



POLICY BRIEF

Challenging Inequalities through the Formation of Student Capabilities For Equal Participation

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About this brief

This research brief is a summary of a longitudinal project conducted between 2013 and 2015 at the University of the Free State (UFS). The brief is addressed to university practitioners, researchers and students who are concerned about the equality of university participation for students from under-resourced school and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, this brief makes the following recommendations:

How could the university enable conditions for equal participation?

1. Ensure a minimum resource threshold for socioeconomically vulnerable students
2. Re-frame deficit-based pedagogic assumptions and approaches to teaching and learning arrangements
3. Create platforms for partnerships between vulnerable students and staff members
4. Ensure that bridging programmes and developmental modules are aligned to students' social and academic needs
5. Improve the quality of foundational provision
6. Expand support structures that enable students to convert available resources into academic capabilities
7. Provide an environment in which students are able to develop autonomy and belonging
8. Expand opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making
9. Enhance academic and social conditions and opportunities for commuter students

Context

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 black students are positioned precariously within higher education institutions. Due to an intersection of individual and structural challenges, many black students have fewer opportunities to convert academic resources into successful outcomes. At the same time, students resist the historical deficit approach that simplistically frames poor and 'underprepared' individuals as less able or less likely to succeed at university. Within this complex institutional terrain, students are often expected to negotiate a competitive and inhospitable environment, while also proving their competence in approaches which position them as deficient.

Participation, agency and the capability approach

The capability approach is a multidimensional approach used to evaluate the comparative opportunities for participation available to research participants. The 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, unequal participation is a remediable injustice that can be partially addressed by creating enabling arrangements for capability development.

Opportunities for equal participation

The deficit approach to student participation is being challenged by national and international research approaches. These approaches shift attention away from student failure and weakness to student agency and existing capitals. The research project expanded on these approaches by suggesting that student voice and autonomy are crucial aspects of equal participation.

The capability-informed praxis proposed conceptualizes equal participation on a spectrum where, at 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.

At 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.

Methodology

The study tracked the experiences of eight undergraduate university students over a period of two years. Qualitative data was collected using 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.

Key findings

A resource threshold

The first finding was that equal participation requires a minimum level of resource security. 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.

Basic resources for equal academic participation include:

- Tuition fees
- Safe, accessible and affordable housing
- Access to textbooks and academic materials
- Access to information technology and data
- Reliable nutrition
- Clothing and toiletries
- Safe and reliable transport Resources for extracurricular activities
- Access to medical care
- Access to mental health care

Factors that decrease participation

The second group of findings was around the pedagogical and institutional conditions that constrain the freedoms that students have to engage with knowledge and pursue their aspirations for learning. Student experiences foreground conditions within classrooms and other institutional spaces that are not conducive to capability development, and that decrease student agency, and constrain their freedom to participate as equal members of the institution.

Table 1: Factors that decreased participation

1	Individualizing failure
2	Uncritical engagement with knowledge
3	Lack of participation in decision-making
4	Alienation from lecturers
5	Misrecognition of ability

Factors that enhanced participation

Another key cluster of findings was student experiences of arrangements where pedagogical practices and institutional spaces made resources available and also offered opportunities to convert resources into capabilities and functionings. The pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enable the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Factors that enhanced participation

1	Enabling affiliation with lecturers
2	Enabling affiliation with peers
3	Creating platforms for student voice
4	Distributing access to knowledge
5	Recognizing student capabilities

Capabilities for equal participation

Six capabilities 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 the student data.

Table 3: Capabilities for equal participation

Capability	Description
Student research	Undergraduate student research to promote agency and ownership
Practical reason	Making well-reasoned and informed choices; becoming an independent and critical thinker
Critical literacies	Incorporating student resources into pedagogical environments; confidence to speak and contribute
Critical affiliation	Affiliation as social networks, recognition, identity and belonging
Deliberative participation	Participatory platforms for engagement with the broader university community
Values for the public good	Commitment to social change through community engagement

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