



# THE *MIRATHO* RESEARCH PROJECT 2016-2021:

## KEY FINDINGS BRIEFING PAPER, 2021

*The project findings are detailed fully in our Open Access book: Melanie Walker, Monica McLean, Mikateko Mathebula and Patience Mukwambo, late 2021, Low-income students, human development and higher education in South Africa: Opportunities, obstacles, and outcomes. Stellenbosch: African Minds.*

### NEW KNOWLEDGE

*Until now there has not been a South African systematic, integrated, longitudinal mixed-methods investigation of the multi-dimensional dynamics or factors shaping and/or inhibiting low-income students' capabilities to access, participate and succeed in a variety of higher education institutions, and move from higher education to work or further study. Nor do we have much research on rural students or rural universities. The Miratho project for the first time offers fine-grained detail from talking to students about how they understand and experience disadvantage, equity and educational quality and about how higher education can foster or frustrate agency and decision-making that empowers them to change their own lives and those of others. Overall we found: That students are agents, actors and carriers of personal biographies negotiating and interacting everyday with multiple, intersecting contextual conditions that present opportunities for being and doing in life; that individuals flourish when they are free to choose lives (beings and doings) that express their own values and goals -inequality is reduced when political, socio-economic or educational arrangements (policies and practices) expand people's opportunities and freedoms to choose; that to gain such freedoms people must aspire and struggle against and with others.*

### RICHLY RECONCEPTUALISED CAPABILITARIAN LEARNING OUTCOMES

*Learning outcomes are richly reconceptualised using Amartya Sen's Capability Approach; such a normative approach is essential in advancing quality higher education. In our approach 'inclusive learning outcomes' move towards a reduction of multidimensional disadvantages and inequalities. We critique the lure of (ubiquitous) learning outcomes: positive achievements (not just time spent in education); a 'performance-based' approach supporting human capital for economic growth; measurable, comparable information to evaluate the efficiency of systems. We articulate problems with learning outcomes: necessary but not sufficient; emphasis on skills, especially cognitive; ignored if not a measurable performance; association with managerialism. Instead, university learning outcomes should expand the freedoms that are of value to students from low-income households. The complex enablements and constraints in the lives of students demand a multi-dimensional evaluative framework for judging advantage and disadvantage, equality, and inequality. The capability approach supplies this framework by offering multidimensional key functionings(as learning outcomes) and underlying capabilities*

## **MATERIAL CONDITIONS HAVE SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

*Material poverty represents a major obstacle in its effects on student chances and equality in opportunities and outcomes. At all stages of acquiring a university education adequate material resources need to underpin university access, participation, and success. What is considered adequate or sufficient at any stage will need to be debated among stakeholders and policymakers and then looked at in the light of competing demands on the fiscus. This is complicated by the welfare element of student grants where low-income students (and their families) consider these grants as a source of financial support not only for the student but also her family, as our data shows. While inequalities, poverty and unemployment prevail in the wider society this understanding is unlikely to shift.*

## **‘CONVERSION FACTORS’ IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONNECT AGENCY AND STRUCTURES**

*Intersecting contextual conversion factors (at the level of national, provincial, district, our data) and across factors of the material, educational, social, environmental and personal constitute the conditions shaping opportunities and obstacles for students in converting their material and non-material resources into capabilities and functionings. If the opportunity to develop capabilities and exercise valued functionings is uneven, we need to look to wider arrangements to understand what is unjust and needs to be changed to enable wellbeing in each life. South Africa is a country with high poverty, high inequality, and low social mobility. There are significant gaps in income, wealth, and intergenerational endowments. Family and community poverty have a spatial dimension and remain concentrated in previously disadvantaged areas, such as the former rural homelands.*

*We found that accessing university required a bundle of resources, including money and information, to be converted into admission and registering at university. At the point of access, students had uneven experiences of choosing a university and a programme of study and few effective capabilities, but those they had (such as navigation) together with personal conversion factors such as determination and hard work were crucial for getting to university and assets they brought with them. While at university, epistemic contribution (in its widest sense including both academic and non-academic materials) emerged as architectonic for higher education and we generated evidence for how it suffused and was suffused by other capabilities that emerged from theorising and data, and to what extent for the group. Through extraordinary personal efforts fueled by experiences of disciplined success at school (for all the qualifications regarding quality), the support of key persons, and by exercising ubuntu with friends and family, most students gained or ‘thickened’ a capability set from being at university.*

*We found that students brought key attributes and strong family and community commitments, which universities could do more to recognize and value as an asset for any university. However, it is also important to note that some students explicitly took the view that they could have done better at university had they had access to more resources and not had to use considerable psychological time and energy on worrying about finance. In our view this is a valid judgement, even if there were limits on opportunities. Moreover, in our view pedagogical and university arrangements could have been more hospitable to these students and that this, too, would have improved their outcomes. Moreover, once they left, the capability for work and future study was severely hampered by structural conditions of possibility 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 the extent to which capabilities are evident as key functionings plays out differently for different individuals. We conclude that for inclusive learning outcomes to be substantively meaningful, sufficient material resources are necessary to get into university and flourish while there; the benefits of a university education should be rich and multi-dimensional (and supported by university arrangements) so that they can result in functionings in all areas of life as well as work and future study; and, the inequalities and exclusion of the labour market and pathways to further study must be addressed by wider economic and social policies.*

*We found, too, that change is complex and unpredictable and understand the challenges of making changes: it is generally hard, incremental and slow work absent major social disruptors, of which #FeesMustFall is one such event delivering as it did free higher education to low-income youth. On the other hand, within the ambit of higher education there are, as Sen, tells us, justices which are 'redressable' without waiting for perfect social structures or perfectly just institutions. Universities can and should act towards change, and the Capability Approach is a significant normative resource, we found, to this end.*

## **KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF SPECIFIC CONTEXTUAL CONVERSION FACTORS**

*1) ACCESS FACTORS: •Access trajectories vary based on the different unfreedoms students face and for low-income students, access is tenuous and negotiated; •Due to the negative intersection of conversion factors, many deserving students are left behind, perpetuating existing inequalities, especially in rural and township areas; •Different unfreedoms determine who can access HE and on which*

*terms. For those who manage to access university, there can be constrained choices where students settle for universities and degrees/ diplomas that they either only qualified for, or their resources allowed them to take up. The inequalities highlighted that access to university does not start when applying for admission but begins at school, at home and in communities; •HE should be more inclusive and accommodate diversity to dismantle historical structures of inequality; •Beyond funding, universities should consider the complexity of student lives and influence of broader contexts in determining access. They should partner with schools, community organisations and alumni in availing information to all, regardless of their background or geographic location; •At this point, students had few effective capabilities, but those they had were crucial for getting to university (notably, ubuntu and navigation capabilities).*

*2) PARTICIPATION FACTORS: While students' capabilities were underdeveloped in the first year of university, this changed gradually over time so that we see the emergence of a widened capability set as the years progressed, which we see as indicative of their transformation. Although it happened unevenly, university participation enabled student transformation. However, it could be much more transformative if pedagogical arrangements and other provisions for learning and material security were possible and taken up. Factors shaping participation were: •Access to technology; •The effects of schooling: lack of confidence to speak up; The effects of schooling: 'cramming'; •Relationships (with lecturers and others); •University community and geography: the impact of living off campus; •University general conditions; •Information about university; •Students' personal attributes; •Teaching and learning conditions; and, •Access to knowledge that is transformative for students.*

3) **MOVING ON FACTORS:** After 6/7 years 38 of the 58 who persisted with interviews for four years had graduated and had their academic transcript (i.e. no fees debt): 14 were employed, 8 were doing further study; 7 had internships of some kind and 14 were unemployed; five had completed but owed money and had their academic transcripts withheld. Two had dropped out. The rest were still completing their first degrees. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to university, challenging as it is, is perceived as an immediate panacea out of poverty and towards social mobility. However, students struggle through universities and graduate at a point of disadvantage even before getting into the (uneven and unequal) labour market. Factors shaping moving on that we found clustered around: • **Educational:** degree; field of study; which university; • **Material:** money; access to technology; • **Social:** information and support; • **Environmental:** location of university; and, • **Personal:** attitudes and values.

### THE MIRATHO CAPABILITARIAN MATRIX

We found a combined normative and empirical process was appropriate in producing the Matrix. From this we generated a set of eight multi-dimensional (all matter) capability domains (valued opportunities to be and to do) with corresponding functionings (achievements) as learning outcomes. The broad capability domains are: epistemic contribution; ubuntu; practical reason, navigation, narrative, emotional balance, inclusion and participation and further work and study. The corresponding functionings to inform practice and evaluation of student success are: being an epistemic contributor; connected to and concerned for the wellbeing of others; planning a (good) life; navigating university/society's culture and systems; telling one's own higher education story; able to deal with academic and life challenges; being a respected and

participating member of the university/ society; and, employable/qualified for further study. We brought the capabilities and functionings together with material wellbeing and conversion factors to constitute a four dimensions Miratho Matrix for inclusive higher education learning outcomes. We acknowledge that measurement against the Matrix is complex and may be imprecise. But Sen explains that, 'it is undoubtedly more important to be vaguely right than precisely wrong'.

Our capability set and key functionings are an evaluation tool and metric (equality of what?) of justice based on the principle of equality in higher education encompassing: access to university; participating in teaching and learning; inclusion in the wider life of the university; qualifying with a diploma or degree; and, moving on to work or further study. This framework is intended to provoke discussion in universities about inequalities across different groups of students in connecting capability (opportunities) and functionings (outcomes) in the different capability domains, and what to do about this. The domains are multidimensional, all count and reinforce each other, and in tandem are the key functionings which intersect and support each other. 'Cherry picking' capabilities should be avoided because it is the whole set which supports students in benefitting from their university education.



2018, photo by Fumani Mashaba

## HOW MIGHT FINDINGS BE TAKEN FORWARD AND BY WHOM?

*How can the Miratho Matrix be used to inform policy and practice interventions that confront the structural inequalities impacting on learning outcomes of students from challenging contexts? We have developed guidance for university actions based on our data and findings. We offer broad suggestions to guide discussion about how an institution might measure and make judgements about whether and/or how there are inequalities across different groups of students in capabilities and functionings in the different domains. We do three things: 1) propose eight key functionings as indicators to be measured qualitatively and quantitatively; 2) sketch broad university conditions against each key functioning - these conditions would need to be evaluated; and 3) for the eight domains we have sketched ways to measure across three areas: university education, academic department and university. Across these three areas attention should be paid both to horizontal inequalities pertaining to culture and forms of belonging and to vertical inequalities associated with distribution of resources. We also provide up to five sub-functionings which support the core functioning for each domain. For example for students to develop as epistemic contributors, university conditions would need to provide: Quality of curriculum design (including attention to ecology of knowledges), teaching and learning and assessment practices that build confidence, inclusion and civic participation, and which foster a dialogical and inclusive epistemic culture and environment.*

*Our key policy relevant and practice relevant findings are: •Sufficient material resources are necessary to get into university and flourish while there; other conversion factors articulate with material conditions: Social; Personal, Educational; and Envi-*

*ronmental; •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; learning outcomes thus need to be reconceptualised as multi-dimensional capabilities and functionings; •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. •Universities have a responsibility – if for no other reason - as recipients of public funding – but also as the space of student aspirations and effort - to transform in relation to the needs of the mostly black working class (rural and urban) students they have and to put in place the conditions of possibility at all levels for all students to flourish.*

*We see the normative approach and findings potentially being taken forward by: Policy-makers especially the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and USAF (Universities South Africa); NGOs, especially those like REAP, working with rural students and those like the MOSAL Foundation working with disadvantaged students; Higher Education practitioners and University Leadership who can apply the Capability Set and Functionings as a grid to evaluate their own practices and Teaching and Learning more generally across the University; and, Higher education researchers and early career fellows (PhD's and Post-doctoral) based in universities and research organisations.*



2019, photo by Melissa Lucas

*The Miratho Matrix, the capability approach, and the set of capability domains and functionings can inform higher education policy and practices in the direction of a quality and more just higher education in South Africa and elsewhere. The core functionings might be used as indicators in qualitative measurement by universities. They are resources for debates and dialogues about doing higher education differently. A richer approach to learning outcomes by universities is made possible.*

*NGOs working with disadvantaged youth will find the project evidence helpful in planning their own higher education interventions. The detailed empirical account of conversion factors makes clear the opportunities and obstacles faced by students from*

*challenging contexts; in particular material factors must be taken into account in evaluating learning outcomes and in the design of university marketing, outreach, access programmes and pedagogical approaches by practitioners. The hardship tables developed might usefully be applied by universities to their own students.*

*The project provides rich information for thinking about the design of a student-centred university in South Africa. The life history methodology and the participatory photovoice methodology offer both method resources but also demonstrate the richness of student voice approaches. Globally we hope to contribute to reconceptualising learning outcomes - in a richer direction - by global agencies and funders.*



2019, photo by Melissa Lucas

