



HEHD POLICY BRIEF

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND STUDENTS' VALUED CAPABILITIES TO ADVANCE SOCIALLY JUST HIGHER EDUCATION

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About this brief:

This policy brief summarises the findings of a PhD project conducted in 2017 at the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State (UFS). The project aimed to implement a participatory methodology and explore this experience as a case study. It investigated how a participatory project can help students to advance the lives they have reason to value, as well as help to democratise knowledge in higher education.

The brief shares the findings of this case study, providing a summary of the project findings that could be useful for the University, both in terms of research as well as teaching and learning.

Context

Higher education institutions in South Africa are in a process of transformation from past injustices. Currently, universities are implementing various transformation-facing projects and adapting pedagogical practices to the demands of today's society.

Such changes in higher education are not only substantial for the well-being of the individuals that have historically been deprived of their freedoms, but also for society as a whole, in order to advance towards a more democratic and just society.

Nonetheless, universities still have a long way to go, especially in the area of research and knowledge generation. Knowledge generation has remained a pending issue as evidence of institutional change has been justified through numbers alone. For example, the reversal of university demographics, with black students now representing a majority. This is laudable but also problematic as it justifies institutional change through a single objective—demographic change—overlooking other important elements, such as that of knowledge production.

To tackle these challenges, scholars have been using and proposing alternative practices in knowledge generation. These practices, under the umbrella term of participatory approaches, aim to overcome some of the current limitations in the space of university knowledge production.

Unquestionably, participatory approaches play an important role in the advancement of social justice, as they allow researchers to challenge the current oppressive structures in—at least—two important ways: firstly, by involving participants as researchers, thus, research is done *with* them, and not *on* them. Secondly, by allowing other knowledge systems to be included in the process of knowledge creation, breaking unjust epistemic barriers for those collectives that have been excluded.

Theoretical Framework

The project not only aimed to promote the use of alternative methodologies to create knowledge in different ways, but also to apply a robust theoretical framework in the form of the Capabilities Approach. The Capabilities Approach is used to evaluate human development among individuals, but what really characterises this theoretical lens is its focus on individuals' real lives. Capabilities—real freedoms—are used as a way to understand the potential freedom that an individual has to be able to do those things that s/he has reason to value. Further, functionings—effective, realized freedoms—are used to indicate whether this freedom has been achieved by the individual. Previous approaches to assess development have focused on resources or subjective happiness. However, there are good reasons to pay attention to actual freedoms, as the context, circumstances and individual preferences surrounding students are important in order to better understand students' lives.

To conclude, the Capabilities Approach is not only a way to assess human development, but also to assess how just or unjust a society is in a particular moment. Sen (1999) clearly makes an appeal for unjust situations—such as that of knowledge generation—to be identified, instead of working on the conceptualisation of a perfectly just society. In this way, when we are removing barriers that impedes humans from being fully free to lead their lives in their own ways, we are in fact advancing towards a more just society, however imperfectly.

Therefore, in the educational context, when institutions are able to promote the lives students and other individuals have reason to value and assist them in removing barriers that leave them with little choice, they are contributing to a more just higher education context and practices.

Methodology

The methodology used was a qualitative case study developed over the course of a year (2017). The case study explored the involvement of twelve undergraduate students in a participatory capabilities-based research project, in which they had the central role of researchers, assisted by myself as the facilitator. A variety of methods were used to gather the data in this case study, such as interviews at various stages both during and after the project (44 in total), participant observation during the monthly meetings (9 sessions), and personal diaries from participants (a total of 12).

Key Findings

Participants as researchers

The study found that students are bearers of valuable knowledge that the university continues to ignore or devalue.

Recognising this knowledge not only fights against structural inequalities in knowledge generation, it also challenges the epistemic injustices that these students face in these institutions every day.

Equally, the evidence suggests that students experienced personal transformation through the project. Students were able to decide and implement the research project by themselves. This not only expanded some freedoms, such as that of self-determination, but also helped them to achieve functionings that were important to them, such as that of voice—being able to talk and express their opinions freely.

Undergraduate lives that matter

On the other hand, although the students that participated in this project had their own clear aims and aspirations in their lives, some of these objectives seemed to be ignored by the institution, guided as it is by its own global agenda. To provide an example, students wanted to help others—to enhance *ubuntu* values that were central to their lives. However, this was jeopardised by the individualist values promoted by the institution. Furthermore, although, it is understood that the University is currently working towards curriculum transformation, this transformation differs greatly between faculties and departments, as students pointed out. For instance, a student complained that although indigenous knowledge was valued, it was completely absent from the Health Sciences faculty.

All these are important elements to be explored by the University. Critically, the University can be transformed into a global and plural university by listening to the demands and contextual aspirations that are asserted by the student body. In this way, understanding students' lives and aspirations, and contextualising the formal and informal curriculum of the University is a means of bringing about transformation and advancing towards a socially just higher education.

Capabilities and functionings as pedagogical tools

The study shows that capabilities (real freedoms) and functionings (achieved freedoms) are valuable categories to assess educational/pedagogical processes. Capabilities and functionings help to guide practitioners towards the human development of the individuals involved, as well as to remove unfreedoms, thus orienting us towards a more just society. This is important as higher education institutions may be ignoring other types of lives that are contextually relevant and, therefore, compromising the potential of these institutions to transform themselves. The case study provides guidance using investigative techniques that can be used by practitioners to understand students' valuable lives and promote them through pedagogical practices. The study claims, thus, that we should not merely agree on a compendium of central capabilities and promote them for all. Conversely, highlights it highlights the importance for educational practitioners and institutions to know their students and understand their aspired life projects in order to help them achieve them by reflecting critically on their lives.

Democratisation of knowledge production

Finally, the study pointed out that there are multiple ways in which students can be involved in research processes. This involvement not only democratises knowledge production, but better situates them in their own assessment of their lives and the world in which they live. To democratise knowledge, universities need to create partnerships with those that are excluded, to conduct research *with* them, and not *on* them, whether they are students, communities, maintenance workers, student organisations, etc. It is imperative for universities to understand what the local demands and interests of these collectives are in order to seek out alliances for research that is socially committed, hand in hand with the research on global affairs that the university is already engaged in.

Equally, democratising research means overcoming the limitations of knowledge generation in higher education institutions acknowledging other knowledge systems—cultural, experiential, indigenous, intuitive knowledges, among others—as important and necessary for the transformation of higher education institutions and the advancement of more just institutions. Nevertheless, this should not diminish the use of scientific knowledge, as the aim here is not to invalidate it. Conversely, the proposal calls for situating different types of knowledge on an equal footing, so that they may all be enriched from being connected to one another

Recommendations and Conclusion

This brief is intended to encourage University management and educational practitioners at the UFS to develop more participatory and pedagogical strategies which are focused on understanding students' valuable lives and future aspirations. It suggests the use of capabilities and functionings—the Capabilities Approach as a theoretical framework—not only to contextualise programmes, curricula and policies, but also to assess pedagogical practices. Further, I stress the view that this cannot be achieved without the introduction of alternative participatory research projects in which participants are given a central role in the research project, and the introduction of other knowledge systems. Thus, the recommendations can be summarised by three main points, related to the level of application and context:

- Micro-measure: The introduction of capabilities and functioning as a way to contextualise pedagogical practices.
- Macro-measure: The exploration of locally valued capabilities and the interrogation of how the institution is promoting those through their teaching, learning and research.
- Knowledge generation: The promotion of participatory research projects that are conceptualised and implemented by students—and/or other excluded groups—to address epistemic barriers and to promote the introduction of other knowledge systems.

To conclude, as stated in the *Mail & Guardian*, 14 February 2019, 'It is a university's responsibility to offer education that equips students with the skills and knowledge that are relevant to their lives' (Kamal Ramburuth-Hurt).