



POLICY BRIEF

Capabilities That Really Matter For Sociology Undergraduate Students

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About this brief

This research brief is a summary of a case study conducted between 2014 and 2015 as a doctoral project at the University of the Free State (UFS). The brief is addressed to academic leaders, lecturers and students who are concerned about the design of undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy, particularly that of sociology. The context of the research is one where universities are under pressure to align the relevance of their curriculum to the needs of the labour market, with less focus on expansive aims and outcomes that contribute to both economic advancement and human well-being. Under the circumstances, the traditional roles of universities are being re-defined.

Context

Stemming from a social justice concern that persists as a policy 'thread' in South African higher education, the government has expanded higher education enrolments and programmes for academic support. However, concerns about student under-preparedness, why and what students learn, the uneven realization of graduate attributes, and the more recent calls for the de-colonization of the curriculum, requires us to interrogate how curriculum knowledge orients students to a critical view of society and their contributions to both social and economic development. Moreover, there is a growing concern internationally and nationally about the weakening and deepening disregard of the humanities and social sciences within the academy.

Curriculum, pedagogy and capabilities formation

The capabilities approach is a normative framework that proposes that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the freedoms people have to promote or achieve functionings they value, that is, their well-being and agency freedoms. The approach draws attention to interpersonal and intrapersonal comparisons of personal biographies and conversion factors which influence how each student is able to mobilise the resources at their disposal and convert them into capabilities. Conceptually, the distinction between capabilities and functionings requires us to consider not only what a student achieves but also the opportunities and freedoms that are available to that student.

Based on this framework, the research foregrounds the concept of curriculum as a potential instrument of social justice. The normative position is that social justice is realised through the formation and expansion of all students' real opportunities and freedoms to choose, do and become

what they have reason to value for life, work, and society. Thus, equipping graduates with more capabilities (that they value or have reason to value), more well-being (achievements) and more agency means higher education would be more just rather than less just. If students are equipped with fewer capabilities, less well-being and less agency that means higher education is unjust.

Methodology

Using sociology departments at two South African universities as cases, the study draws on perceptions from empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with students (11) and lecturers (11) at the two universities. The research investigated three levels: i) Curriculum level where I examined what sociology knowledge is selected and why, as well as what valued doings and beings are considered important; ii) Pedagogy level which explored how sociology knowledge is transmitted and how (if at all) the process expands capabilities and functionings; and iii) Curriculum outcomes level where what students say they have become as a result of studying sociology was investigated.

Key findings

The two Sociology Departments appeared to lack any focus on human development, particularly capabilities formation. Moreover, neither department showed a clear thread holding the curriculum together, or a manner that is related to the type of graduate that ought to be produced.

Valued capabilities for educational well-being

Six capability themes were extrapolated from valued functionings mentioned by both lecturers and students because they were achieved and thus valued, or were valued but not achieved. Students and lecturers value capabilities such as knowledge and critical thinking, with the students' emphasizing capabilities such as economic opportunities, the opportunity to provide or experience good teaching, autonomy and voice, resilience, and recognition, respect and belonging.

However, there were limited opportunities to foster these. Only a few students said that they had acquired all the capabilities. Importantly, all capabilities intersect and are multidimensional, thus students need all of them to achieve well-being as they reinforce and support each other. Agency rests on the platform of these capabilities.

Table 1: Capabilities valued by lecturers and their students

Capability theme	Valued functioning(s)
Knowledge and critical thinking	To excel academically, to gain knowledge and have a broader knowledge base, to engage critically with the world.
Economic opportunity	To develop personal and professional skills.
Good teaching	To develop good teaching skills/ to experience good teaching.
Deliberative dialogue	To participate and deliberate on design of curriculum.
Agency	Ability to make autonomous decisions, ability to participate in various activities, to be independent.
Recognition and respect	To be treated with human dignity and respect, to form good relationships with lecturers & tutors, and to participate in class without being discriminated against.

Pedagogical arrangements that affect learning experiences

Pedagogically, knowledge was transmitted mostly through lectures. The lectures seemed more oriented to 'deliver' knowledge to students. Although lecturers seemed to understand their students' circumstances, students were largely treated as a homogeneous group. There was limited consideration of personal conversion factors such as personal biographies, talents or family income, which shape each student's freedom to achieve.

Table 2: Factors that negatively affect learning experiences

1	Lack of knowledge to choose degree
2	Large classes
3	Lack of critical, moral and ethical debates and discussions
4	Lack of meaningful participation and empowerment
5	Unapproachable lecturers
6	Lack of recognition, respect and affiliation

Pedagogical arrangements that enhance learning experiences

The pedagogical and institutional factors that enhance learning experience are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Factors that enhance learning experience

1	Affiliation with lecturers
2	Small classes and more tutors
3	Treating students with respect and dignity
4	Enabling freedom to choose education one has reason to value
5	Enabling affiliation with peers
6	Creating platforms for student voice

Designing Sociology curriculum and pedagogy

Five stages for curriculum and pedagogy planning and design emerged from the empirical data. Within a capabilities-inspired curriculum model, curriculum knowledge is not the starting point for curriculum planning and construction but the vehicle through which capabilities can be developed.

Table 4: Stages for designing a capabilities-inspired curriculum

Stage	Description
1	Identify the capabilities needed to live and act in the world
2	Select knowledge that would foster capabilities
3	Organisation of knowledge to achieve capabilities
4	Determine how knowledge is transmitted to students to achieve learning experiences with reference to their capabilities
5	Ascertain what student capabilities that have been developed because of the sociology curriculum and pedagogy

It was evident from the research that students valued education for intrinsic and instrumental reasons hence the model suggests a way to start a dialogue about skills for employment and capabilities in the sociology curriculum.

Recommendations

How could curriculum knowledge acquired by undergraduate sociology students contribute to enhancing their capabilities to live and act in society?

Based on the research findings, the following policy and practical recommendations emerged:

- 1) (Re)think policy orientations to sociology curriculum design, particularly about how the capabilities approach and the more limited human capital theory can complement each other in higher education and curriculum design.
- 2) Discuss the ideas underpinning capabilities formation at faculty and departmental level to enable direction to education goals.
- 3) Pay particular attention to relations of power in class and the lecturer-student ratios required to support the kinds of teaching and learning that are required to achieve the agreed basic goals of education; and minimally expand tutorials but with smaller numbers of students in each group.
- 4) Introduce new subjects, non-Western and female voices to the existing canon to provide transforming decolonized knowledge which engages with African contemporary challenges.
- 5) Initiate a public forum, with an emphasis on the use of democratic mechanisms, to deliberate the design of the undergraduate sociology curriculum.
- 6) Initiate work-integrated learning, which could be embedded in the curriculum to improve the employability of sociology graduates.
- 7) Initiate a professional development programme for lecturers to provide quality teaching and hold faculty and departmental refresher courses on how to implement SAQA level descriptors.

Useful references

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