



***MIRATHO* - Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index**

How can and how does higher education contribute to building a democratic and just society, in the light of a Gini inequality co-efficient of .7 and a wealth distribution Gini of at least 0.9? How can we then understand research into opportunities for access and participation in knowledge and pedagogies, and outcomes in this moment of decolonization - against a background of persistent structures of inequality and exclusion at multiple levels? How can a research project contribute usefully to thinking about and acting towards improving and transforming higher education in universities, to policy, and in individual lived lives? How can young people themselves best be involved in the research process? Who should be engaged in the research process and knowledge findings and why? How can the capabilities approach help us address current challenges in higher education?

INTRODUCING OUR *MIRATHO* RESEARCH PROJECT

In our research project funded by the ESRC and DfID, and also the NRF, and led by Professor Melanie Walker, we plan to undertake a systematic, integrated and longitudinal mixed methods investigation over four years (September 2016-August 2020) of the multi-dimensional dynamics or factors shaping and/or inhibiting disadvantaged students' capabilities: i) to access, ii) participate and succeed in higher education, and iii) move from higher education to work. We do not know in fine-grained detail from students how they understand and experience disadvantage, equity and quality in relation to learning outcomes, nor how higher education fosters agency and decision-making that empowers young people to work to change their own lives and that of others.

We have chosen the Venda word *Miratho* for our project. Roughly translated this means to be determined in the face of dangers and to work with others to make progress.

Other members of our **research team** are: Dr Merridy Wilson-Strydom (COI, UFS), Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker (COI, Birmingham), Professor Monica McLean (COI, Nottingham), Dr



Mikateko Hoppener (senior researcher, UFS), Carmen Martinez (UFS, PhD student) and Anesu Ruswa (UFS, PhD student). We work closely with the Thusanani Foundation led by Mukovhe Masutha.

Please contact Dr Mikateko Hoppener (hoppenerm@ufs.ac.za) for information on research progress, events, working papers and publications, and the project website url..

OUR RESEARCH AIM

Our aim is to build a human capabilities-based higher education learning outcomes Index that offers a normative multi-dimensional model for identifying and improving the equity and quality of higher education for rural and township youth, using South Africa as the country case study. Aligned with this main aim, the project will address how interacting and complex biographical, socio-economic, policy and educational factors enable or inhibit pathways for students from challenging backgrounds into, their experiences in and their transitions out of, higher education, and relate these specifically to the learning outcomes achieved. We will define and measure multi-dimensional learning outcomes by conceptualising them as capabilities, shedding light on evidence-informed practice and policy options which advance both equity and quality. The methods include a participatory component involving rural and township students supported by an innovative youth-led intervention to enter and succeed in higher education. Central to the project are consultative processes with a diverse range of stakeholders through engaging them in workshops and colloquia which will lead to policy and practice recommendations. By using the capability approach to understand, evaluate and measure educational equity and quality, the project will generate new knowledge about the achievement of valuable outcomes in higher education for youth from two challenging contexts.

OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do ‘disadvantaged’ youth from rural and townships schools access, participate in and succeed in higher education, and then move into work? [data]. [What can the TF programme tell us about what works well for these students.]



- What contextual dimensions of economic, policy, social and educational conditions enable or inhibit access, participation and success? [data]
- What multi-dimensional higher education learning outcomes which benefit individuals and society are valued by stakeholders, including students? [data]
- How can the capabilities approach be applied analytically to the multiple data sets to produce a multi-dimensional inclusive higher education capabilities-based higher education Index? [measurement, across all data sets]
- How can the Index be used to inform policy and practice interventions that confront the structural inequalities impacting on learning outcomes of students from challenging contexts? [impact space]
- To develop an innovative theoretical approach for understanding inclusive learning outcomes in higher education but with broader educational relevance in developing countries [theory space]

OUR RESEARCH DESIGN

Complex data sets are required because the distribution of capabilities is embedded in families, schools, university educational and social arrangements, and work-readiness activities. Insights into these processes will be gained by exploring student pathways, experiences, aspirations and plans for their future careers. We will also explore their values and commitments to contributing to an inclusive society, and what forms and sustains these values. In addition, students will be involved in participatory workshops and research processes so that the project directly expands their capabilities and operationalizes their right to research. The combined data sets, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data, will enable both a macro view of the educational pathways of the selected student population, but also fine-grained micro accounts of their lives. We have thus designed a multi-method, longitudinal study to investigate the complex nature of how higher education opportunities and achievements are distributed among students from challenging rural and township contexts. The project will work with the youth-led, non-profit Thusanani Foundation (www.thusananifoundation.org/). The research participants are young people who have gained access to higher education through the support of the Foundation. These young people will be in their second year of study in 2017; they are distributed across four diverse university sites and studying engineering, science, commerce and humanities subjects at diploma or degree level.



Quantitative

Existing large data sets: HEMIS, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) annual General Household Survey, and Quarterly Labour Force Survey (all in the public domain) data.

New statistical data: student surveys of all students supported by the Thusanani Foundation to establish their valued learning outcomes, what has contributed to their learning outcomes and what have been the obstacles. In addition, all final year students in four universities and in the same faculties will be surveyed. We will also use *Thusanani Foundation data*

Qualitative

Life histories of 48 Thusanani students (12 students x 4 universities), 3 interviews per student
Participatory research (PR) using visual methods with a small group of Thusanani students and mentors at each of the four universities

Interviews with 6 Thusanani Foundation student mentors at each of the 4 universities, and the 5 Board members of the Thusanani Foundation

Ethnographic 'snapshots' of Foundation workshops with schools in one rural district.

Field notes at stakeholder meetings to capture perspectives of policy makers and other stakeholders

Measurement

A multi-dimensional learning outcomes index will be produced as an instrument of public debate and of policy decisions which can capture interconnected information that otherwise cannot be presented so succinctly. We are aware of the problem of simplifying complex issues as targets and indicators, and will keep these challenges in mind, throughout, as well as document our approaches to overcome them.

Documents and Literature.

Textual data will complement the data sets above. It will include national development and education policies, 'the state of nation' as the research progresses, media reports, university mission and vision statements, and relevant websites.



CAPABILITIES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT¹ AS OUR FRAMEWORK

We know that South Africa’s Bill of Rights enshrines a number of socioeconomic rights which are crucial for creating a more equal society and include the rights of access to healthcare, sufficient food, social assistance and adequate housing. Their aim is to help everyone lead a dignified life. Yet not even all our university students have these basic socio-economic rights met – we find food insecurity on our campuses, shockingly inadequate accommodation for far too many students, and insufficient funds for loan (social) assistance from government. Moving to less tangible rights specific to education, we cannot claim that all students in all universities have access to key ‘pedagogic rights’ to enable their participation and success in curriculum, pedagogies and university spaces. Both kinds of intersecting rights need to be addressed in higher education – the material (and income) resource base and lived experiences of dis/advantage.

The capability approach and human development as the broader outcome, we think, could go a long way to helping us think about practices of transformation and decolonization and in guiding government policy on how to allocate money to universities.

The capabilities approach was developed by Indian born Nobel laureate Amartya Sen in response to the question ‘equality of what’, that is, on what informational basis do we decide if people are equal in comparison to each other. Sen’s response has been to argue that the question we need to ask is whether people enjoy the real freedoms (‘capabilities’) to choose the lives they have reason to value. Someone born into poverty is expected to compete for access and success in higher education alongside those from socio-economically advantaged

¹ Human development seeks to expand people’s real freedoms – their valuable capabilities - to choose and to lead flourishing lives in sustainable societies by empowering people as active agents of equitable development on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the agents of long term, equitable human development, both as individuals and as groups. Hence Human Development is development *by* the people *of* the people and *for* the people. The capabilities approach refers to the set (wide or narrow) of opportunities (or capabilities) from which an individual can decide on and realize valuable states of being and practices (‘functionings’) in comparison with others. More capabilities means more human development and well-being; fewer and thinner capabilities means more disadvantage and more ill-being.



circumstances so that access exists on paper but in reality, poor students may not be able to attend a decent school, be advised on choosing and applying to university, or be able to afford university even if they succeed in getting a NSFAS loan. Once at university they may not feel they ‘belong’, or they may not experience teaching and learning which is confidence-enhancing, while also being critical knowledge-making. Their rights are not secured.

The capabilities approach asks us to look at people’s lived realities to determine whether they truly possess the real freedoms to make meaningful higher education and life choices. It further asks us to consider what people do with their higher education as agents. Do they make contributions to the public good and social change in society or maximize their own self-interest? What does their university encourage then to do?

We explained the approach in this way in our research proposal: The CA refers to the set (wide or narrow) of opportunities (or capabilities) from which an individual can decide on and realize valuable states of being and practices (‘functionings’) in comparison with others. It emphasises agency; an agent being someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives. For individuals the CA implies removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life, which, on reflection, they find valuable. Social, political, policy and economic arrangements interacting with personal biographies are understood as ‘conversion’ factors for enabling or constraining capabilities, which are then the metric for assessing advantage, well-being and a flourishing life.

In this project we understand learning outcomes as the capabilities valued by students, but also other stakeholders, in terms of student development, well-being and agency within and beyond university, and as a means of foregrounding the role that graduates should play in building democratic and decent societies. From an integrated equity-quality perspective, the CA allows us to think differently about good quality education and learning outcomes. In particular, we do not only look at instrumental outcomes such as student performance on standardised measures, but also consider student well-being and agency. Learning outcomes are thus capability expansion for diverse students and graduates. In addition, human diversity is central to the CA, in particular in understanding how personal, social and environmental contexts influence learning outcome achievements as capabilities. The CA thus helps us understand and analyse mechanisms of inequality that operate within and beyond the higher education context



to influence in/equality of learning outcomes. It provides a conceptual approach that explicitly takes account of quality and equality concerns mapped over diversity to improve learning outcomes in the normative direction of human development.

Developed by a Southern academic based in the North, the capabilities approach is not foreign to South African thinking. Indeed our transformative Constitution is committed to building an egalitarian society and evinces a similar commitment to that of the capability approach.. One of the most important purposes of the Constitution is to “improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person”. But people can only reach their potential and lead meaningful lives if their socioeconomic rights are fulfilled by government resource allocation – including access to higher education under fair conditions. It’s up to the government to eradicate the “unfreedoms” that result from poverty. Any review of government’s spending choices – not only those for higher education because choices about spending in one part of the budget will affect other choices or claims to ‘lack of funding’ - must contribute to making an egalitarian society in the light of the ideals of the constitution.

The capability approach also requires participation and public reasoning by all those affected in making decisions about policy. This requires agency and voice to be strengthened as the student movement calls for. Funding to higher education should promote people’s participation in the political, economic and social spheres. The evidence based for decisions must be clear and transparent – what Sen calls the informational basis of judgment in justice. Do we make capabilities the basis of our judgements of justice, or something else? What is the impact of these different evidential decisions? The entire process of decision-making should be informed by the fundamental values of freedom, dignity and equality which underpin both the Constitution and the capability approach.

We think that the capability approach has the potential to be developed into a review framework for higher education policy and practice in this moment of decolonization. Participation, voice and reasoning are centrally important. It would prioritize decisions and resources which enhance each student’s capabilities to lead a free and dignified life in a position of substantive equality with others. It is attentive to social, historical and economic context and how this enables or constrains these capabilities. It would ask: what is each person able to be and to do and what stands in their way or helps them? How can higher education contribute to a society which values creating capabilities for all inside and outside the university?

- For more about Amartya Sen and his life, work and commitments please watch https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3muzELM1_uw

- Also see articles on capabilities in *The Conversation*:
 - <https://theconversation.com/heres-how-to-measure-and-deepen-change-in-south-africas-universities-48899>
 - <https://theconversation.com/students-experiences-show-its-time-to-rethink-ideas-of-universities-45504>
 - <https://theconversation.com/universities-must-do-more-to-become-a-home-for-vulnerable-students-57376>.
 - <https://theconversation.com/how-to-turn-professionals-into-people-who-serve-the-public-good-56702>