



MIRATHO

Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for
rural and township youth: Developing a multi-
dimensional capabilities- based higher
education index.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Theoretical Framework

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1. Capabilities and human development¹ as our theoretical 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

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 disadvantages and more well-being.

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 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 value 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 our 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>