraints, as illustrated by Kea below:

The lecturer was never standing still in class! She knew some of the students personally; that made us connect a little more to her... I liked the fact that she was more of a presentation person. She walks around and talks to people. She laughs; she makes jokes. If ever you get something that is practical, you not going to forget it... She spoke about marketing products which makes it easier for students to write about it. It makes it easier for students to interact, and to ask questions [INT 2].

It was concerning that Kea could only identify a couple of instances where a lecturer facilitated access to content. Yet while the lecturer engaged student attention using games and sweets, which helped Kea to memorize content for assessment, it was unclear whether arrangements where students are 'treated as either clients or as restless children in need of

high-energy entertainment' (Giroux 2015) enabled critical participation. Tracking Kea's approach to learning during her narrative suggests that these interactions with 'popular' lecturers did not develop the critical capabilities and limited her academic engagement to reproducing information for assessment.

Although the outcome of pedagogical affiliation appeared to be largely instrumental, Kea framed her lecturer's ability to connect to students as an arrangement that could expand a sense of belonging as a crucial part of redistributing recognition (Fraser 2009):

Because if lecturers are teaching a lot of students they must find a connection. For instance, if the lecturer talks about her personal experience or maybe something that is very similar [to student experience], then the students feel more connected to their lecturer because she is being open [INT 2].

Naledi also described a lecturer who transformed a disengaged classroom with her performative style:

... this other time, [a soft-spoken lecturer] had a substitute just for a day, and the class was active. And the class asked, 'Are you the new lecturer?' And we felt: Yeah! Could it be more active, more loud, more examples? [INT 3].

While participants valued lecturers with the ability to capture students' attention, the relationship between resource distribution, recognition, quality of teaching and the ability to entertain students was unclear. Although lecturers who 'perform' may expand students' interest in the subject, it is doubtful whether the ability to entertain students cultivated capabilities required for equal participation such as analytical thinking and critical literacies. In my view, a lecturer's ability to create opportunities for students to convert information into critical capabilities and functionings depends more on discipline-specific strategies to make invisible discourses more explicit and abstract knowledge accessible (Kapp & Bangeni 2009; Hockings *et al.* 2007; see also Samson 2005).

Condorrera offered a more nuanced critique of pedagogical arrangements, while also highlighting the conceptual shift towards teaching as a service offered to paying clients:

So if you go to class with somebody who is passionate about what they are doing, it's not the same as going to class and getting a service from a lecturer who is not as passionate about what they are doing. Maybe they are doing it as a substitute or they know it, or they can do it, or they are just specialized in it. But they are not just passionate about it [INT 2].

In Aziza's experience, the role of lecturers should be to connect learning with skills and knowledge beyond the classroom, which she had had the freedom to develop in our academic literacy course:

But if lecturers could make you see beyond just words and grammar. Because that's what you've shown me. But students don't see literacy as something that is very important and something you are going to use until you die [INT 2].

Another aspect of affiliation identified across narratives was students' need for an *ethics of care* between students and lecturers (Tronto 1989; Pym *et al.* 2011). In Techniques' experience, the participatory climate of our academic literacy classroom helped him to mediate the isolation and confusion he described in chapter six:

You are able to relate with students more... you are more involved in the personal lives of your students. That's why we find your class so interesting [INT 3].

Given the limited resources with which many first-generation students enter the institution, material and symbolic resources that enable them to cope with stress are unevenly distributed, making students dependent on campus-based support structures. In response, an ethics of care developed by a lecturer-student alliance could alleviate the alienation that disconnect students from support structures outside their immediate families. Given the intensity of identity work at university where students must develop the qualities associated with being a university student (Pym & Kapp 2013; Pym *et al.* 2011), lecturer affiliation emerged as a conversion factor that enabled both access to knowledge and individual development. Yet as mentioned earlier, an ethics of care cannot act as a substitute for arrangements that facilitate critical access to knowledge; rather, belonging and engagement with knowledge must be developed simultaneously. While this approach could be an important way to begin challenging hierarchies that alienate students from knowledge, it

would require a more equitable distribution of resources because it is time and labour intensive, and requires both financial resources and commitment from faculty.

In Clarice's experience, the power imbalance between lecturers and students was complicated by misrecognition of students who valued being recognized as autonomous individuals. She suggested that lecturers should consider that:

I'm teaching adults now. How do I engage? How was I at varsity? What did I want to do? What didn't I want to do? [INT 2].

However, most lecturers were white and middle-class, which could limit the cultivation of narrative imagination about the lived struggles of first-generation students from impoverished communities (Leibowitz 2009; Case 2007). At the same time, the neoliberal culture does not encourage or reward 'investments' of time and energy into academically vulnerable students. Although in policy, symbolic commitments to social justice are embedded into institutional mandates (Ministry of Education 2014), translating this policy into enabling pedagogical arrangements is more complicated (Walton *et al.* 2015). For example, part-time contract lecturers on development programmes have limited opportunities for research, and this decreases the staff's incentive to extend their teaching function beyond minimum requirements (Bouhey 2010b). The skills discourse embedded in foundational programmes also shifts the focus from critical capability development to short-term remediation of student 'problems' (Leibowitz 2011). This is an institutional failure which requires a redistributive approach so that reliable freedoms, opportunities and resources are made available to the most vulnerable students.

7.3 Enabling affiliation with peers

Peer affiliation emerged as another set of conversion factors that enabled students to convert academic resources into participation. In contrast to students who have access to residence life, Naledi was a commuter student who showed evidence of vulnerability to academic and social exclusion. She described the isolation of living as a commuter and being unable to make friends:

I remember in all of my classes besides your academic literacy course, I didn't talk to anyone after my friend left the university. So I would just go to lectures, then go back home. But in this class I started talking to people [INT 3].

The research project offered sustained opportunities for peer affiliation which alleviated her isolation and broadened her participation beyond the classroom. The opportunity to participate in the research project expanded her social engagement with peers, which in her experience acted as a fertile functioning. Naledi also converted affiliation into empathy when her academic struggles were recognized in the experiences of peers:

I've learned a lot about other people. Like for me, [university] was... get a degree, and go and do something. Like for other people, it's actually... understanding [their] different... history and backgrounds [and that] other people have been through a tough time like myself [INT 3].

Another aspect of this fertile functioning enhanced Naledi's capability for critical reasoning. Even though she was frustrated by the lecture-and-leave approach, informal interaction with peers on the research team enabled her to construct a more critical approach to planning her life:

I've learned being able to be open and not accepting everything and saying - being able to say no, this is what I want to do, [Being] open minded to other things, and learning about other people's experiences [INT 3].

The opportunity to work reflexively with her educational trajectory also helped Naledi realize the emotional and academic impact of bullying, and she was able to acknowledge her resilience despite these constraints (Gachago *et al.* 2014a; 2014b):

Reflecting back, just thinking about the whole high school thing, I had to reflect and think... those things [being bullied and teased] had an impact in how I... chose my [studies]... How could people be so cruel? 'Cos not a lot of people talk about [bullying]... It had an impact in how you learn and how I'll be a [...] student [INT 3].

Naledi explained how the pedagogical arrangements of the research project enabled her to make important connections between her experiences at school and her initial struggle to succeed at university. As she explained in the second year of the research project, she shifted her focus from wanting to obtain a degree to realizing the opportunities for capability development at the institution:

... the university has contributed much for me, to be able to reason differently from someone who is sitting at home. I have more ambition; I just wanna go big and not just sit at home and limit myself... if I was at home, I was just going to think, let me just work somewhere. Now at varsity there's a lot of opportunities. I can go and study abroad or I can do something about my situation in terms of having kids, and think, I'm at varsity now. Let me just wait [before having children] and do something that I'm passionate about [INT 2].

Yet despite the supportive function of peer affiliation, Naledi did not have access to real freedoms to change the environment.

Techniques similarly reported that peer affiliation created an opportunity where he could develop capabilities with the support of research participants:

Like for me, this group has motivated me a lot. I'm able to gain ideas, and do things I never thought I'd be able to do. So it has done a lot for me. So I think it depends on what type of person you are, and the type of environment you associate yourself around. Because people have an influence on who you become; especially your friends [INT 3].

Peer affiliation expanded Techniques' agency for pursuing capabilities and functionings, such as the opportunity to make friends who enhanced his academic participation. Academic pressure and the fear of failure directed his energy and time towards study, leaving limited resources for valued peer connections.

Peer affiliation also enabled Techniques to develop valued capabilities aligned with his aspiration for community development projects:

[P]ublic speaking... though I'm not a fan, and I don't see myself [as a public speaker]. But... you gain confidence as time goes, depending on the type of people you have around you. Whether it's people who are going to press you down or people who motivate you.

[At university], you get the opportunity to mingle around different people... You get the opportunity to find your strengths and weaknesses as a person, as you grow, as you

develop. You see where you lack and where you are most comfortable in. So it helps in self-definition of who you are [INT 3].

In the extract above, it is evident that Techniques had the freedom to challenge inherent beliefs about his ability to learn. The research process expanded his critical thinking to incorporate his ideas about democratic education into the design of a community project:

Isn't that the whole aim behind education? So you become educated and then you educate other people? [INT 3].

Peer affiliation is aligned to his aspiration to convert educational resources into outcomes that benefit people in the broader community. Affiliation with peers expanded Techniques' aspirations, which in time also enhanced the development of capabilities such as confidence and an independent approach to learning.

Thuli also converted peer affiliation into an opportunity for individual development:

[What helps me learn is] my ability to share what I have with other people. There are people who struggle to understand certain work. I share what I've learned with them, and I also learn something from them. You get to test your knowledge of something. Whenever I have an essay or assignment, when I'm chilling with my housemates, I always ask them, then some of them elaborate on their different views [INT 1].

Access to an international student residence is a valued resource that Thuli converted into a platform to exchange knowledge with peers. Thuli valued peer affiliation because of the freedom to transfer knowledge using informal tutoring in a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge.

Peer affiliation enhanced academic engagement for Clarice despite the structural constraint of large classes. Her freedom to develop academic capabilities was expanded in a small group environment where integration of interdisciplinary learning is encouraged:

When you're in a group of 20 with a [module] facilitator, you speak about something and it goes off that topic. I engage and get to know people from the medical faculty. So that's nice [INT 2].

Kea described the conversion of peer affiliation with a member of the SRC into well-being achievement. Kea converted achieved well-being into future aspirations for socially-just engagement:

I feel like there is a lot I can give. That why I like associating myself with [student leader] because she inspires me. She teaches me so much more. I even told her: I value your presence in my life. I've been through so much, [and] you're not this perfect person, but you're a human being that I can learn from. You inspire me as a human being, as a black woman [INT 1].

Affiliation with a mentor enabled Kea to convert the traumatic pre-university experiences of losing her parents and living in poverty, and the difficult transition to university into functioning as an engaged student. In particular, Kea valued the ability to convert these traumatic experiences into functioning as a student leader in her residence:

Because many black women do not see themselves as being leaders or bringing changes in other black women's lives. But [the mentor] being the person that [she is], having a personality that is similar to mine, makes me see that I can go somewhere with my life. I can go somewhere in life. I feel like I'm growing... every day and I can now see that I can associate with people that contribute to my life [INT 1].

Other participants reported valuing a small-group pedagogical environment because it enabled a critical dialogue between peers from different racial and ethnic groups, which challenged students' embedded beliefs about race and language. A pattern emerging across student experiences is that opportunities for individual and small group engagement enabled the development of valued academic and personal capabilities.

For first-generation students adjusting to the demands of the institution, the opportunity to share and make sense of experiences with peers emerged as a valued opportunity which helped negotiate an alienating environment, as Aziza explained:

So what I mean is for us to have begun this journey, there was a level of no awkwardness... that's when we would actually be able to be comfortable enough to open up to each other, or even to open up to you. That's what I mean with the voice

and platform. 'Cos when you have a voice... you have a platform where you can be listened to [FG 4].

Clarice reflected on the value of the research group in transcending superficial engagement with peers and in personal benefits to academic participation:

This has made me work harder in a sense, to push myself and to try and engage with my lecturers even though they have 800 students in their class [INT 2].

She made this comment in an interview following a focus group where students revealed the psychological consequences of their university experience:

Like the group we are – it's just made me respect everyone more... we just learned so much about people and their lives. People might seem happy but you don't really know what's going on [INT 2].

Research participants shared experiences of fear and anxiety, depression, worry and loneliness compounding the pressure of being a first-generation student.

7.4 Creating platforms for student voice

The third cluster of enabling conversion factors was pedagogical arrangements where students could develop an independent and critical voice (Brooman *et al.* 2014; Burke 2008; Canagarajah 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011; Nkoane 2010; Paxton 2012; Seale 2009; Sellar & Gale 2011; Thesen 1997). Yet this opportunity was thinly spread across the narratives and only a few references were made to the freedom to cultivate student voice.

Nevertheless, the capability for voice was an important way to resist the passivity of the banking system and to disrupt deficit beliefs about first-generation students, as Aziza described below:

Before we actually write our writing assignments, we've been discussing it in class. Then... ideas are coming... you're using Kea's words, you're using [classmate's] words, you're using your own words, you're using your own planning in class. And you [think] but Kea said something, or [classmate] said something! Oh, let me research about that! [INT 2].

In this way, the platform for voice enabled her to convert academic resources into engagement with knowledge. The capability for knowledge was also enhanced as Aziza collaboratively engaged with ideas that developed her ability to practice discipline-specific academic writing:

That kind of insight to put yourself in there like a big melting pot. And you'll be able to find your voice and see the skill that you're acquiring could be beneficial. Because I think that's what academic literacy has shown me. That now I have actually got my voice. I'm thinking now [INT 2].

Aziza valued the freedom to develop critical thinking and to navigate different disciplinary codes while incorporating valuable experiential knowledge.

Kea similarly converted resources in the academic literacy module, where students were encouraged to incorporate existing capabilities into the process of learning, into the capability for voice:

I loved my class from the first day I was in the class. Because everyone spoke in class, everyone was interacting, so I felt part of an intelligent group of people who are very knowledgeable in terms of what they know [and] what they are talking about. So that inspired me to be part of the group, instead of me being Kea and me showing people how much I know. I listen, I interact, we argue about something and then at the end of the day, we come out having something that is worth more than billions [INT 2].

Kea valued the freedom for group interaction, and its corresponding development of confidence, belonging and access to knowledge, and the opportunity to play an agentic role in her education, which included the freedom to develop as an interdependent individual who is capable of listening to other voices (Pym & Kapp 2013). Another functioning was the recognition of herself as a valued member of a student community, in contrast to her earlier experiences of misrecognition described in chapter six. These arrangements suggested evidence of the freedom to co-construct knowledge instead of passively absorbing information (Freire 1970; Gee 2003).

Clarice also valued the freedom to develop her academic voice in our academic literacy module that acknowledged the divergent voices and identities that students brought to the classroom:

I walked in and [thought]: I like this class. And then I started speaking. And I never stopped speaking; that's me! I also want to feel part of class, and you are interested. Oh my gosh! You actually listen to what I'm saying [INT 3].

The data provide evidence that creating platforms for student voice was an important conversion factor that enabled students to convert educational resources into engagement with knowledge, although these opportunities were rarely identified in student narratives.

7.5 Distributing access to knowledge

The next set of conversion factors was access to strategic knowledge⁶⁴ that students could convert into capabilities and functionings. Keeping in mind the influence of the banking system identified in the previous chapter, these experiences illustrate tentative alternatives to uncritical reproduction of information.

In contrast to her critique of first-year foundational developmental modules, Clarice's experience of her subject major aligned to content that inspired her to read and expand her engagement with knowledge:

It might sound silly – I'm studying communications. Everyone communicates. But it's so much deeper. It's just talking, but there's communication within cultures, and within cultures there's differences. It's this whole cool thing that I've studied. It's so wow! I did intercultural communication, and then organizational communication, and they also have conflicts in organizations. And you can actually see it [in the practicals], and it's like ah! That's cool! [INT 3].

Across her interviews this is the only description of a positive experience with academic content, and I noticed that this subject was taught by the lecturer with whom Clarice cultivated a critical alliance discussed in section 7.2. At the same time, Clarice described specific career aspirations for becoming a communication specialist, which suggested an

⁶⁴ In defining access to knowledge, I distinguish between knowledge as disciplinary content and procedures and information as practical advice and support given by the institution.

important connection between aspirations and engagement with knowledge. Another important aspect of participation is that the course offered 'practical' [tutorial] sessions with small-group engagement and continuous assessment. Her parents were also able to buy her a laptop which enhanced her ability to develop technical capabilities associated with learning.

However, the pedagogical approach in these modules did not encourage Clarice to question information. Her aspiration to become a corporate communication specialist was framed as her lecturer's advice about possible career paths available, even though the lecturer has never worked outside the university. She explained this advice was a rare instance when someone told her how she could make money using her degree. But there is no evidence of a wide range of opportunities to learn about and access alternatives, in particular opportunities that reflect a socially just approach to being a graduate.

For this reason, the freedom for critical capability development was limited by uncritical practices enforced by crowded electives and decontextualized developmental modules. Equal participation was not possible when only a small part of academic engagement was supportive and resourced, and when the overall approach to learning mirrors the banking system. Also, an administrative error forced Clarice to be held back for a year to complete outstanding electives, which separated her from peers and lecturers in her communication science network in the crucial third year of the course, while extending her bachelor's degree to six years.

Techniques' access to knowledge was mediated by his aspirations for community engagement aligned with his interest in issues of political power and exploitation. Once he changed his major to political science, he was able to convert information into meaningful engagement with knowledge. However, because Techniques' potential is misrecognized by lecturers, his freedom to convert formal content is limited, and he found informal learning with peers more conducive to developing critical capabilities, which he described in the extract below:

And when it comes to politics, you learn how the whole system works: the different functions of government, and how politicians [and] the global arena tend [to] exploit other people. The funny thing about the system is that people who are most affected are the ones who don't know. And that's basically the truth. Because when you sit at

home you don't read newspapers, you don't follow the news. People in the higher positions tend to take decisions for you, because you don't know [INT 1].

As a shy student with low confidence, Techniques did not have the freedom to develop affiliation with lecturers in the 'dog-eat-dog' environment described by Naledi. Inspired by his aspiration to contribute towards social change, he gleaned critical knowledge from his major and occasionally from other modules:

{The module} although it's boring but it helped a lot. We spoke about economics and inflation and how it affects the country. We did something on climate change, where we spoke on different projects that are being done in South Africa. We learned about a lot of things that we never thought happened. Though you see them on TV you never take them into consideration [INT 3].

Although the course above offered an uncritical approach, Techniques converted the information into a critical interpretation of the economy using his own experience of socioeconomic marginalization and his interest in unequal distribution of opportunities. It was also significant that although he had not been exposed to enabling conditions at school, Techniques recognized the passive reception cultivated by the institution's banking system:

You go to a lecture, just sit there and listen to a lecture and then we leave. That's too formal. Why not make it interesting? Why not... try to involve the students in what you doing? So it's not a matter of facilitator coming and facilitating and telling you this is what, and then you have to answer questions, but more on you telling them what do you think you have learned, and your peers helping you answering the questions [INT 3].

The institutional limitation for Techniques was that he was unable to convert his passion for social change into functionings. He reiterated these commitments during the project, and became increasingly articulate about the shape of his aspirations. But his time and energy were directed to the struggle to conform to the banking system and lecturer expectations to pass enough modules to retain his bursary. By his third year, decreased resources forced him to move from accommodation, in walking distance from campus to a remote neighbourhood where he could stay for free with a relative, making transport to campus difficult. These

academic and socioeconomic pressures were barriers to opportunities outside the curriculum to develop and implement his aspirations for social change. The selection criteria for opportunities for capability development such as volunteering and mentorship programmes excluded Techniques, who was forced to direct all available resources to preventing his academic exclusion.

Aziza used her agency to navigate decontextualized content by focusing on the development of marketable skills:

I think even though they disregard academic literacy but it does truly help if you just look beyond the grammar and the work that you have to do, and see it as a skill that you're learning. That's what I always try to do in every module. Even though it can be a drag, but I see it... could be connected to something in... find the value... even though the lecturer is boring... find the value in what you are doing so even if you tried your best, you tone down your own negative voice [INT 2].

In trying to compensate for the poor quality of teaching and misalignment of content, Aziza reverted to an uncritical 'skills' discourse. But justifying disabling arrangements with the hope that they prepare students with skills needed for employment is an inadequate response since it shifts sole responsibility to the individual while downplaying structural failures (Vally & Motala 2014). Her attempt to engage despite unjust pedagogical arrangements did not address deeper questions about the critical capabilities that universities should be offering to students, although it does give evidence of her agency in negotiating these restraints.

Aziza's overall experience of knowledge offered in her degree was the cram-and-exam approach she described earlier. Juggling parenting responsibilities at home also meant that Aziza was excluded from opportunities for critical capability development. By her final year, there was limited evidence of a critical approach to knowledge as she was forced to adapt to the pervasive banking system in order to retain her bursary.

In Condorrera's experience, her status as a mature student enhanced her freedom to engage meaningfully with knowledge:

I think because of I'm fourth year now and I'm older, I pick up a lot of things. You can go to the same class with first years. They are not the same as... the older students. They come

here to... explore. So they don't really listen to what the lecturer is saying... They just want to go to class [to] get it over and done with. Some of them are here just to get a degree to maybe have something to fall back on. So they are not really paying attention to that. But I think the older students in class... are very critical; they listen, they pay attention. They digest what the lecturer has said when they get home [INT 2].

However, the quotation above speaks to an instrumental approach evident in the responses of younger participants, which is exacerbated by structural limitations. It also suggests that some pedagogical arrangements offer poor quality education with few opportunities to develop critical engagement with knowledge. Yet the ideal version of a student who engages meaningfully with knowledge is difficult to achieve when students enter the institution with diverse resource bundles, within the context of an insufficiently resourced higher education system. Condorrera is able to negotiate knowledge using the rich bundle of resources and capabilities developed before university. Just arrangements would enable more students the opportunity to convert information into knowledge despite different resources constraints:

I believe everybody who is here... can read and write. But we have to have interest for reading and writing... Being interested in what you do... It has to come from the course itself. Listening to the lecturers, doing what is expected, and seeing that you are going somewhere with this... Students [who] are more interested in class... never miss a class [INT 2].

While previously Condorrera emphasized that the individual should take responsibility for her own participation, she shifted her focus to the role of pedagogical conditions, although she still framed participation as meeting lecturer expectations. Even though she was critical of unfair treatment by lecturers, she did not have real freedom to challenge the constraints of the banking system.

Kea described the value of a developmental module that enabled her to convert knowledge from our academic literacy module where the arrangements had been designed to help students synthesize relevant information from different academic sources:

Academic literacy actually helps us to improve some of the skills. You put... people with the same disciplines or ones that are related [into] a group. So that helped me to

implement that in other modules. I used the knowledge that they have and I used the information I got from my textbook, and made it one. So that helped me as an individual to communicate... especially this year [INT 2].

The conversion of pedagogical arrangements into knowledge was enabled by a combination of structural and personal conversion factors.

7.6 Recognizing student capabilities

The final cluster of conversion factors recognized student capabilities and resources (Leibowitz 2011). Students reported instances both in classrooms and in our research project which offered platforms for students to convert individual resources and capabilities into deeper participation.

Techniques brought a cluster of capabilities and resources to the informal research space created by our project. These capabilities included a commitment to challenging social inequality, curiosity about the structure of political and economic systems, and experiential knowledge about alienated young people in his community:

But now I've realized that it's only when you engage yourself, when you read, when you research, then you will know the basis of living... Because if you know how the system works, how language works, and how people interact, you tend to know the basis of living. You are one step [ahead] in that... at least now I know, not my purpose, but the purpose of life as a whole [INT 1].

Because opportunities for critical engagement with knowledge are thinly spread in the formal curriculum, Techniques converted interaction with peers into opportunities to resist the misrecognition of an unjust school system:

Because with varsity you learn how to become yourself, independent, and you acquire skills that you were unable to acquire when you were at school. You see yourself [as someone who] could sit down and study [INT 1].

A crucial part of his capability development involved navigating his school history; university enabled Techniques to identify areas of development that he valued and which had been left 'under-developed' by the school system. Techniques used his agency to claim the recognition of himself as, in his words, as a 'work in progress' who developed the freedom to challenge

the stigmatizing labels attached to his former inability to learn. He converted resources and opportunities into valued functionings as a university student capable of independent and critical thinking.

Further evidence of critical capability development suggests that Technique was able to resist the banking system. As the research project deepened over time, he used this informal pedagogical space to convert knowledge and aspirations for community-based projects into critical consciousness. This capability then enabled him to act on the belief that *'every individual person plays a role in the transformation of a community'*:

We should try to relate to different people. It's the same that if you want to change... a group of gangsters; if you go there... and if you wanna to speak English, do you think they are going to take you seriously? Definitely not. So you need to go to their level and speak their language... So I think that's one way of doing it. Speaking the language of the youth. Get something that you know the youth loves and they enjoy... It should be something informal. Because people are tired of formal things [INT 3].

In the quotation above, his experience of being alienated by learning arrangements that are 'too formal' is applied to vulnerable groups who are excluded from higher education. He experienced these 'formal' teacher-centred arrangements as alienating:

Because people who are back home, who are not in higher [education] institutions, they see education as, not a waste of time, but as an unfair object of society. Because not everyone is able to come to varsity and not everyone who has a degree is able to obtain a job [INT 3].

During the research process, Technique navigated the conflict between the value of education as an instrumental good and a social good, and grappled with conflict between the value of education and the inequality that the education system perpetuates, created by his experiential knowledge about the effect of social inequality on the lives of family and peers in his community:

What is life? Is life just living and dying and doing nothing? Or is life to transform and create or reproduce what we already have? How do we produce if we keep asking for things and not creating them for ourselves? And I think that is the most important

message that we need to convey to the youth especially. Because we are the future leaders, so if we don't have that mindset to say, we want to make a difference, I believe our country is going to a downfall. So those are the types of messages we need to send out. So how do we change that type of mindset? [INT 3].

In later stages of the research project, Techniques developed his political interests into his aspiration for a community-based project that is accessible to unemployed youth. He was reflexive about the value of education, but believes that higher education in its current form remains inaccessible to many young people:

There are a lot of things that one can do, though I'm not saying that education is not important. It is important. But the way we go about... putting it out there, I think that's the problem. To motivate the youth, to develop them, develop the way we think, the way we see life. Life is more than just the big car, the fancy house, the money. What about those people who are lagging behind, who don't have the resources we have? What are you doing for them? [INT 3].

Another aspect of student capability is the representation of diverse identities in academic content. Aziza reported that she was alienated by Eurocentric experiences embedded within academic content:

In a sense they [are] making us a little bit inferior [by implying] that maybe our [African] academic information is not good enough. If they add the African element [and] a bit of realism into it, when someone else is reading, [they] can relate to it. Because most of the articles in [the developmental module], we can't really relate.

If they could add stuff like that ['the African element'], it would be really interesting... was a total bore to read those things... when it comes to English, make it interesting so we can actually interact with words [INT 2].

In her experience, academic content that offered a balanced representation of diverse identities enabled Aziza to convert content knowledge into academic engagement, as she described below:

So if ever you speak about... the experience of black people... if ever you learn about someone's culture in your [academic literacy] class, and then that same thing is implemented maybe in psychology or sociology... then [I'll say]: Oh, I did this in class. And then I'm going to [apply] it to my other modules [INT 2].

Within the institution, Condorrera's capability development was enabled by her agency to pursue personal and academic development despite institutional and social limitations:

[At school] I was not interested in reading. [Now] I read more, I research more. When you told me about this digital narrative thing, I said it was new; I wanted to do that. Because then I want to leave university knowing I'm equipped in this and that. So I'll be able to tell others about digital narrative [and] about the importance of knowing your own language, [and] what it's like being at university [INT 2].

The relevance of education was mediated through her engagement with creative writing, which helped Condorrera make sense of structural constraints in her community. She described her decision to write a book as an act of resistance to the absence of creativity at school, as well as a strategy to enhance capability development:

Condorrera is a Venda word; it means perseverance. In the book, I talk about myself; how I grew up; the experiences that I had. So I actually walked to school with holes in my shoes. But I look at it as, yes, those shoes they had holes; it was difficult to walk to school in winter's cold like that, but they took me far in life. So it's a story about hope [INT 2].

7.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed student evidence that foregrounded pedagogical and institutional arrangements where opportunities and resources enabled academic participation. Most of these opportunities were associated with peer and lecturer affiliation, while platforms for student voice, access to critical knowledge, and the recognition of student capabilities also enhanced their freedom to participate.

At the culmination of these two data chapters, I will now comment briefly on the significance of the findings as presented in Tables 5 and 6, which captured the structural conversion factors that informed the data analysis. In particular, it is important to foreground my

observations that emerged in comparing the negative and positive effects of conversion factors. For instance, individualizing failure had a negative effect on the freedom to participate for a number of participants, which in Clarice's case worked against real opportunities to cultivate meaningful access to knowledge. Another finding was that students who were alienated from lecturers during the early part of their degree course— such as Clarice, Naledi and Techniques —also showed evidence of the significantly enabling benefits of lecturer affiliation. This suggests the importance of ensuring that institutional arrangements are re-designed so that more students have real opportunities for equal participation. In essence, this also means being cognizant of the ways in which individual freedom for participation is expanded or decreased by structural conversion factors.

Overall, students reported significantly more constraining than enabling pedagogical and institutional arrangements and there was little evidence of equal participation as defined in chapter three. At best, a diminished version of participation was identified across student experiences. What was striking about the conversion factors was that they enabled participants to navigate unjust conditions with increased agency, but they did not expand their freedom for equal participation. Most of the enabling experiences described were transient experiences of support that did not increase secure opportunities for participation. Even though most participants described some arrangements that enabled participation, the analysis concludes that these opportunities did not expand most students' freedom to participate as *equal or valued* members of the university. I base this conclusion on the fact that participants had fewer opportunities for capability development and that pedagogical arrangements associated with foundational modules on extended degree programmes did not reflect the same quality of resource provision on mainstream programmes and were facilitated by underqualified staff (Boughey 2010b). While participants used their agency to access and convert resources, these opportunities were scarcer, precarious, based on the goodwill of faculty, without secure opportunities for that support sustained throughout the degree programme (Walton *et al.* 2015).

Whereas students on a well-resourced degree course have access to degree-specific support structures throughout the degree programme (Pym & Kapp 2013), most participants in this group were registered on general social sciences and business degrees, and therefore had to compete for lecturer and tutor support and resources that supported learning. In large

classes with some lecturers who have a couple of consultation hours split between hundreds of undergraduates, participant experiences showed that sufficient support for equal academic and social participation were therefore unevenly spread across the student body. Furthermore, although participants valued involvement in activities that developed capabilities for leadership, critical thinking, creativity, and community engagement, it was evident from the narratives that the freedom to pursue these opportunities was constrained by the lack of material resources. Selection criteria for participation in capacity development programmes excluded mature, single-parent and/or working-class students without access to the finances, discretionary time, geographic location, and capabilities associated with student leadership.

In the next chapter, I explore how a capability approach to pedagogy responded to this question through the design of capability praxis.

Chapter 8

Designing capability-informed praxis

Freedom without opportunity is a devil's gift.

Noam Chomsky⁶⁵, *Profit Over People:
Neoliberalism and Global Order*

8.1 From exclusion to capability development

The aim of this chapter is to consolidate the findings of the preceding three empirical chapters and the theoretical framework in the design of a capability-informed praxis. This theoretical and empirical integration responds to the fourth and final research question:

How could student experiences be used as evidence to inform the design of capability praxis for equal participation?

The recommended capabilities outlined in the chapter respond to constraints to equal participation identified by the participants. This is also informed by the theoretical principles outlined in chapter three, and the research findings identified in the literature review in chapter two. Although I do not suggest that this praxis would be generalizable to diverse pedagogical contexts, the principles could be relevant to arrangements where students are vulnerable to unequal participation because of the intersection of resource scarcity, poor quality schooling, and structural inequalities.

Before introducing the principles underlying this praxis, I briefly review one case study to frame the application of these principles within the context of student experiences. In the preceding chapters, Techniques' narrative demonstrated how the corrosive disadvantage of unequal access to resources, misrecognition and misrepresentation worked together to constrain his freedom for equal participation (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007; Fraser 2008). He entered university as a first-generation student from a poor family, and because of a lower entry score did not have the freedom to pursue his intellectual interest and was forced to settle for a degree course that he did not value. Even though he demonstrated critical

⁶⁵ Chomsky 1999: 91.

consciousness about unfair structural arrangements, he did not have real opportunities to resist institutional inequalities while struggling to adapt to academic requirements and worrying about money for food, textbooks, transport and accommodation. Besides first-year developmental modules, which were misaligned to his academic or social needs, the institution did not offer other accessible support structures. If these structures were available, Techniques did not know about them and was not able to convert them into equal participation. He was also not connected to student leadership networks and struggled to gain recognition as a valued member of the institution. Although he networked with a provincial youth development agency, he did not have the support or resources to develop these connections into valued functionings. Despite changing his degree course, he lost his bursary, was forced to leave the university without completing his degree. He has since returned home to the rural Northern Cape, where he is now attempting to find employment.

How could the institution have reallocated resources, opportunities and arrangements to enable Techniques to convert his agency, resources and existing capabilities into equal participation? At what point in his trajectory could appropriate resources or support have been made available to enable him to convert educational resources into capabilities? How could institutional structures have enabled his aspirations to help reduce unemployment in his community? What should pedagogical arrangements have looked like to give Techniques the freedom to cultivate the capabilities he needed for equal academic participation? Given the significant resources that were spent to fund his tuition and living costs during these three years, could there have been more enabling alternatives that would have allowed him to leave the institution with both a recognized qualification and the capabilities needed to achieve his aspirations to contribute to the public good?

The praxis developed in this chapter responds to these questions. It proposes a capability-informed pedagogy which could address the constraints to equal participation faced by Techniques and other first-generation and socioeconomically vulnerable university students. The chapter is organized into the following four sections: the first section briefly my conceptualization of *praxis*; the second section focuses on a minimum *threshold of basic resources* required for the conversion of resources into capabilities; the third section briefly describes the process of capability selection; and the fourth section outlines the six *capabilities* associated with the praxis.

8.2 Conceptualizing praxis

Given the evidence of constraining and enabling arrangements for participation identified by students, how could these principles be translated into practice in university pedagogy?

Building on the principle of *education as freedom* outlined in chapter three, the praxis operationalizes six capabilities for pedagogical arrangements, with reference to the student data. I conceptualize praxis using Freire's definition of praxis as '*reflection and action directed to the structures to be transformed*' (Freire 1970: 120, original emphasis) where '[a]ction and reflection occur simultaneously' (Freire 1970: 123). Drawing on a convergence of reflection and action, I have conceptualized praxis as capabilities that enable students and lecturers to collaboratively (re)design pedagogical arrangements for academic capability development (Hart 2015, personal communication; see also Waghid 2001).

Another aspect of Freirian pedagogy that is aligned to this design is the focus on egalitarian practices that challenge hierarchies between students, lecturers and institutional structures (Freire 1970; 1974). Freire and other critical pedagogy scholars maintain that the purpose of less hierarchical arrangements is to expand students' freedom for critical education (Burke 2015; hooks 2003; Leach & Moon 2008; Lankshear & McLaren 2002; Nkoane 2010; Siry & Zawatski 2011; Stein 2000; Shor 1996; Walker 2010; Weiler 1988; 2002). The outcome of this praxis would be *redistributive policies* that enable equal participation for vulnerable students. Instead of imagining a 'perfectly just university', these capability-informed practices work pragmatically towards the ideal of a just university (Sen 2009; see also Fraser 2013; Robeyns 2012; Marginson 2011).

8.3 A minimum resource threshold⁶⁶

Another aspect of a capability-informed praxis is a threshold of material and academic resources required for equal participation. The data confirmed that even when arrangements were enabling, students without financial resources for transport to campus, for instance, were less able to convert resources into capabilities or functionings. The findings show that an absence of financial resources was a form of corrosive disadvantage that intersected with other deprivation and conditions to decrease access to instrumental freedoms (Sen 1999: 10; Wolff & De-Shalit 2007). As a consequence, when students had to find private sources of

⁶⁶ My thanks to Melanie Walker for originally raising this idea.

support to negotiate these resource barriers, their struggle for recognition and academic participation was often misframed as apathy, boredom and disengagement (Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Fraser 2009; 2013).

In response, equal participation requires a minimum level of *resource security* which would be more likely to enable 'capability security', which Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) define as knowing that a capability will be reliably available in the future. This resource threshold would depend on the needs of an individual student and should ensure that students with income insecurity have access to the minimal amount of resources needed to participate equally. As I discussed in chapter seven, participants reported a significant absence of resource and capability security, with many opportunities for development being unreliable (Nussbaum 2011: 43). This meant that even when a capability was achieved as a functioning, the functionings were often precarious, leaving students more vulnerable to exclusion than peers with resource and capability security. For this reason, identifying students with resource scarcity could help to establish a minimum resource threshold for participation, not based only on academic merit but also on vulnerability to exclusion (Nussbaum 2011: 24; Walker 2015). For example, commuter students living off campus may need more resources to cultivate a basic threshold of affiliation than students who are integrated into residences or who are registered for smaller, more selective degree programmes.

8.3.1 Pedagogy and resource distribution

Pedagogical sites emerged as an important starting point for resource distribution since for some commuter students, classrooms and tutorials were the only places where they had regular contact with staff and other students. Yet the classroom has been sidelined as 'most institutional efforts have been situated at the margins of students' educational life' (Tinto 2012: 5; see also Engel & Tinto 2008). Lecturers committed to an egalitarian ethic could claim the opportunity to redesign arrangements so that vulnerable students benefit more equally from existing academic resources, by reinstating the classroom as the central point of engagement. For instance, interactions in the capability-informed classroom could become catalysts for debates and information-sharing that stimulates collective action for resource redistribution.

In practice⁶⁷, this requires lecturers, peer allies and support staff who are committed to engaged pedagogy and public deliberation at a pedagogical and institutional level. For instance, if knowledge and activism related to issues of resource scarcity are more effectively integrated into pedagogical practices and curricula, it could be possible to create an informational database and communication platforms that would help the institution identify and support students who are excluded due to resource insecurity.

To address resource scarcity, lecturers could also create platforms to identify student needs, while being sensitive to the fact that some students will need more resources to reach the same level of participation. In this way, classrooms could be critical spaces to identify students who require more academic resources, such as individual tutoring to develop capabilities for participation, while being careful not to slip into a deficit approach to less-prepared students. For instance, while access to a textbook is critical, even if a student is able to afford a textbook, he might require sustained, discipline-specific lecturer and tutor input to convert the contents of the textbook into capabilities for critical academic participation (Nussbaum 2011). When these resource clusters were available, as in Condorrera's narrative, it created a fertile environment for conversion of knowledge resources into academic capabilities. But when these resource clusters were not available, then capability development was compromised and functionings were precarious and unsustainable, as was evident in Techniques' narrative. For this reason, it is crucial to ensure the alignment between financial and academic resources, which is required for equal participation.

Another short-term intervention to address resource insecurity is to show students where to find free resources such as good-quality MOOCs, online books, legitimate downloadable articles, accessible academic blogs, reputable and good quality news sources, videos, and other content with a Creative Commons license⁶⁸. While participants valued these resources, they reported that lecturers mostly focused on rushing through curricula instead of facilitating access to knowledge resources that could benefit vulnerable students.

⁶⁷ Another practical implication would be a stronger collaboration between academic teaching staff and student support services.

⁶⁸ A Creative Commons licence enables a creator to share her work with the public, within the boundaries of certain conditions that prevent misuse and exploitation, especially by corporations (<http://creativecommons.org/about>).

An important caveat to the suggestions above is that pedagogical practices and teaching staff can only play a limited albeit important role in redistributing knowledge resources. Once resource scarcity has been identified, the institution would need to ensure that available resources are then distributed to meet the needs of vulnerable students, which I discuss in more detail in chapter nine. Individual efforts are unsustainable without resource distribution for the most vulnerable students at an institutional level, which depends on a commitment to resource investment from the state (Bozzoli 2015). Once resources are redistributed more equally, the capabilities-informed praxis could contribute towards policies, communication platforms and support structures that enable students to convert resources into equal participation.

8.4 Selecting capabilities

In this section, I discuss how the six capabilities were selected in conversation with relevant theory and my research findings (see **Table 7** below). The purpose of identifying these capabilities at the culmination of the three empirical chapters was to summarize the valued opportunities that emerged in student experiences of higher education. In the section following the table, I give a brief description of how these six capabilities were selected.

Table 7: Capabilities emerging from student data and literature

	Capability	Evidence in data	Evidence in literature
1	<i>Practical reason</i>		
	Making well-reasoned and informed choices; becoming an independent and critical thinker	Valued opportunities to be challenged and to have access to rigorous learning environments; students resisted 'dumbed-down' pedagogy	Walker 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2015a
2	<i>Critical literacies</i>		
	Incorporating student resources into pedagogical environments; confidence to speak and contribute	Valued opportunities that incorporated existing individual resources and capabilities; discipline-specific opportunities for writing, reading, thinking and speaking	Hart 2012; Pym and Kapp 2013; Leibowitz 2011
3	<i>Undergraduate student research</i>		
	Undergraduate student research to promote agency and ownership	Valued the opportunity to be involved in research aligned with aspirations, which increased ownership of the learning process	Appadurai 2006; Neary 2009; Wood and Deprez 2012
4	<i>Deliberative democracy</i>		
	Participatory platforms for engagement with the broader university community	Valued opportunities to be listened to by lecturers and management, and consulted in decisions about pedagogy and curriculum, and democratic processes in the classroom	Meier 2008; Wood and Deprez 2015
5	<i>Critical affiliation</i>		
	Affiliation as social networks, recognition, identity and belonging	Valued supportive affiliation with faculty and peers and to be recognized as members of the academic community	Walker 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Fraser 2013
6	<i>Values for the public good</i>		
	Commitment to social change through community engagement	Valued opportunities to contribute to community engagement and to form aspirations for the public good	Wilson-Strydom and Walker in press; Boni & Walker 2013.

8.4.1 Evidence from student data and literature

The capabilities above were selected in consultation with students, while I was analysing and interpreting the qualitative data⁶⁹. This decision was based on the normative assumption that more students should actively contribute to creating policies that influence their freedom to participate (Sen 1999; see also Deneulin 2014; Cammarota & Fine 2008; Pick & Sirkin 2010; Smith *et al.* 2015). Once I had established that these were either freedoms that students had reason to value, or that they were opportunities that had been identified as absent, I could cross-check that these capabilities had also been identified as significant in other empirical studies.

Another factor in establishing this list was the conceptual framework outlined in chapter three. Drawing on the framework, I focused on the *development of capabilities* using existing student resources as an agency-informed alternative to a remedial approach that ‘fixes’ student deficits. As I have discussed at length in this project, the focus shifts from what undergraduate students cannot yet produce or what they do not yet know to the possibility of developing critical academic capabilities that increase opportunities for participation.

8.5 Capabilities for equal participation

I now turn to the six capabilities that emerged during the longitudinal research process. These capabilities are a pedagogical response to inequalities identified in student experiences that constrained their freedom to participate equally. These capabilities have been identified as alternatives to the constraining arrangements identified in chapters six and seven, which include:

1. *Practical reason*
2. *Critical literacies*
3. *Student research*
4. *Deliberative participation*

⁶⁹ For example, drawing on experiences within pedagogy, I interpreted participants’ references to the freedom to choose and to participate in decision-making as ‘agency, choice and freedom’. Similarly, although participants did not explicitly discuss emotions as a valued capability, I interpreted instances where emotions within pedagogy were ignored, misunderstood or devalued as evidence that emotions were an important part of becoming a university student (Ahmed 2013; Burke 2015; Christie *et al.* 2008; Nussbaum 2001).

5. *Critical affiliation*
6. *Values for the public good*

These are broad capability clusters which have a number of possible functionings embedded within each cluster: for instance, the capability for critical literacies would include a number of corresponding capabilities associated within discipline-specific communication and research practices required for academic participation. I have decided, however, that these more specific capabilities cannot be determined without consulting students and knowledge experts within disciplinary fields. Therefore, although the capability development below suggests practical steps that students and staff could take to challenge inequality, this is not a 'problem-solution model' for unequal participation (Boughey 2010b). Instead, the capabilities reflect principles of justice that should be negotiated in consultation with students to suit diverse pedagogical and discipline-specific contexts.

These practical proposals reflect the findings in the empirical chapter while also drawing on the pedagogy that I applied to an undergraduate academic literacy module based on the normative language of the capability approach which moves from judging a situation towards a 'certain type of action to transform that situation' (Deneulin 2014: 47). Although the evidence focused on both pedagogical and institutional arrangements, the praxis is focused particularly on conditions within teaching and learning, while the recommendations in chapter nine address broader institutional arrangements.

8.5.1 Practical reason

The first capability that emerged in the data were the freedom for practical reason, which was identified as an opportunity that all participants valued, but which was thinly spread across pedagogical arrangements. From a capability perspective, practical reason is defined as: 'being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' (Nussbaum 2003: 41-42). The definition has been expanded in relation to higher education as:

Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices. Being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world. Having good judgment (Walker 2006: 128).

In relation to the transition from high school to university, it is defined as '[b]eing able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options' (Wilson-Strydom 2015a: 115).

Practical reason would enable a student to interrogate 'beliefs, statements, and arguments' that create uncritical acceptance of authority and systemic arrangements (Nussbaum 2006: 388). In the context of marginalized students, whose experiences of schooling may not have equipped them to demand just structural arrangements, they could be enabled to develop practical reason in response to complex social issues (Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Pym & Kapp 2013), summarized as follows:

[I]f students are to become critical members of, and contributors to, the discourse, rather than instrumental reproducers, they have to be allowed the time and space to engage with the messy process of exploring (through talking, reading and writing) who they are (and who they are becoming) in relation to the authoritative voices in the field (Bangen & Kapp 2005: 114).

The data confirmed that pedagogical arrangements perpetuated inequality when lecturers taught students how to navigate the banking system instead of enabling them to develop intellectual autonomy and critical consciousness for equal participation. There was considerable evidence in the student narratives that vulnerable students had fewer real opportunities to resist structural conditions when the reproduction of information and measurable outcomes were valued above evidence of critical capability development (Freire 1970; Giroux 2005). In particular, participants reported that developmental modules were presented as uncritical 'study skills' that only helped them summarize and memorize information for tests and examinations. In practice, lecturers could enable conditions for vulnerable students to develop practical reasoning by resisting standardized assessment practices so that students could convert resources into critical engagement with knowledge.

Furthermore, an equal distribution of academic resources means that pedagogy should not be 'dumbed down' because students have not yet developed access to academic discourses. Instead, lecturers could cultivate practical reason for vulnerable students by mediating complex knowledge instead of assuming that students do not have the potential to learn (Lawrence 2002; Pym & Kapp 2013). Instead of being limited to simplified access to

knowledge, as described in particular by Clarice in chapter six, the freedom to develop critical academic capabilities could be extended to more first-generation students if lecturers collectively resist the banking system and homogenizing messages about student ability and provide a supportive environment to cultivate these critical freedoms (Walker 2006; Wood & Deprez 2012). In practice, there are a number of ways that lecturers can enable students to participate critically by modelling practices that cultivate independent thinking. For example, instead of summarizing the textbook on PowerPoint slides in bullet form, opportunities for practical reason could enable students to convert learning into capabilities instead of the regurgitation described by most participants.

Achieving practical reason depends on a university curriculum that 'enhances the capability of students to develop as independent and critical thinkers' (McFarlane 2012: 724). For this reason, access to information would be an important step to cultivating practical reason 'as a critical variable in students' ability to navigate their way through a complex academic organisation' (CHE 2010: 104). The data established that access to accurate information for equal participation was unequally distributed to vulnerable students, which I illustrate with examples below. Another important barrier to practical reason was when students did not know where to find relevant support and did not effectively navigate the support structures available on campus, rather struggling to cope on their own. In resistance to this barrier, lecturers can use pedagogical spaces to make strategic information accessible and empower students to negotiate a variety of choices (Walker 2006: 102; see also Sen 2009). For example, Clarice was misinformed about elective requirements which meant that by the end of the research project, she was forced to extend a four year degree to six years, which for financial reasons forced her to leave the university and complete her degree with distance education at another institution. Unlike students like Condorrera who accessed some opportunities for capability development, most students were misinformed about the value or importance of opportunities for capability development, which compromised their freedom to pursue and benefit from these opportunities.

8.5.2 Critical literacies

The capability for critical literacies builds upon practical reason as forms of expression such as the confidence to speak publicly and the freedom to read and research outside the boundaries of prescribed course material. Being critically literate includes the ability to

distinguish between corporate marketing and independent sources of information, while being able to make sense of your world without undue coercion by religious or academic influences, social media, or other social structures (Nussbaum 2010; Gee & Hayes 2011). In higher education, it means being aware of bias embedded within curricula, such as embedded stereotypes about race or gender that are normalized within disciplinary content. A critically literate student would be able to offer sound reasoning for the choices she has made using a diverse variety of sources, including own experience, academic texts and informal sources of knowledge.

However, literacy remains a contentious debate in higher education research. While the new literacies movement enabled a theoretical shift away from conventional text-based practices as the standard measure of literacy, there is still much emphasis on student 'illiteracy' with its emphasis on generic language-based practices (Archer 2012; Kapp & Bangeni 2009; Bock & Gough 2002; Gee & Hayes 2011; Henderson & Hirst 2007; Hewlett 1995; Hurst 2015; Jacobs 2005; Kress 2003; Lea & Stierer 2000; Leibowitz 2004; McKenna 2010; Prinsloo & Breier 1996; Rose 2005; Seligmann & Gravett 2010; Street 1995; 2003; Van Pletzen & Thesen 2006). The data suggest that while all the participants were second-language English speakers, their primary struggle in accessing knowledge was not a general deficit of grammar or vocabulary. Rather it was the need for access to the complex academic disciplinary discourses, including theoretical concepts and ways of writing, thinking, reading and speaking specific to their degree courses, which did not improve with the additive language course offered by the extended degree programme (Leibowitz 2011; Eybers 2012; Boughey 2010b):

[B]ecause limited proficiency in the dominant language often co-occurs with inadequate mastery of the written academic register, it is easy to understand why many educationists refer to difficulties with the additional language as the problem, when it is only one among the many challenges facing multilingual students (Leibowitz 2005: 676).

Since the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment prescribed by this literacy course were disconnected from the academic requirements of their mainstream programme, participants were not able to transfer competencies from the literacy course to their mainstream modules. At the same time, participant responses confirmed that decontextualized language

skills did not develop critical capabilities (Boughey 2010b). Instead of pedagogy that is designed around ‘formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms’ (Gee *et al.* 1994: 61) critical literacy should be:

creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for [students] to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment (Gee et al. 1994: 60).

It would be important to ‘work with’ the literacies that students bring to the classroom, while keeping in mind that the literacies required by workplaces are different from the academic literacies required for academic study, which lecturers who have not worked in the field may not be familiar with as academic researchers (Leibowitz 2011).

In response to this limitation, I included critical literacies as a capability based on the analysis of student literacies throughout the research project. While there was some evidence of critical engagement with knowledge, this was thinly spread across the narratives. At the same time, there was almost no evidence that pedagogical conditions were encouraging students to develop critical literacies. If these opportunities existed, participants were not converting these resources into critical academic capabilities. In response to this absence, opportunities to develop critical literacy should be expanded and embedded within disciplinary practices. In practice, the development of critical literacies could incorporate students’ multilingual resources in order to enhance access to disciplinary knowledge (Leibowitz 2005; Newfield *et al.* 2003; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; Paxton 2009; Stein 2000). In this way, critical literacy could democratize curricula using the knowledges, cultures, languages, and identities that diverse students bring to the university (Cross & Carpentier 2009; Crosbie 2013; Dewey 1920; Freire & Macedo 1987; Gandin & Apple 2002; Leach & Moon 2008; Meier 2008).

Furthermore, instead of producing students who comply with uncritical pedagogy, curricula and assessment practices, developing this capability for literacy could also enable students to recognize and resist constraining arrangements, including deadening teaching and learning. Across narratives, students described the function of university education to prepare them for the existing labour market, which is consistent with global, neoliberal imperatives in higher education. The primary purpose of a degree was to enable formal employment and an income; there was little evidence that education had a critical, transformative function.

In a normative sense, critical literacies could serve the purpose of:

enhancing the ability of the individual autonomously to realize, understand, recognize, articulate and act towards or follow their own formed (through education), informed and reasoned values through deep discussion, sustained engagement and critical scrutiny of a range of perspectives among fellow students, client groups and knowledge resources (Vaughan & Walker 2012: 506).

Another practical function of critical literacy could develop understanding of the power relations underlying systems of knowledge (Gee 2005a). In this way, instead of generic skills development, critical literacies would make explicit the normative content of disciplinary and popular texts. Critical access to complex multimodal reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills would weave critical literacy into the identity work of becoming an independent thinker and ‘to negotiate norms, values, attitudes and beliefs different from their home discourses’ (Pym & Kapp 2013: 274).

8.5.3 Student research⁷⁰

In the data, students valued the opportunity to approach learning as research (Appadurai 2006; Neary 2009; Smith-Maddox & Solórzano 2002; Blecher 1994; Brown 2009; Carey 2013; Cuthbert *et al.* 2012; Hordern 2012; Hunter *et al.* 2012; Russell *et al.* 2007; Schack 1993; Siry & Zawatski 2011; Taylor & Wilding 2009):

In the sessions we had, Talita would give us questions, and then she would say we should go and research with it. Today I am able to do my own research and I can say I am in a better position [Pedagogy colloquium].

Undergraduate research has been found to improve the quality of learning, particularly in the development of critical academic skills, while also enabling an active approach to learning (Neary & Winn 2009: 198; see also Neary 2010). Undergraduate research was also found to address the dichotomy between scholarship and teaching and challenges the ‘traditional archetypes of teacher and student with a collaborative investigative model’, while using a

⁷⁰ See chapter 4, section 4.9.5 for details of the digital narrative project and student involvement in research.

mentorship based model of teaching and expanding students' analytical and communicative skills (Healey & Jenkins 2009). Positioning students as collaborators also has the potential to increase retention rates for students who are at risk of drop out (Taylor & Wilding; see also Lambert, Parker & Neary 2007 for a model of student engagement; Gregerman *et al.* 1998), while student participation in curriculum development showed that 'meaningful engagement requires a revision of the culture and processes of university curriculum decision making' (Carey 2013). Instead of a passive approach to learning, undergraduate research could help students to engage in the production of knowledge (Hordern 2012; Kardash 2012; Guertin 2015), while involving student researchers in cognitive, personal, and professional development (Hunter *et al.* 2007). Other studies showed that students were more likely to engage with learning when lecturers used collaborative learning techniques (Ewald 2007; Fielding 2001; Ruksana & Ronnie 2007; Schack 1993; Seale 2009; Schlicht & Klauser 2014; Umbach & Wawrzynski 2005).

These findings confirm the value that students attached to collaborative opportunities throughout the duration of our research project. For example, although Techniques was disengaged from modular content and struggled to pass assessment, he articulated well-reasoned and socially engaged aspirations for education targeting vulnerable youth. Based on the findings above, it is probable that if he had been given more engaging and active forms of learning, together with a basic threshold of resources, he could have developed an approach to learning which may have increased his chance of equal participation. Moreover, Kea reported that being involved in research helped her think critically about her role at the university and as a future graduate:

I became empowered in that I realized that the project was about the struggle to success. I used to talk more and listen less. It improved my confidence... I gained the skill of becoming a researcher, and I am proud to say that I am now a researcher.

The transfer of capability development from the research platform outside the classroom also helped create a pedagogical environment where students expanded their freedom to engage with knowledge and cultivate reasoned academic voices. In this way, the research team played a role in cultivating conditions that benefitted their capability development, as Clarice described:

And after the first few months, we spoke to each other more, we interacted more. The class just became a place where, that's where you always wanted to be. 'Cos you felt like you're not just being given a lecture, and then you leave, you haven't asked questions or you haven't interacted [INT 3].

8.5.4 Deliberative participation

The fourth capability that emerged in connection with equal participation was a participatory platform for consultation and decision-making to address 'the need for greater institutional engagement with students in order to address their needs' (Manik 2014). The freedom for deliberation operationalizes the importance of education as freedom developed in the conceptual framework. Despite institutional barriers, limited resources and unjust practices, I argue that a participatory approach could create conditions that expand the freedom for equal participation. I define the three aspects of participatory freedom as 1) a rigorous *process of participation* that works to 2) increase *access to critical knowledge* and 3) expands *student agency and opportunity freedoms* (Sen 1999; Deneulin 2014; Crocker & Robeyns 2010; Drydyk 2008). For example, instead of generic skills interventions designed to remediate literacy deficits, students and lecturers could engage in a consultative process to co-design a pedagogical approach to academic literacy aligned with students' mainstream disciplinary knowledge and their existing literacy resources to increase opportunities for critical learning (Boughey 2010b; Leibowitz 2009; Paxton 2007).

As I argued in chapter three, recognizing student agency as ownership and active engagement (Crocker & Robeyns 2010) within pedagogy could reframe education as a *process* of freedom for expanded capability development. I draw this conclusion based on findings in the student data that a lack of consultation and decision-making decreased students' commitment to learning. In the data, participants reported arrangements that reflected un-participatory approaches to education that decreased individual agency and isolated students from decision-making processes related to their academic development. It was also evident across student experiences that when pedagogical arrangements were imposed onto students without consultation, the potential benefits and perceived value of resources were diminished. Moreover, participants took a less critical and more passive approach to learning when arrangements were devalued and perceived as coercive.

Instead, participatory classrooms could offer students the freedom to engage in processes of decision-making as well as opportunities to achieve valued outcomes (Sen 1999: 291). In this sense, capability praxis would create pedagogical spaces that model democratic processes. For example, a deliberative process of consultation could determine how to make these structures accessible to individual students and to negotiate a fair distribution for the most vulnerable. Sen writes that ‘the freedom to participate in critical evaluation and in the process of value formation is amongst the most crucial freedoms of human existence’ (Sen 1999: 287). Student experiences confirmed their need for flexible processes that enable them to re-negotiate modules that are misaligned to their academic needs (CHE 2013; Walton *et al.* 2015). Instead of being alienated from learning, it would have been helpful if Clarice had access to a participatory platform that did not compromise her academic performance or push her to leave the institution. Her participation could have been enhanced if she had more freedom to participate in choosing modules and designing the structure of her course.

Finally, participatory parity could enable students to actively challenge unequal arrangements. Lecturers can make pathways to resistance and activism more visible and support student initiatives to resistance (Currie & Newson 1998), which reflects an ethical responsibility to create humane pedagogical environments in collaboration with their students, where students feel free to engage with knowledge, ask questions and cultivate reasoned academic and individual voices:

Current student protest is a direct consequence of the manner in which the university governance has underestimated proper consultation with students and other constituencies of our universities (Mail & Guardian 2015).

Importantly, Freire writes that ‘[d]emocracy and freedom are not a denial of high academic standards. On the contrary, to live an authentically free life means engaging in adventure, taking risks [and] being creative’ (Freire 1992: 34). This freedom should be available to all university students regardless of the constraints they face.

8.5.5 Critical affiliation

The fifth capability is the opportunity for critical affiliation, which I define as a form of social support with staff and other mentors, while being critical in its resistance of racial, classed and gendered hierarchies and paternalism within these support structures. Across the divergent disciplinary communities reviewed in chapter two, the opportunity to become integrated as part of a challenging and supportive learning community was a requirement for epistemological access, recognition and the development of a learning disposition (Tinto 2014b). Another crucial point is that students' perceptions of whether they are valued members of the university community have an impact on their engagement with learning, and even on decisions to leave the university (Tinto 2014b: 9). From a social justice perspective, it is indefensible that students like Naledi were unable to convert academic resources into the critical affiliation associated with learning (Leibowitz 2009; Leach & Moon 2008):

Before being on the research team my idea of getting a degree was just to get a degree, go work... Before being on the team, it was just going to a class for two hours, dragging my feet [INT 3].

Her department was alienating and she moved between home and campus without the opportunity to make friends, access support or participate in enriching opportunities. This degree of isolation was not conducive to equal participation; for this reason, students like Naledi should be given priority when opportunities for capability development are allocated across the student body. In practice, this would mean reviewing selection criteria to include students who are not given the same opportunities for capability development, or providing access to alternative platforms for capability development. On the other hand, while Condorrera faced challenges associated with poverty, there was convincing evidence to suggest that she was integrated as a valued member of the university who benefitted from available academic and social resources and opportunities, in contrast to other participants. Evidence of her participation was found in the fertile range of capabilities and functionings that she reported during the project. In follow-up interviews, I also tracked how she was pursuing a Master's degree, and she shared how 'I am not going to stop until I get to my PhD'.

Further research would need to establish how many students remain on the margins of university life without genuine opportunities to establish critical pedagogical connections with lecturers and peers. According to the findings in the data, it would be important to determine the extent to which constraints created by resource scarcity, alienation, and discriminatory practices converge in the experiences of commuter students in non-selection courses. In student narratives, it was evident that commuter students facing resource scarcity were particularly vulnerable to weak forms of institutional affiliation, which decreased their access to networks and opportunities for academic capability development.

I have framed this capability as a critical version of affiliation because it should not only enable students to cope with the academic and social side effects of exclusion, but also increase recognition of and resistance to structural inequality. The critical function of affiliation would extend beyond social support to include platforms to critique, for example, paternalism embedded in student-staff interactions. Although participants had been socialized at school to expect authority, the narratives showed that they valued opportunities for non-hierarchical alliances with faculty. Instead of modelling a corporate authority structure, classrooms can challenge the alienation, fear and silence created by strong academic hierarchies. Creating alliances emerged in the data as an important condition for engaged classrooms. Student narratives revealed segregation between students and faculty based on deficit assumptions around class, race, gender, ethnicity, and language. Instead of silencing conflict, lecturers can use their authority to challenge stereotypes and use conflict as opportunities to develop critical consciousness. Lecturers could then create a pedagogical climate to resist institutional power structures while educating students about how power permeates relationships between people.

Keeping in mind the importance of affiliation in capability lists for higher education, the absence of opportunities for meaningful affiliation across the student body is a remediable institutional failure (Walker 2006; 2013; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Crosbie 2013; Boni 2012; Flores-Crespo 2007; Nussbaum 2010). Furthermore, I have identified critical affiliation as a capability which can be cultivated within pedagogical settings by fostering a sense of affiliation which strengthens students' confidence and agency and enables 'the development of social connectedness, identity and agency [which] strongly assists academic success' (Pym & Kapp 2013: 278; see also Bozalek & Biersteker 2010; Crosbie 2013; Gachago *et al.* 2014a;

Gachago *et al.* 2014b; Pym & Kapp 2013; Wood & Deprez 2012). Furthermore, recognition could be cultivated by students' contribution to the teaching and learning environment:

It is part of our task to help [students] to work reflexively, to reflect on current priorities, and develop future goals that are meaningful to them. They have engaged in agentic ways in the past. We provide them with the time and space to reflect on how and why they have engaged in particular subject positions rather than others, and to consider how those roles may or may not change in the future (Pym & Kapp 2013: 281).

In practice, critical affiliation could also challenge lecturers' assumptions around poverty, township schooling, and experiences of female, working-class and African identities by focusing on the life histories of individuals (Janse van Rensburg & Kapp 2015; Marshall & Case 2010; Stein 2000; Wood & Deprez 2012). At the same time, instead of encouraging interpersonal competition for resources or recognition, lecturers could encourage cooperation amongst students by steering away from a meritocracy focus on measurable outcomes. This could mean taking an active role in identifying vulnerable students who have less confidence to demand attention and support, as Condorrera pointed out:

But I think if [lecturers] see something that can benefit us, it's better if you tell us in time. Because we are still learning and we want to move forward [INT 2].

Affiliation embedded within pedagogical arrangements could take into account students' need for opportunities for mentorship, regular feedback sessions, the development of self-esteem and voice, and platforms for communication that emerged in the data. Although social and emotional aspects of learning are often neglected in the classroom, a critical praxis would create a platform that distributes these aspects more equally (Christie *et al.* 2008: 579; see also Hockings 2010: 13-14; Pym *et al.* 2011; Nussbaum 2010). The evidence suggested that vulnerable students who have regular opportunities to connect with lecturers and peers expanded their freedom to participate.

As illustrated throughout the research, students converted the opportunity to listen to the lives of others into narrative imagination when the visibility of suffering in the lives of their peers cultivated empathy. The capacity to imagine the lives of other people involves

‘developing students’ capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people, particularly those whom their society tends to portray as lesser, as “mere objects”, teach attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness that suggest that weakness is not shameful and the need for others not unmanly... develop the capacity for genuine concern for others’ (Nussbaum 2010: 45).

8.5.6 Values for the public good

The final capability for equal participation is the cultivation of values for the public good. This capability reflects a normative stance which argues that the purpose of education is not only to empower individuals with knowledge, but also to address local and global injustices (Boni & Walker 2013; Nussbaum 2010; Walker 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2015a; Walker & McLean 2013). The capability approach is founded upon *ethical individualism*, which translates into an examined life with concern for others, which could lead to individual actions that enhance collective well-being. For this reason, capability praxis would enable individuals to convert education into capabilities and functionings that expand their freedom to live an ethically engaged life. This means ‘conceptualizing education as an active space that may enable an individual to learn and to develop their values and agency goals’ (Walker & Vaughan 2012: 496; see also Walker & McLean 2013; Boni & Walker 2013; Deneulin 2014). The long-term measure of equal participation would be well-being achievement that benefits individuals, protects the natural environment, and decreases inequality, in alignment with the values of equity, sustainability, participation and productivity (Alkire 2005). As such, this is a long-term vision of human development that incorporates education as a site where values for the public good can be cultivated. As I discussed in my introduction, these values would extend the instrumental function of education as a private commodity or a driver of national economic growth.

Furthermore, a focus on cultivating socially just values could challenge instrumental discourses associated with higher education:

According to Aristotle... we learn to be virtuous by acting in virtuous ways, we learn to live well by living well. We then need to ask what we are all learning to become and be as we currently “live” and “do” in our schools, colleges and universities; through discourse we end up producing the kind of education system desired by government

policy makers, while non-market values get squeezed to the margins (Walker 2012: 391; see also Walker & McLean 2013).

From a human development perspective, pedagogy should enable a platform to nurture the ideals of sustained interventions to social justice and values that enable students to convert educational resources into 'social and moral consciousness' (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015: 18). The role of capability pedagogy would be to incorporate social justice values that prioritize the well-being of people and the environments into curricula. In the 1997 White Paper, the following policy statement connects the role of higher education to the public good alongside the knowledge-driven and human development functions of higher education:

To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good (Ministry of Education 1997: 4).

Institutions have the potential to provide resources and to shape agency and values (Vaughan & Walker 2012: 499). From a Freirian perspective, students captured by the banking system are unlikely to develop the critical consciousness they need to 'weave cognitive, social and emotional development together in an inextricable exchange of individual and collective values' (Piata 1999; Freire 1970; see also Gasper 2013). This requires mentorship from peers and faculty who are committed to modelling ethical, value-laden practices and knowledge(s) in pedagogical spaces. Michael Sandel argues that people who have not been given the opportunity for ethical action may have difficulty cultivating ethical ways of being (Sandel 2010).

Yet, while most participants valued opportunities to address social inequality, they were disillusioned by the disconnection between curriculum and social justice aspirations. I found evidence that although students valued opportunities to contribute to community projects they were confused by the mixed signals sent by the institution. Significant contradictions emerged during interviews and in conversations outside the research space: students observed and were being taught corporate values modelled by staff and management. Some participants reported that they were being socialized into the idea of individual success and

personal development. For example, Kea was frustrated that she was being taught how to ‘work for someone else’ instead of being taught how to start her own business. Clarice, Aziza and Naledi were overwhelmed by inequality in their families and communities, but did not think they had the freedom to develop capabilities that could help them convert information into social transformation. The pedagogical challenge would be to create pedagogical and institutional practices that provide opportunities for individual capability development despite resource constraints faced by first-generation students.

8.6 Conclusion

In this penultimate chapter, I have outlined a basic resource threshold as the means to capability achievement and six capabilities as foundational requirements for a capability-informed praxis relevant to socioeconomically vulnerable, first-generation university students. These capabilities also bear relevance to students who are not first-generation, and who face different vulnerability. Previous chapters have outlined the necessary conversion factors for freedom to achieve. The capabilities are intended to reflect enabling pedagogical arrangements in which students would be able to convert available academic resources into equal participation. As I stressed at the beginning of the chapter, this is not a technical, one-size-fits-all approach, and I do not suggest that they would be applicable to other first-generation or vulnerable undergraduate students in exactly the same way. These capabilities would have to be publicly debated and empirically tested using a larger and more representative sample of the first-generation student cohort to establish their relevance and applicability, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, based on the findings and corroborated by evidence in literature, I propose that these capabilities could be applied to diverse pedagogical contexts in consultation with student cohorts who face accumulative resource scarcity and misrecognition in higher education. I have been convinced that these capabilities had the potential to increase participation for the participants in this project.

Chapter 9

Policy recommendations and conclusion

Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development.

Amartya Sen⁷¹,

Development as Freedom

9.1 From student deficit to enabling structural arrangements

In conclusion, I now reflect on how the findings within student narratives have responded to the research questions. I also consider lessons learned and significant theoretical shifts that have occurred during data collection and analysis. In addition, the chapter presents institutional-level policy recommendations. These recommendations have been formulated in response to evidence of conditions that constrain and enable students' capability for equal participation. In this way, I respond to the overarching research problem:

Given the structural inequalities within universities, how could pedagogical and institutional arrangements enable first-generation students to convert available resources into the capability for equal participation?

Drawing on student data, I have argued that even though more students have access to higher education in South Africa, there was evidence that the first-generation students in this study did not achieve the recognition and support that they needed to develop critical academic capabilities associated with equal participation. It was also evident that participants who were not first-generation students and who had attended well-resourced schools also faced significant constraints to equal participation. The final section of this chapter concludes with recommendations for policy and pedagogical practice drawn from evidence in the previous four chapters.

⁷¹ Sen 1999: 18.

9.2 Research question 1

How do structural conditions at school, in the family, and the community enable and constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

9.2.1 Implementing a resource threshold

In the early stages of this study, the problem of resource security was not foregrounded in the research design. This was a deliberate shift from a deficit view of poor university students. In essence, I did not want to pathologize students in the way that Condorrera had experienced in chapter six, where she was labelled as unlikely to succeed because of socioeconomic challenges. This decision also reflected a normative stance and the empirical findings that poverty and other forms of disadvantage are not inevitable barriers to academic participation and success (Marshall & Case 2010; Janse van Rensburg & Kapp 2015). Condorrera's narrative illustrates that even without resource security, she was able to attain a relatively good degree of participation that enabled her to achieve valued capabilities and functionings, and to progress towards her career aspirations. Yet, this achievement required a unique and at times serendipitous combination of conversion factors, together with fragmented and precarious forms of support to which other participants did not have equal access. This has led me to conclude that in some cases, a minimum threshold of resource distribution would be an initial requirement for participatory parity.

In chapter five, student experiences before university entry demonstrated that resource scarcity *increased* their vulnerability to unequal participation. According to the data, socioeconomic conditions within the family and community exacerbated unequal participation at university, and in Techniques' case, led to eventual drop out. This meant that poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities at home were constraints that made participation more precarious. Participants from working-class and poor families could not rely on essential resources such as textbooks or even money for food and transport. Furthermore, resource scarcity was a source of anxiety for participants who found it difficult to focus on their studies, while being concerned about the reality of academic exclusion and urgent issues such as lack of basic nutrition and unsafe accommodation.

The sustainability of a basic resource threshold requires both institutional and a ministerial commitment to resource distribution to ensure that students 'who need more help to get above the threshold get more help' (Nussbaum 2011: 24). In the case of socioeconomic

vulnerability that leads to drop out, as illustrated in Techniques’ experience, an early warning system embedded in pedagogical and/or institutional arrangements for a commuter student on a non-specialist degree course might have offered support before vulnerability turned into exclusion (Christie *et al.* 2004; John 2013). This intervention would be effective, however, if institutions have access to adequate resources.

For this reason, I recommend that a basic resource threshold (Nussbaum 2011) is a foundational requirement that should precede other pedagogical and institutional interventions, depending on the circumstances of individual students. I propose that a resource threshold be implemented by the Department of Higher Education and Training in collaboration with higher education institutions, to ensure that all students have a fair chance to succeed with the basic requirements of living costs and academic materials (see **Table 8** below). This would ensure that sufficient resources are made available annually by national bursary schemes such as NSFAS, and that the current shortfalls in funding are urgently addressed by the DHET.

Table 8: A minimum resource threshold

	Basic resources for equal academic participation
1	Reliable and decent nutrition
2	Safe and reliable transport to campus and extracurricular activities
3	Access to textbooks and other academic materials required by the degree course
4	Resources needed for academic printing and photocopies
5	Access to information technology, especially reliable data connectivity and the software/hardware required for academic assignments
6	Safe housing that is located at a reasonable distance from campus
7	Resources for minimal participation in extracurricular activities
8	Access to basic medical care, including access to mental health care
9	Access to basic toiletries and to clothing that does not cause shame to the individual

The data confirmed that the freedom for equal participation is constrained by the intersection of individual resource scarcity and higher education institutions that are under pressure to meet demands for quality education and for expanding student numbers, despite decreased state funding in real terms (Jansen 2015; Bozzoli 2015; HESA 2014; Pithouse 2015; Dickinson 2015). The recommendation to higher education institutions would be to advocate

for a formula in which state funding is increased to address this urgent shortfall, as reflected in a response to the #FeesMustFall protest in October 2015:

The current system of funding is dysfunctional and ineffective. Unequal access to higher education can only be addressed in one way: to make our universities fully publicly funded by government. We argue that the value of democratic, independent universities to the public good cannot be underestimated and that solutions to the funding crisis, such as a national wealth tax and/or graduate tax, are necessary (*Mail & Guardian* 2015).

A report commissioned in 2012 found that South African universities would need at least double the amount of block grants as state funding to ensure effective operation aligned with international standards (Bozzoli 2015). A new funding formula, which is currently being worked on by a ministerial task team, would also need to reconsider how given South African's growing unemployment, poor economic performance and increasing social inequalities, convincing human capital and human development arguments could be made for greater investment in higher education (Boni & Walker 2013; Walker & McLean 2013).

9.2.2 An egalitarian approach to opportunity distribution

The second cluster of findings within chapter five was that due to under-resourced arrangements at school and/or in family structures, some participants entered university with fewer recognized and valued resources than more privileged peers. Using a capability lens meant that I was able to interpret resources as means to valued ends or outcomes, instead of assuming that resources in themselves led to academic participation. The analysis of conversion factors illustrated that a focus on resources alone was not sufficient to determine participants' freedom to convert available resources into capabilities and functionings. For example, Naledi and Techniques' narratives showed that they entered the university with a smaller bundle of recognized resources, while at the same time their freedom to pursue academic, extracurricular or social opportunities was constrained. This was further compromised by their struggle to meet minimum academic requirements without embedded and reliable support structures.

The narratives also demonstrated that some participants needed more resources to get to the same threshold of participation. For instance, while Dante reported a university

experience filled with opportunities for academic and personal development, Naledi was alienated from academic and social engagement in university life (Wilson-Strydom 2015a). Although neither of these participants were first-generation students, it was striking how Dante's involvement in residence life, campus-based activities and community projects, which cultivated a social life, enabled capability development and showed evidence of fertile functionings, while Naledi did not have real opportunities to achieve the same capabilities and functionings. Tracking Dante's experiences at the relatively well-resourced schools he attended suggests that the resources offered by an elite schooling system prepared him for participation at university, despite labelling himself as an 'average' student. On the other hand, Naledi's social environment, combined with poor quality schooling and the failures in her first two years at university, positioned her precariously at the institution. This disparity of experiences requires a closer investigation into the way that not only resources but also opportunities are unequally distributed.

Another important aspect of opportunity distribution is an institutional response to evidence that even when academic support structures exist, there are complex reasons why students do not access or benefit from these resources. Furthermore, when opportunities for capability development were available, some students were unable to afford the additional costs associated with participation (Rivera 2015), such as the resource shortage that made it difficult for Techniques to gain access to campus for academic and extracurricular activities. To resist an inequitable model of opportunity distribution, I propose that each student should have sustained opportunities for capability development regardless of their status at the university. Ideally, such opportunities would incorporate existing resources and capabilities that students bring to the institution, instead of forcing students to adjust to hostile arrangements (Walton *et al.* 2015: 267). Drawing on my findings and similar conclusions in the literature, I propose creating platforms where students who were not able to benefit from available opportunities contribute to creating accessible alternatives. If these processes are participatory and deliberative, they could bring the academic expertise of lecturers and institutional planners to an engagement with resources and capabilities that students bring to the university. In practice, this could mean creating collaborative spaces where vulnerable students and undergraduate teaching staff find solutions to problems with teaching and learning arrangements that adversely affect students' potential to succeed. Finally, I also

recommend finding a more effective way to track students who face complex forms of academic, extracurricular and social exclusion (Yu & Jo 2014; see also Coolbear 2014; Gašević *et al.* 2016)⁷².

9.3 Research question 2

How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university constrain the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

9.3.1 An embedded and well-resourced approach to foundational provision

In response to the second research question, I found evidence of conversion factors that adversely affected participants' status as valued members of the institution, and so diminished their capabilities for equal participation (Fraser 2008). For example, this was illustrated in Clarice's narrative, where persistent administrative failures and deficit treatment by staff members decreased her motivation to engage academically. Although at the beginning of the project she had expressed aspirations for academic excellence and belonging, by her third year she was 'happy with just a 50%', was planning to leave the university before completing her degree, and had a negative perception of the institution (Tinto 2014b). Due to a series of administrative failure, she was unable to join the final year cohort in her degree major, which was a significant blow to her motivation to engage academically. She became increasingly isolated and distracted from her studies, since she was forced to spend a year completing first-year elective courses in her fourth year, without access to the supportive mainstream lecturers and peers that she had identified in chapter seven.

At the same time, although it was apparent in the data that some students had not received secondary education which had adequately prepared them to become university students, a more significant finding was that unequal participation was exacerbated by foundational provision that was misaligned with the capabilities that students needed for academic success. As part of extended degree programmes, students identified compulsory foundational programmes that were taught outside their mainstream disciplines. Yet there was little evidence to suggest that students valued these courses, attended them regularly, or that the pedagogy and curricula enabled the academic development that the courses aimed

⁷² This could mean, for instance, contributing a robust qualitative strand to the current focus on learning analytics, which aims to use large data sets to track student progress through the higher education system.

to cultivate. There was also little evidence of skills transfer from these generic modules to students' mainstream courses.

Given the importance of academic development requirements for equal participation, it was also concerning to find that students were deliberately postponing developmental modules until their final year, or reporting that these programmes were a 'waste of time' because of perceived or genuine concerns about poor quality provision, poor teaching and teaching practices, a dumbed-down curriculum and a deficit approach to students. As discussed in the literature review, foundational programmes face immense pressure in articulating with the academic development required by students on extended degree programmes. This also reflects the resource and staffing constraints discussed at length in chapter 2, which suggests a potential waste of resources created by ineffective programme design. For these and other interrelated reasons, additive programmes 'seldom result in systemic change' and had a limited impact of student participation (Walton *et al.* 2015: 267; see Tinto 2005 for a similar argument).

In response to these limitations, I recommend that foundational support should be incorporated into departments and/or faculties and facilitated by staff members who are able to offer discipline-specific academic development (see Pym and Kapp 2013 for an example of how this model was successfully implemented within a specific university faculty). To prevent these programmes from decreasing motivation to learn, as was evident in Clarice's narrative, I would also recommend that the institutional focus should be on designing and implementing theoretically appropriate and discipline-specific programmes instead of offering fragmented, generic courses that fail to increase academic participation (Walton *et al.* 2015; Boughey & Niven 2012; Zepke 2013). It is important that programmes are redesigned using a rigorous and transformative approach aimed at 'restructuring the underlying generative framework' without 'creating stigmatized classes of vulnerable people perceived as beneficiaries of special largesse' (Fraser 2008: 82). This could mean investigating the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying pedagogical arrangements and curricula, particularly assumptions based on merit that downplay the complex cultural, racial, classed and gendered binaries embedded within knowledge structures.

Furthermore, the interpersonal comparisons in the data showed that the need to be integrated into a supportive yet challenging learning community was valued by all participants, including Clarice and Dante who did not face resource scarcity, who had supportive home and residence environments, and who had attended well-resourced schools. This is significant because it suggests that the structural gaps in pedagogy and institutional arrangements affected not only poor and/or first-generation students, but were likely to be experienced across a broader sample of the student body. This finding also confirmed the literature I reviewed in chapter two that established the need to extend foundational skills associated with for example, academic literacy, to most if not all undergraduates whose communicative proficiency is not a reflection of their ability to access and engage with complex, discipline-specific academic discourses.

Based on the research presented in this thesis, I have found that some remedial interventions are in danger of reproducing misrecognition and perpetuating a deficit approach to undergraduate students. The consequence of a marginal status projected onto students by foundational provision, combined with resource scarcity, had a profound effect on some students' ability to develop learning dispositions, to seek and expect challenge, to form a concept of themselves as valued members of the institution, or to give the individual the legitimacy to claim fair opportunities. In response to these limitations, I would argue against foundational provision models that separate first-generation students from the mainstream and would recommend instead that the institution considers alternative approaches to develop the academic capabilities that students need within mainstream provision, while ensuring that the level of challenge and the quality of provision is not diminished (see Pym and Kapp 2013 for an example of how this has worked in practice).

From a social justice perspective, it is indefensible that students who are vulnerable to drop out and other forms of marginalization do not have access to sustained, well-resourced, and good quality pedagogical arrangements on foundational and mainstream undergraduate programmes. Until the state increases the funding needed to ensure quality teaching and learning and foundational provision for more students (Bozzoli 2015), it is critical to ensure that existing resources in earmarked grants are used to fund and sustain foundational programmes that are aligned to the academic requirements of mainstream programmes, while being valued and utilized by students who are most vulnerable to academic exclusion.

An important future challenge would be to redesign interventions that provide the academic rigour, degree of engagement and social support that enable equal participation, while resisting the status injuries of remedial approaches that diminish freedom, autonomy, agency and critical reason. Guided by the principles of the capability approach, this is a challenge which I take into my future research projects.

9.3.2 Pedagogical arrangements in classrooms that enable participation

By the end of the data collection process, my assumptions about the deficit approach to teaching and learning had been confirmed by participant experiences, but the institutional context of this inequality had been expanded. It was evident that the banking system and the deficit approach were found not only in developmental modules but also across the mainstream curriculum. A recent special edition of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* summarizes this challenge as follows:

We would suggest that tertiary institutions have to consider not just the arrangements made to support students, but also to reflect on the institutional cultures and practices that compound the barriers that perpetuate patterns of unequal access to success. If they do not, interventions that provide only the financial means to access may inadvertently destroy the very bridges to belonging that they are designed to build (Walton et al. 2015: 267).

For this reason, it is necessary for pedagogy and curricula to distribute academic resources more fairly, while being sensitive to students' need to be recognized as valued members of the community. This would mean that institutional structures and pedagogical arrangements should be transformed in consultation with students who are disengaged and excluded.

Another practical implication is the need for more research that deepens our understanding of the complex factors that affect students' capability for equal participation (Walker 2012; see also Hart 2009; Tinto 2014b). At an institutional level, this would mean improving the quality and competence of academic staff by providing adequate funding for the university to employ a sufficient number of qualified lecturers across degree programmes (see UFS SRC Memorandum, 26 October 2015). It would also mean implementing pedagogical measures associated with academic success and excellence across the curriculum, such as lower student-staff ratios, tutorials for every module, seminars from the first-year level, and the

intensive development of critical academic literacies for all students, in particular academic writing embedded within disciplines across all years of a degree course. In addition, I also recommend more robust systems that monitor the quality of teaching and learning across the institution, which could mean strengthening the work of systemic quality initiatives such as efforts headed by the Council on Higher Education.

I must stress that the recommended interventions above will be difficult to achieve given the major financial constraints in the system, which is another reason why higher education institutions need a commitment to the stable and sustained forms of funding required to ensure quality education for the growing student body, as discussed earlier. Without these systemic interventions, the proliferation of experimental, additive and unsustained forms of teaching and learning will continue to be marginally effective (Walton *et al.* 2015; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015).

9.3.3 Equal opportunities for commuter students

As discussed earlier, we should be concerned by evidence from first-generation commuter students like Naledi who by their third year on campus had not accessed any opportunities for extracurricular capability development, peer affiliation, faculty mentorship, student association or other leadership programmes. With only around 2 500 students in residences (UFS Integrated Report 2014), and benefitting from the academic programmes and social support build into residence life, commuter students risk being disconnected from extracurricular activities. Therefore, another important policy intervention would be to ensure that commuter students in particular are not excluded from opportunities for capability development, as I discussed in section 9.3.2.

In practice this could mean creating sustainable pedagogical networks that connect students to support services. The university could ensure that critical affiliation with at least one supportive staff member or academic advisor is available to students who live off campus and who have fewer resources or time to participate in activities that foster the development of academic capabilities. It was evident in the data that even isolated instances of enabling interaction with a supportive lecturer, or a subject with which the student was critically engaged, mitigated some negative effects of discrimination and exclusion. Based on the literature in chapter two, and the findings in chapter seven, increasing access to qualified mentors could give more students the freedom to navigate systemic constraints, even while

structural conditions remains resistant to transformation (Tinto 2014b). However, keeping in mind the warnings against fragmentation and irrelevance to academic purpose (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015), I would propose that this form of affiliation is embedded within disciplinary spaces and ideally connected to learning, in order to prevent the proliferation of additive programmes that demand additional time and resources to which students, staff and departments do not have equal access. At the same time, these programmes would depend on the availability of qualified staff and funding, which reiterates the need for increased state funding to the institution.

9.4 Research question 3

How do pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enable the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation?

9.4.1 Introducing undergraduate research

As I discussed in previous chapters, this project was initially framed as participatory research, and later developed aspects of undergraduate research, which contributed to participants' capability development. Since research is expensive and time intensive, investing in more opportunities where students not only participate in but also benefit from the capability development in undergraduate research, could be an important way to bring the development of first-generation students to higher education's research agenda.

Based on the positive feedback from the digital narrative component of this research and the student-driven research project that developed in the second year, the university could consider cultivating more opportunities for undergraduate student research as a catalyst for the capability development that emerged in chapter seven. In light of the student data, involving more undergraduate students in rigorous, discipline-specific participatory research (Appadurai 2006) may have the potential to address the conflict between teaching and research so often expressed by academic staff (Mouton *et al.* 2013). Expanded freedom for inquiry-based, active and critical research also has the potential to cultivate the capabilities associated with engaged learning, as was evident in this project (see chapter 4). As the data in sections 4.9.6 and 8.5.3 illustrated, creating platforms for undergraduate research has the potential to respond to the constraints identified by first-generation students. This includes challenging the student-lecturer hierarchy using participatory collaboration and resisting the banking system as learning becomes more engaged. Furthermore, it could create a platform

where interdisciplinary academic capabilities can be developed, while also contributing to research output and capacity development which are strategic institutional priorities.

In practice, academic staff could identify talented yet vulnerable first-generation students who could be affiliated with supportive lecturers and postgraduate students in discipline-specific, participatory research projects. Such initiatives could bring together the capability development of students with the creation of learning communities that increase the status, belonging and learning disposition of undergraduate students. These projects would have to be carefully structured and planned, and sufficiently funded. It would also be important to align these projects with research output requirements so that researchers and/or lecturers involved are able to align their involvement in such projects with the demand for research output, which is so pronounced in the neoliberal university context globally.

9.4.2 Participatory platforms for decision-making

It is critical to expand the quality and sustainability of platforms that recognize, consult and include undergraduate students as valued members of the institution. In my findings, it was evident that providing these platforms is part of structural transformation while also increasing individual autonomy, ownership and the incentive to engage with knowledge. As such, I recommend creating sustainable participatory platforms for students to participate in decision-making. This was a freedom that participants valued but that was frequently inaccessible due to lack of genuine opportunities, ignorance or fear of victimization (Marginson 2011; O'Halloran 2015). Given the pedagogical structure of large classrooms and the subsequent distance between lecturers and students, the data pointed to a need for sustained dialogical spaces where collaborative interaction is allowed to flourish between students and staff.

As a response to misframing first-generation students and undergraduate students more broadly, students should have the opportunity to cultivate the capabilities they need to resist structural injustice using practical reason and critical literacy, as I discussed in chapter eight. Democratic institutions cannot thrive under conditions where vulnerable members are silenced because they do not have the confidence to contribute to public debates (Macfarlane 2012: 729; Walker & McLean 2013). This means that platforms in which access to knowledge could increase confidence to contribute should be a critical priority.

This recommendation builds on Sen's idea of development as freedom, not as unbridled critique⁷³, but an evidence-based and socially embedded engagement that takes divergent student voices seriously. For staff and management structures, this would mean challenging an anti-student rhetoric and negativity about student complaints or activism. To enable students requires creating opportunities to develop reasoned and well-informed critique so that they are prepared for engagement in public fora and so that important demands are not compromised by the absence of critical information. Using the human development value of participatory democracy, this would mean institutional platforms that amplify student voice in a way that enables a reasoned, articulate voice, while taking seriously the concerns and inequalities raised by these protests.

There is also evidence that although students recognized the constraining conditions in which they were being taught, their resistance to these arrangements was compromised by a corrosive cluster of personal and structural limitations. As a policy response, it is recommended that the institution should include first-generation students in decision-making processes to ensure that these problems are addressed in a participatory way. For instance, students in this project made pertinent suggestions for improving pedagogical conditions, which are potentially valuable to staff and policymakers who are addressing unequal participation.

Finally, this capability would also respond to evidence that students were misinformed about their rights and did not know how to report discriminatory behaviour. The participants expressed many concerns about the quality of teaching and learning, their relationships with lecturers, the conditions at residence, a lack of resources, and unequal access to extracurricular opportunities. Yet in some cases student complaints were restricted to the private realm and left unresolved. In my analysis, a long-term response to the issues raised by

⁷³ Within the context of the #RhodesMustFall protests and the more recent #FeesMustFall protests across campuses in South Africa, this requires taking into account the effects of status injury and the perceptions that students draw from lecturers' dismissive or discriminatory treatment (Fraser 2013; Tinto 2014b). Yet even though these protests were platforms for students to articulate their exclusion, aspects of these processes were not participatory as defined by the principles of deliberative democracy. Instead, students have often been positioned against management and the state with much hostility and anti-student rhetoric from members of staff and privileged students (Kadali 2015; O'Halloran 2015; Mbembe 2015). While the urgency and importance of protests cannot be disputed as an important function of student activism, I would also recommend the creation of sustained participatory platforms where issues of exclusion are addressed while challenging the misrecognition of students.

the participants highlights the importance of consulting and collaborating with undergraduate students in the design of pedagogical, curricular and other institutional interventions that influence the way students learn and participate in campus life.

9.5 Research question 4

How could student experiences be used as evidence to inform the design of capability praxis for equal participation?

The recommendation in response to question four has been discussed in detail as the capability-informed praxis in chapter eight. To briefly recap, I argued that the capability development associated with this praxis ought to be prioritised within pedagogy and curricula. In practice, pedagogical practices, curricula and assessment could be designed using the capabilities as broad normative guidelines⁷⁴. The design of this praxis has been unique in that I was able to involve students in the research process as part of the longitudinal research. Using the undergraduate research project that evolved from this interaction, it was valuable to consult the participant-researchers on the capabilities and functionings that should be incorporated into pedagogy, while also conducting reflective conversations about these decisions. This process moved between student data, research participation, relevant literature and theory, which produced a list that not only reflected student voice but also confirmed the most recent research findings related to student participation, summarized below:

1. Practical reason
2. Critical literacies
3. Student research
4. Deliberative participation
5. Critical affiliation
6. Values for the public good

9.6 Methodological challenges and reflections

In the next section, I outline some limitations of my study, with particular reference to what the research was unable to achieve due to logistical or theoretical constraints. I also briefly

⁷⁴ See Wood and Deprez & Deprez 2012; 2015; Crosbie 2012, 2013 for examples of capability-informed pedagogy.

discuss significant lessons that have emerged from this research and the contribution that has been made to the field of higher education studies. Finally, I identify possibilities for future research.

9.6.1 The promise and limitations of participatory methods

Using participatory research methods was both rewarding and challenging. On the one hand, I was aware of the power imbalance in working with undergraduate students who viewed me as an authority figure (Soudien 2008). In this sense, it was frustrating for me to see how some participants uncritically accepted my authority and offered tentative and at times apologetic critique of conditions that reflected discriminatory practices or serious institutional failures. Moreover, it was also sobering to be reminded throughout the research how beliefs about race, intelligence, gender, and socioeconomic class have permeated students' discourse and in some cases were reflected in diminished aspirations and forms of self-exclusion. There is much work that remains to be done in higher education if institutions are to be conducive not only to academic success, but enabling to students who continue to experience discrimination based on racialized, gendered, class-based and other forms of marginalization. In addition, the research required critical and in-depth responses, which was at times constrained by students' lack of confidence, language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. This was however a barrier that we were able to mediate over time as relationships of trust and mutual understanding developed, which was another reason why the longitudinal approach was valuable.

Despite these limitations, using participatory research also offered invaluable insight into student experiences that deepened over time. These platforms created opportunities to challenge and to some extent reconstruct hierarchical research and pedagogical relationships. Although the digital narrative process is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth mentioning that the production process enabled significant pedagogical and transformative opportunities as a result of the longitudinal research process. While being a time intensive process, the biographical insights and analysis in chapter five would not have been possible without the 'thick description' of experiences provided by the digital narratives (Kress 2011).

From a capability perspective, individual voice can be denied to vulnerable people when institutions fail to create platforms for all actors to contribute to conversations about values,

freedoms and agency. Since the capability approach is interested in lives that people have reason to value, a relational, voice-based method offered a particularly fertile way to investigate individual experiences. Focusing on student voice also enabled detailed accounts of structural injustice. This meant that while some participants attributed failure to their own deficits and failures, the narratives then revealed how structural arrangements created an environment that made success difficult or almost impossible.

The small number of research participants was both a limitation and an advantage. The rich data that emerged from a close engagement with the participants suggests the need for mixed methods and larger qualitative studies that track the experiences of first-generation students (Walton *et al.* 2015; Kahu 2013). Although I do not claim that the experiences of these eight participants reflect the equality of participation of all other first-generation students, it was evident from the divergent literatures in higher education research that many students face even more severe exclusion, while others manage to participate and benefit from academic resources despite structural inequality. It is my contention that institutional commitment to rigorous qualitative research across a more representative first-generation student cohort could contribute towards improved, effective and socially just programmes that enable success for vulnerable university students (Siry & Zawatski 2011; Wilson-Strydom 2015a).

A final limitation was that the resource inequality that constrained students' freedom to participate also sometimes made it difficult for students to participate in the research. Although participants were keen to contribute to participatory processes, the structural constraints that limited their freedom to participate in learning also compromised their freedom to participate in the research. Even though participatory research holds the potential to involve students in the process of resisting injustice, structural limitations prevented students from gaining equal entry into all aspects of the research (Crocker 2008: 342-344 in Kosko 2013: 310). For instance, due to transport constraints, attending meetings was not always possible, while not having access to the Internet or laptops sometimes made the production process more complicated.

9.6.2 Equal participation and critical social theory

As I alluded to in the conceptual framework, there were some epistemological limitations to working within higher education research, where producing empirical evidence for policy and

engaging with critical social theory were not necessarily compatible research goals. I have encountered significant conflict between two equally important goals: firstly, the urgent logistical challenges facing first-generation students, such as access to basic resources and successful progression through the system, and then secondly, the need to transform pedagogy and institutional cultures, which inhibits deep-seated systemic transformation of institutional cultures and practices (Ahmed 2012).

In some sense, this trade-off reflects the balance between efficiency and equity (Akoojee & Nkomo 2007) in which pragmatically ensuring that students have a chance of academic success compromises the development of rigorous critical pedagogy, affiliation between lecturers and students, deep engagement with knowledge at an undergraduate level, mainstreaming academic excellence across the curriculum, and extracurricular capability development opportunities for all students. Yet at the conclusion of this research, I am convinced that these capabilities cannot be separated from academic engagement and success. Serendipitous, marginal and 'dumbed-down' investment in students who are already vulnerable to disengagement and drop out do not reflect institutional commitment to equality of opportunity (Tinto 2005). It is my hope that a greater investment in and commitment to pedagogical quality, aligned with institutional transformation, would make these capabilities available to more undergraduate students.

Finally, some research on student participation has occurred in 'disciplinary silos', which is why the interdisciplinarity of the capability approach has been useful in conducting research that draws on diverse academic theories and practice (Tinto 2014b; see also Robeyns 2005). Having said this, I also take cognisance of the specificity of the case study presented in this research, in which particular institutional and disciplinary limitations also played a role in defining the parameters of available theory and practice.

9.7 Research contributions and future research

I now turn to a number of contributions made by this research. Firstly, the study has brought the importance of academic participation into conversation with the need for redistributive policies and transformed pedagogical practices. This convergence reiterates how resource security and equal participation cannot be separated, which was an under-researched area identified in the literature review.

Secondly, I have been able to use the findings to make the argument that pedagogical transformation and academic success are goals that should be pursued simultaneously. In essence, this contribution highlights the importance of transforming systemic injustice while ensuring academic challenge for vulnerable students. As such, I have sought to contribute a narrative-based approach that has emphasized the importance of incorporating student resources and capabilities into pedagogy, while being reflexive about what these capabilities ought to look like in transformed institutions. Future research is planned to apply the capability praxis to discipline-specific contexts in order to establish its potential for expanding participation.

Furthermore, the research has contributed a normative response to education as the practice of freedom within a context that is increasingly under pressure to adopt technocratic 'solutions' to unequal participation. Instead of increasing technical interventions, this research however applied an agency- and freedom-focused view of undergraduates as a pathway to expanded participation, which means finding ways to develop student capabilities without diminishing autonomy, choice and freedom within complex structural arrangements. An emphasis on pedagogical freedom also informs my future research projects in which I intend to bring Sen's principles of deliberative democracy to the design of participatory student research projects (Sen 2009). Connected to this contribution and future research focus is the argument that research and undergraduate teaching should not be separated but should be brought together to expand opportunities for equal participation and engaged research.

Finally, this research has foregrounded student voice not only to identify problems but to find solutions to the complex problem of unequal participation. Instead of including student voices as qualitative data in policy findings, this research has attempted to involve students in the process of pedagogical and institutional transformation. There is relatively little evidence of approaches that include undergraduate students as researchers, and overall, most solutions are developed by experts, tested on students and then improved in various ways, without a process of deliberative consultation, which was central in this study.

9.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is convincing evidence from this research that unjust systemic arrangements exclude many students while offering a thin version of participation to others. For the student who travels from accommodation far from campus, to a crowded classroom, to a library desk and then home again, the university is less likely to offer fair opportunities to develop critical academic capabilities. For many students, university brings much hardship and confusion, loneliness and disappointment, fear of failure and misrecognition of potential.

Working with policymakers, staff and students, these are the structural conditions that I hope my research will address. In future research, it is my aim to implement the praxis within higher education, to determine whether a capability-informed pedagogy could enable more students to achieve academic success. I am fortunate to have access to funding that enabled a longitudinal study, where I am tracking the experiences of the participants beyond the scope of the findings presented in this thesis. It is also my hope that given the institution's ethical commitment to vulnerable students that future policy and pedagogy might enable more of its undergraduate students to flourish as equal and valued members of the academic community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of individual interviews and focus groups

	<i>Participants pseudonym</i>	<i>Abbreviation for in-text reference</i>	<i>Interview date</i>
1	Aziza	INT 1	04 Sept '13
		INT 2	15 Nov '13
2	Clarice	INT 1	07 Aug '13
		INT 2	18 Sept '13
		INT 3	11 Nov '13
3	Condorrera	INT 1	07 Aug '13
		INT 2	04 Sept '13
4	Dante⁷⁵	INT 1	13 Aug '13
5	Kea	INT 1	08 Aug '13
		INT 2	15 Nov '13
6	Naledi	INT 1	06 Aug '13
		INT 2	19 Sept '13
		INT 3	20 Nov '13
7	Techniques	INT 1	13 Aug '13
		INT 2	18 Sept '13
		INT 3	19 Nov '13

⁷⁵ This participant was not available at the time of the second round of interviews.

	<i>Participants pseudonym</i>	<i>Abbreviation for in-text reference</i>	<i>Interview date</i>
8	Thuli	INT 1	08 Aug '13
		INT 2	19 Sept '13
		INT 3	19 Nov '13
	<i>Focus groups 2013/2014</i>	<i>Abbreviation for in-text quotes</i>	<i>Date</i>
		FG 1	02 Aug '13
		FG 2	06 Sept '13
		FG 3	13 April '14
		FG 4	30 May '14
		FG 5	22 Aug '14

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

Interview 1: Conversion factors at school, home and community	
<i>Part 1</i>	<i>Tell me about your time at school.</i>
	Tell me about your teachers and/or peers.
	What did you enjoying learning about at school?
	What did you enjoy and/or find challenging at school?
	What were some defining moments for you at school?
<i>Part 2</i>	<i>Tell me about your family and the community where you live.</i>
	Has anyone in your family studied before?
<i>Part 3</i>	<i>When did you know you wanted to go to university?</i>
	What did you do after matric?
	How did you come to choose your degree programme at university?

Interview schedule 2: Conversion factors in higher education	
Part 1 Intro	Were there any challenges in making the transition from school to university? OR What makes university different from high school?
Part 2 Agency	What personal strengths and qualities have helped you adjust to university life?
Part 3 Knowledge and pedagogy	What have you learned so far at university?
	OR Tell me about your favourite course/module.
	How have you experienced lecturers and/or tutors?
Part 3 Academic support	Has anything been a barrier/obstacle to your success at university?
	Where have you accessed social/academic support for the problem you just described?
	Have you experienced discrimination?
Part 4	What has it been like learning in English?

Language and literacy	
	How have you adjusted to academic language?
Part 5 Aspirations	What do you want to do after university?
	How do you plan to reach these goals?
Part 6 Digital narrative	What do you want the focus of your digital narrative to be?

Appendix 3: Participation on a research project

Clarice	Techniques	Aziza	Kea	Naledi
<p>Changed my thinking to think outside the box</p> <p>Approach to assignments changed</p> <p>Participating more in class</p> <p>Perception about education has changed</p> <p>More driven and confident about life goals</p>	<p>Digital narrative has helped me become a better person</p> <p>Focusing on education as a key aspect of success</p> <p>Education is more than just getting information</p> <p>Education is about inspiring others to become better people</p> <p>This project has taught me to become open-minded to have opinions about issues that you have in daily life</p> <p>I don't just see education as a paper thing; it's about doing something positive in society</p> <p>New methods of studying: preparation for tests and examinations, acquired the skill to do</p>	<p>Taught me that I am a strong intelligent young woman with potential</p> <p>Importance of team work and people who believe in you</p> <p>Importance of being at UFS</p> <p>Learning to think critically with all modules</p> <p>Writing at an academic level/research</p> <p>Bringing change to society using own experiences</p> <p>Use technology to change the way we do marketing</p> <p>Improving the lives of family social outreach projects – high school career development centre</p> <p>Using education as a tool</p>	<p>Improved my confidence</p> <p>Enhanced and improved the way I communicated with people</p> <p>I gained the skill of using technology in other modules</p> <p>Changed my method of studying – independent note-taking in lectures/ developed</p> <p>Become empowered – became motivated to see that the project is about your struggle to success, to become driven to success</p> <p>Dreams and goals – aspiring to become a businesswoman and motivational speaker</p>	<p>Shifting perception of role of higher education from 'selfish' reasons for employment to benefit other people</p> <p>Ideas around getting the degree changed:</p> <p>Improving quality of education – different perspective – more enthusiastic - not just signing the register – participating in class</p> <p>Less about me – more about the collective – driven to change my surroundings</p> <p>To contribute towards my community for a better South Africa</p>

	<p>independent research</p> <p>Thankful for the research: changing courses – changed my degree because of the project</p> <p>Dreams and hopes: I see myself as a leader, to inspire other people</p> <p>Role of institutions: lecturer-student relationships – research has showed us that we can achieve more academically when you have a mentor in your life</p>	<p>Dreams for the future based on higher education</p>		
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Appendix 4: Letter of consent



Supervisor: Prof M. Walker

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PhD student: Talita ML Calitz

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Date: 15 July 2013

Dear Participant

I would like to invite you to take part in this research project. The title of my study is:

‘Applying capabilities to academic literacy at a South African university: the potential of digital narratives’⁷⁶

What is my study about exactly?

This study is about undergraduate student experiences of higher education at the University of the Free State. Participants in the study will create a digital narrative (short video) that tells the story of important moments in their educational journey.

Why have I invited you to participate in my study?

I would like you to be a participant in this research because you are an undergraduate university student, which means that you could contribute valuable information about your experiences at university, including the success you experience and the challenges you face at university.

What is the purpose of this study?

⁷⁶ The title was subsequently amended to shift the focus to conversion factors and to change the primary methodological focus on digital narratives.

The reason I am doing this study is to collect undergraduate student narratives [stories] which tell me and the university more about the unique personal resources that help university students succeed, as well as the challenges that students face at university.

Are there any risks if you participate in this study?

By being a participant in this study, you will be expected to share information about your experiences at university, and contribute some time and energy to participate in the research. In order to protect you from any risks involved, all information that you choose to share will be treated confidentially. This means that your real name will not be used, and I will remove any information which could identify your contributions, especially if the research is published.

How will you benefit from participating in this study?

I am sure you will benefit from this study because you will have the opportunity to learn new skills as you work with digital multimedia tools to create your digital story. This will also give you an opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge about your own educational journey.

Your participation is voluntary

While I would greatly appreciate your participation in this important study and the valuable contribution you can make, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part in this study. If you do choose to take part, and an issue arises which makes you uncomfortable, you may at any time stop your participation with no further repercussions.

Who to contact in case of a problem:

If you experience any discomfort or unhappiness with the way the research is being conducted, please feel free to contact me directly to discuss it, and also note that you are free to contact my study supervisor Prof Melanie Walker (her contact details are indicated above).

Should any difficult personal issues arise during the course of this research, I will endeavour to see that a qualified expert is contacted and able to assist you.

Warm regards,

Ms Talita M.L. Calitz

Appendix 5: Producing codes_ January 2014

Domain 1: community/family	Conversion factor	Resource	Aspirational trajectory	Agency and well-being
Adequate finances for registration and tuition				
Adequate finances for accommodation, textbooks, clothes, food and transport				
Family/peer support in preparation for university				
Family support of degree choice				
Development of confidence and self-esteem				
Bodily safety and integrity in the community				
Levels of violence and crime in the community				
Empathy for other lives				
Attitude towards race, gender, class, sexuality				
Gender: Expectations of family care (young children/elderly relatives)				
Supportive social relationships				
Literacy resources at home/community library				
Reading modelled by family and peers				
Relationships with siblings				
Siblings' educational opportunities				
Unemployment at home				
Community attitudes around higher education and employment				
Access to basic resources at home				
Dependent extended family members (disability, illness, unemployment)				

Media sources/access to technology and the Internet at home				
Transport and access to urban centres around the community				
Race: identity work around racial categories in South African context				
Impact of community environment on aspirations				
Loss of parents/guardians				
Mental health of the individual/family				
Physical health of the individual/family				
Impact of media content				
Access to social networking				
Parents' level of education				
Use of language and mother tongue at home				
Domain 2: primary and secondary schools	Capability obstacle	Capability input	Aspiration	Agency
Information to make subject choices at secondary school				
Career guidance at school				
Development of key interests and talents while at school				
Freedom to choose degree				
Freedom to choose university				
Language proficiency				
Subject knowledge				
Development of maths literacy				
Development of Information literacy				
Role of teachers in transmitting content knowledge				
Peer relationships (positive and negative)				
Opportunities for sport, extramural activities after school				

Role of teachers in confidence and self-esteem				
Quality of subject content				
Assistance with subject combination choice for university				
Gender: safety at school				
Opposite/same sex romantic experiences while at school				
Community perceptions of value of school				
Gang activity and violence at school				
Role of religion at school				
Relationships between teachers, management and students				
Basic resources at school: sanitation, meals, desks, textbooks				
Status of school and impact on individual confidence				
Reading culture at school				
Access to library at school				
Relationship with the community (parent's involvement)				
Development of critical thinking				
Role of teacher pedagogical practices				
Domain 3: Higher education	Capability obstacle/ conversion factors	Capability resource/ conversion	Aspirational trajectory	Agency
Recognition of student epistemology				
Lecturers' pedagogical practices				
Complexity of theory				
Emotional tone of the classroom				
Relationships between students and lecturers				
Relationship between students				

Access to textbooks				
Access to the Internet				
Level of reading proficiency				
Level of writing proficiency				
Motivation to pursue the subject				
Tutorial support				
Confidence to ask questions in class				
Access to range of alternative sources				
Development of critical thinking				
Recognition of own experience and voice in the classroom				
Quality of content knowledge				
Lecturer content knowledge				
Transparency of assessment practices				
Coherence between different modules				
Participatory freedom				
Opportunities for social connection				
Student leadership				
Dialogue around issues on campus				

Appendix 6: Data coding using the CA_May 2014

Arrangements which enable or constrain access to higher education	Opportunities for functionings (well-being freedom)	Achieved functionings (well-being achievement)	Conversion factors: positive Positive factors that enable the student to convert resources and opportunities into functionings	Conversion factors: negative Negative factors that constrain the student's conversion of resources and opportunities into functionings	Agency Which functionings support student agency? How do students choose and make independent decisions? Which conditions enable students to position themselves as agentic participants in their own learning in pedagogical spaces?
<u>Sociocultural environment</u> Home	<u>Sociocultural environment</u> School	<u>Pedagogical arrangements</u>	<u>Knowledge as capability</u>	<u>Assessment practices</u>	<u>Access to resources</u>

Appendix 7: Coding for conversion factors_Jan 2015

Original code(s)		Original code(s)		Original code(s)	
Conversion factors (positive)	Conversion factors (negative)	Agency (positive)	Agency (negative)	Well-being freedom	Well-being achievement
New code(s)		New codes		New code(s)	
Structural intersectionality		Agency		Un/freedom Well-being	
Level of analysis: <i>descriptive analytic</i>		Level of analysis: <i>critical theoretical</i>		Level of analysis: <i>critical theoretical</i>	
Social/material constructs: recognition (level 1) Individual and collective					
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education 2. Aspirations 3. Language 4. Knowledge 5. Identity 		Agency as resistance/dissent Agency as compliance/assimilation Agency as reproduction Agency as adaptive preference Agency as subversion Agency as creative production Agency as redistribution Agency as independent action and decision-making		Unfreedom (Flores-Crespo) Oppression (Freire) <i>What do structural intersectionality and agency tell us about the social/institutional/pedagogical arrangements – do they enable or constrain?</i> <i>What functionings and capabilities do students have – what are they able to be and do?</i>	

Appendix 8: CD-ROM with three sample digital narratives

Digital narrative	Participant	Date	
1	Clarice	18 Nov 2013	This narrative was included to illustrate the supportive role played by a student's family, and to highlight the function of digital narrative methods in enabling a reflexive approach to education.
2	Kea	11 Nov 2013	Kea's narrative foregrounded the challenges faced by a first-generation student who must also negotiate poverty, and some factors that enabled participation.
3	Naledi	15 Nov 2013	I selected Naledi's narrative to illustrate how school of origin played a crucial role in her opportunity to participate, and how limited resources and opportunities must be taken into account to enable more students to make the transition to higher education.