

THE *MIRATHO* RESEARCH PROJECT 2016-2021 OVERVIEW

Why Miratho?

Miratho are informal bridges constructed by communities during times of floods to get from one village to another, or to get to school. This TshiVenda word symbolises the determination to access education and also, working with others to succeed. When communities build miratho, opportunities are created for students to access education opportunities.

Overview

Our overarching concern was with contributing to a transformed and transformative way of thinking about student trajectories into, through and out of higher education. Over four years (2016-2020) the project team of Melanie Walker (UFS), Monica McLean (Nottingham), Mikateko Mathebula (UFS) and Patience Mukwambo (UFS) investigated how intersecting and complex biographical, socio-economic, policy, and educational factors enable or inhibit pathways for rural and township youth from low-income households to get in, get on, and get out of higher education. We were interested in their 'learning outcomes', their multi-dimensional opportunities to achieve, and the contextual conditions of possibility and constraint.

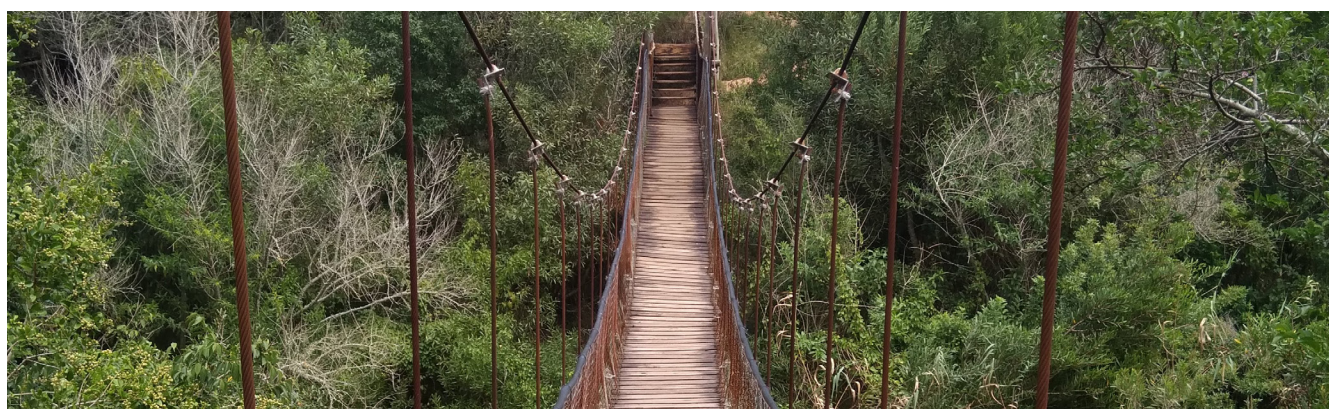
We asked how low-income youth from rural and townships schools access, participate in, and succeed in higher education, and then move into work. What contextual dimensions of economic, policy, social, and educational conditions enable or inhibit their access, participation, and success? We used our data to produce a higher education matrix to debate, develop, and evaluate higher education transformations in capability terms.

We asked how a capabilitarian analysis problematises opportunities, obstacles and outcomes and advances our understanding of what is needed for justice?

Also, how can we understand the project as a contribution to decolonial methods, practices and thinking?

Data

Our data comprised: 1) four waves of life history data collected between 2017 and 2020 (65 students in year one, 63 in year two, 60 in year 3 and 58 in year 4); 2) workshops on identity and imagined futures; 3) photovoice project: 19 photobooks and one common photobook, with data comprising training workshops, field notes, river of life drawings, interviews, a UFS colloquium, and two short videos); 4) pilot survey among Miratho students and a revised survey at one university; 5) secondary data sets.



2018, Carmen Martinez Vargas

Theoretical framing

We framed the project as a contribution to southern and Africa-centred scholarship and decolonial methods which re-centre Africa and human dignity, adapting Amartya Sen's capability approach's framework of key concepts: capabilities, functionings, context and conversion factors, poverty and agency to investigate opportunities and obstacles to achieved student outcomes.

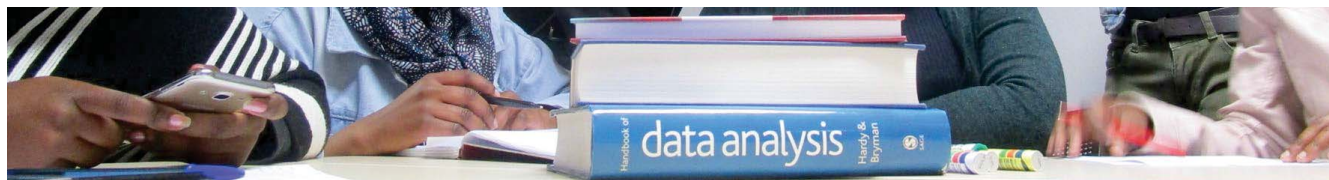
The approach allowed us both to give attention to student voices about their education and lives and to consider the conversion factors which shaped aspirations and success. We found that higher education offered a space in which we could identify how student agency was mobilised and how far it could push against structural conversion factors. Using the capability approach we reimagined 'learning outcomes' to encompass the multi-dimensional value of a university education and a plurality of valued cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds whose experiences are strongly shaped by hardship.

Conversion factors

Amartya Sen's concept of conversion connects individual lives to social and policy arrangements and, although not made explicit by Sen, requires us also to examine the historical context in order to illuminate social norms (of race, gender, class and so on), and how they shape everyday lives and our capacity to take advantage of opportunities. We found four clusters of intersecting conversion factors shaped students' ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings and to exercise their agency. These were: 1) material (money, secure funding for university studies affected every single student), 2) social (including family, significant others such as a teacher or NGO, community, education, policies), 3) environmental (especially geography), and 4) personal (especially aspirations, hard work and self-efficacy). All these factors were shaped by relationships with others, either helping or getting in the way (such as poor quality university teaching). We found considerable unevenness in student experiences of pedagogy and curriculum and lecturers such that transformative experiences for this group of students were not strong for the most part.



2018, photo by Muofhe Netshirando



2018, photo by Zizipho Retyu

Eight capability domains

Based on a capabilitarian analysis of the data, we found that for justice, higher education learning outcomes need to include the cognitive and the non-cognitive, working together.

We developed a set of eight higher education multi-dimensional capability domains oriented to more justice and more equality for each person to have the opportunities to be and to do what they have reason to value. The wider

and ‘thicker’ the capability set, the more advantaged a student will be and the more effective agency she is likely to have in working towards her valued goals.

We understand each domain to include clusters of corresponding capabilities, which we describe as ‘effective’, that is they are feasible for someone to achieve. We identified a key functioning (achievement or outcome) related to each domain. The functionings together constitute student well-being in higher education and going forward.

Capability domain	Capabilities	Key functioning
Epistemic contribution	<i>Equality in gaining degree knowledge, being able to reason, understand, apply, share, discuss and examine knowledge critically alone and with others; having a transformational relationship with university undergraduate knowledge; voice.</i>	<i>Being an epistemic contributor</i>
Practical reason	<i>Equality in deliberating about, reflecting on and forming a view of what it would be best to do in specific situations and for a good life. Deliberating about ends and valuing a certain kind of life, being a certain kind of person. Planning purposively towards this; in aspiring, independence, and confidence in making life decisions.</i>	<i>Planning a (good) life</i>
Navigation	<i>Equality in the ability to manoeuvre into (access) and through university and to adapt to succeed academically; resilience; more confidence; support from others; motivation to succeed; fortitude.</i>	<i>Navigating university/society culture and systems</i>
Future work/ study	<i>Equality in preparation to find a graduate level job in the public or private sector, self-employment or further study.</i>	<i>Employable/qualified for further study</i>
Ubuntu	<i>Equality in understanding that a person’s well-being is connected to the well-being of other people; intrinsically valuing relationships.</i>	<i>Connected to and concerned for the wellbeing of others</i>
Narrative	<i>Equality in telling one’s own higher education story with confidence.</i>	<i>Telling one’s own higher education story</i>
Inclusion and participation	<i>Equality in being respected, recognized and participating fully in teaching and learning, the wider university, and his/her community; having good relationships/friendships</i>	<i>Being a respected and participating member of the university/society</i>
Emotional balance	<i>Equality in developing and achieving emotional balance (able to deal with challenges and stress, able to be happy) in higher education experiences and learning.</i>	<i>Deals with the stress and worry of challenges</i>

Table 1: Capability Domains

A capabilities matrix

We developed a matrix (figure 1) to show the four features that require attention to achieve functionings outcomes equitably: 1) capabilities across all eight domains, 2) functionings, 3) adequate material resources, and 4) contextual, intersectional conversion factors. The matrix therefore outlines an approach to learning outcomes divergent from the common view that learning outcomes are decontextualised and designed to count, to measure and to evaluate; as such they have a role in thinking about curriculum and learning but a limited one compared to our rich capabilities-based proposal.

Capabilities (opportunities)	Functionings (learning outcomes)
Adequate material resources	Contextual , intersectional conversion factors (personal, university, society, history)

Figure 1: Capability-based learning outcomes matrix findings

We found that accessing university required a clutch of minimal resources to be converted into admission and registering at university. At this point, students had uneven experiences of choosing a university and a programme of study and few effective capabilities, but those they had were crucial for getting to university. While at university, 'epistemic contribution' (in its widest sense including both academic and non-academic materials) emerged as architectonic for higher education and we offer evidence for how it suffused and was suffused by other capabilities that emerged from theorising and data, and to what extent for the group. Most students gained or 'thickened' a capability

set from being at university (even if there were limits on opportunities). However, once they left, the capability for work and future study was severely hampered by structural condition conversion factors which, in turn, curtailed freedom in other capability dimensions.

While this is the overall story of the group, how resources are converted for a university education and extent to which capabilities are evident as key functionings plays out differently for different individuals as we show in a set of rich student narratives.

We found that learning outcomes should be capability-based, operationalised in functionings, and interwoven in cognitive and non-cognitive clusters. In addition, a person's capability set further intersects with relevant conversion factors (which can have enabling or disabling effects). Finally, adequate material resources must be taken into account. This makes for a complex multi-faceted approach to learning outcomes and a framework which departs substantially and innovatively from the more usual learning outcomes approach.

Policy and practice implications

We conclude that policy and practice need to pay attention to:

- 1) sufficient material resources are necessary get into university and flourish while there;
- 2) the benefits of a university education should be rich and multi-dimensional so that they can result in functionings in all areas of life including paid work and future study; and,
- 3) the inequalities and exclusion of the labour market, and pathways to further study must be addressed by wider economic and social policies and economic transformation for higher education outcomes to be meaningful and more just.