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CRHED Policy Brief
Transitions and Trajectories

University access and success: Capabilities, diversity and social justice

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About this brief

This research brief summarises a research project conducted between 2009 and 2014 at the University of the Free State (UFS) (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The brief is intended to be of use to university managers, leaders, scholars and lecturers as well as policy makers in the South African higher education (HE) sector by providing new insights into the complex terrain of university access and success. It further presents recommendations for universities to work towards social justice in the specific context of access and the transition to university.

Context

South African HE is plagued by the inequalities of the past, particularly with respect to throughput and completion (CHE, 2012). Given the race, class, and gender dimensions of inequalities, this state of affairs should be seen as an issue of social injustice requiring urgent attention, particularly since the value of higher education for both the individual and society is increasingly significant in the global knowledge economy. Indeed, the recent White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (2013) as well as the National Development Plan (2011) both recognise the centrality of HE for the country's future and the need to build an inclusive, diverse sector. Further, achieving social justice in education is positioned as a central policy goal.

Social justice

There are many different theories of social justice, each with different implications for what should be done. In this research, the Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides the theoretical grounding. The approach is the foundation on which the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Reports (HDRs) are based (http://hdr.undp.org). Human development places people at the centre of development interventions and argues that rather than economic growth as the main aim of development, we should instead strive to improve people's well-being and their

opportunities to live a life that they value. Economic growth is only a means for improving well-being, not the ends of development. South Africa currently ranks 118th (medium human development) out of the 187 countries included in the HDR, so investments in education (and higher education) are crucial.

In his initial formulation of the capability approach, Sen (1980) framed the central question of development to be **'equality of what?**' In the HE sector we have generally sought to achieve equality of access/participation and output (completion) in terms of numbers. When making assessments of equality we usually turn to statistics that compare absolute and proportional access and completion rates for different groups of young people of university age. While this is part of the picture, this research brief shows that a more expansive answer to the question of 'equality of what?' in the domain of access and success is needed. Rethinking our answer to this question potentially points in new directions for interventions that seek to build a more equal national higher education sector.

Access and success

Despite a wealth of research, nationally and internationally, on widening access, inequality persists.

We thus need to ask new questions in order to advance new solutions. This is what this study sought to do, by:

(1) Researching *both* the schooling and the university ends of the transition (which is seldom done on studies of access);
(2) Rethinking what it means to be ready for university level study; and
(3) Considering a wider conception of what equality means in the access domain.

A starting point for doing this is to better understand – and begin to apply – research that has shown university readiness to be multi-dimensional (for example see the work of Conley 2003, 2005, 2008). A multi-dimensional conception of university readiness is in contrast to the dominant ways of measuring readiness which focus on school performance (grades) and admissions tests (such as the National Benchmark Tests). Although there are some exceptions, most South African universities – and many universities globally – rely on these measures of prior academic achievement (merit) to assess readiness and to make decisions about who should be admitted and which programmes are most suitable. Given the persistent inequalities in access and completion, this approach appears to be insufficient.

Rather, this research highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional understanding of what a student needs to be able to do and to be (their capabilities) in order to successfully transition to university.

Methodology

The study on which this research brief draws was conducted between 2009 and 2014 with high school learners and first-year university students in the Free State province. It made use of mixed methods (both quantitative and qualitative research) as summarised in Table 1. The research participants represented different race, gender and socio-economic status groupings. The data collection methods included: a quantitative survey, individual interviews, focus groups, visual methods, and written reflections.

Table 1: Summary of empirical data

Level of Study	Sample	Date	Type of data
Schooling	2816 grade 10, 11 and 12 learners (sampled from 20 feeder schools)	2009	Quantitative survey
	33 grade 11 and 12 learners who participated in a university readiness programme during June/July school holidays	2010	Qualitative
University	128 first-year students	2009	Qualitative
	142 first-year students	2010	Qualitative
	14 lecturers teaching first-year students	2010	Qualitative
	23 first-year social work students	2014	Qualitative and quantitative

Key findings

Transition to university experiences

Students entering university – regardless of their home or schooling background – **reported feeling confused, lost and scared.** This is not unexpected since students are entering a new environment and a new stage of life. What was unexpected, was **the impact that this fear had on students' confidence to learn**; and so, on their chances of success in the first year. Analysis of the data showed that feelings of being scared and confused were expressed in terms of the physical landscape of the university (getting lost), as well as how the university system works. This has **implications for orientation**

programmes and highlights the importance of including **academic and contextual knowledge** as part of the process. The support networks provided for students living in university accommodation (residence), compared to commuter students was notable. Given the current shortages of student accommodation at campuses across the country, finding ways to provide meaningful support networks to students living off campus is critical. Despite the supportive role of university residences, students also reported being exhausted and distracted from their academic work in the crucial first few weeks at university by compulsory residence activities.

The challenges of making the complex transition into university were also evident in the **low levels of confidence and competence students reported in their use of the language of instruction.** For many students, university is the first time that no teaching takes place in their home language. Students commonly described how at school their teachers would explain difficult concepts in Sesotho, even though the formal language of learning was English. At school, students could also ask questions in Sesotho and so, for many, needing to speak in English, means that students do not have a voice in the university classroom (especially in the first-year). Similar issues of **competence and confidence in the use of computers** were also noted. While most young people have accessed the internet using their cell phones, many have not used a computer before.

The data also pointed to the stress that students describe when faced by **financial difficulties** at the start of the first-year and at fee paying cut-off dates. The challenges of student financing are urgent. This is even more so the case for students in their first-year who as yet still need to learn how to negotiate financial requirements of university, as well as discover where assistance might be sought.

Diversity and social context

The participants in the study included young people from the range of schooling contexts we see in the country – from extremely poorly resourced rural/township schools to some of the best resourced ex-model C and independent schools. The participants represented different genders, several different home languages, and schooling in English, Afrikaans and parallel medium of instruction. It was thus possible to explore the role of diversity and social context with respect to issues of access and success.

At the personal level, young people, regardless of their backgrounds, who had developed **confidence in their ability to learn**, were better placed on entering university.

School context and culture matters greatly. The data showed that learners attending Afrikaans high schools and township schools had fewer opportunities to meaningfully engage with diverse peers (particularly in terms of race, socio-economic context, and religious beliefs). Thus, for many of these students, they are confronted with diversity for the first time when they enter university. Challenges within schools were also evident at the level of knowledge and ideas. In some schools, learners reported much less engagement with diverse ideas, complex problems and learning to debate and respect differences of opinion. These skills are essential at university level, and students who have had little opportunity to engage with different or new ideas and ways of thinking at school are at a disadvantage when they enter university.

Teacher quality was also critical, and many students reported absent or poorly qualified teachers. Absent teachers had contradictory influences on students – for some, this meant that they had not covered the required content while at high school and so faced major challenges with their university subjects. For others, absent teachers forced learners to become independent and to take responsibility for their own learning, which some students reported had helped them adapt to university.

Major differences in the **quality of subject choice advice, and freedom to choose one's own school subjects,** was evident across the different schools in the study. High school learners report relatively low levels of discussion with their teachers about applying to university and what it means to study at university. In many cases little career advice is available, and learners must turn to hearsay regarding choice of university, funding options and study paths. Both learners and students also described how **university marketing teams**, when they visit schools (poorer and remote schools were sometimes overlooked) focus on promoting the university from which they come and **provide little substantive information** about how universities work and what learners need to know about university level study, how to select courses, how to apply, how to seek funding and so on.

In addition, **home and community context also influence university readiness**. Young people from poorer socio-economic contexts spent much larger amounts of time travelling to and from school, doing household chores and caring for family members than those from wealthy contexts. This

has implications for time available for learning, as well as involvement in enrichment activities such as sport, cultural activities, and volunteer work, all of which help with preparation for university. Universities need to understand the social (home and community) and schooling contexts from which their students come in order to **respect and recognise the diversity of experiences that students bring to university** – some of which enhance their chances of success and others that act as hindrances.

Rethinking university readiness

The empirical data collected from both high school learners and first-year university students highlighted the importance of **expanding our notions of what it means to be ready for university**. The areas in which university students appeared to be least 'ready' were those of academic behaviours (such as study skills, time management, self-discipline) needed for successful study, and university knowledge (understanding how the formal and informal university systems and rules work). Readiness gaps with respect to competence and confidence in the language of instruction, academic content and cognitive skills (such as critical thinking) were also noted by students.

Capabilities for university readiness

One of the key outcomes of this study was the formulation and verification of a set of 7 capabilities for university readiness. As expanded on in the recommendations below, universities need to find ways of working together with feeder schools to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to develop these capabilities during their last few years at high school and during the first-year at university. It is not sufficient to assume that students who meet admissions criteria for university (even where this means placement into extended or bridging programmes) are ready for university. Conley (2008) calls this the **gap between *eligibility* and *readiness*** – and this study shows that this gap needs serious attention.

Table 2: Capabilities for university readiness

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

In sum, when policy makers, university leaders, managers, researchers and lecturers ask the question of 'equality of what' with respect to university access and success – our answer should be **equality of capabilities for university readiness**, and not just numerical measures of equal participation.

Recommendations

Although the study highlighted the complexity of the transition to university, particularly when approached from a social justice perspective, the data also pointed to specific points of intervention that are mostly likely to improve access and success. These are summarised below.

What could universities do differently?

(1) Embrace a comprehensive understanding of access and university readiness, which should infuse the ways in which universities work with their students (administratively, academically, and outside of the curriculum).
(2) Adopt educationally intentional approaches to 'marketing' at schools where the focus is less on promoting the given the university and more on raising awareness among school learners and teachers about capabilities for university readiness.
(3) Ensure that adequate academic advice is provided to guide new students when making enrolment decisions, selection of courses, and to assist students to make sense of the formal and informal university systems and rules.
(4) Assist first-year students to understand the complexity of university readiness, and to see that they are not alone when feeling confused, lost or scared.
(5) Integrate across the curriculum opportunities to learn the required academic behaviours and dispositions, including language competence and confidence.

Universities need to adapt and tailor these recommendations to their specific context and that of their feeder schools. **Ultimately, facilitating the transition to university requires long term, contextually meaningful partnerships between universities and feeder schools.**

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