

Pandemic Perspectives: Virtual Mobility and Capability in Doctoral Education

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

With illustrative data from a research study newly underway we present an evaluative framework and methodology to investigate how the transition to remote learning due to the global pandemic affected the development of doctoral capabilities. A capability approach (CA) is used to develop the evaluative framework to investigate capabilities valued by doctoral students and in doctoral education and unpack the conversion factors impacting the formation of doctoral capabilities during and after the pandemic. We are focusing on four conversion factors – individual, external, pedagogical, and institutional. We adopt a qualitative approach to collect opinions and lived experiences from doctoral students, supervisors, and doctoral college staff in a university in the West Midlands, UK. We expect that CA's evaluative focus on the equality of participation and formation of capabilities would help to identify crucial elements in doctoral students' journey and inform changes to improve their learning experiences.

Full paper

The higher education landscape has dramatically changed in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic. While rapid transition to online learning resolved some of the challenges pertaining to

teaching and learning within taught programmes, for doctoral education the challenges are somewhat different considering the individualistic nature of the study and significant research component. Although online supervision and home working were quickly initiated for doctoral education, it had its own challenges which differentially affected doctoral students. Challenges including campus closures; lack of access to data; transition to online supervision, support, and viva; lack of study-spaces at home; home working and lack of resources (European University Association Council for Doctoral Education, 2020; Jackman et al., 2021) impacted the development of capabilities crucial to doctoral education.

In the current project we aim to investigate how the shift to remote learning in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic affected doctoral students with regards to developing worthwhile doctoral capabilities. We construct an evaluative framework informed by capability approach (CA) to examine doctoral capabilities valued by doctoral students and in doctoral education as well as the conversion factors enabling or constraining the formation of these capabilities. The expectations are that the project will help to understand the particular challenges and inform future development of supervision and researcher development practices. We are focusing on three key questions in this project:

1. What are the doctoral capabilities being valued by doctoral students and in doctoral education?
2. How do the relevant conversion factors enable or constrain the formation of these doctoral capabilities?
3. How do the overall project outcomes inform the supervision and researcher development practices in future?

As indicated earlier, the project is informed by capability approach which is conceptual framework based on the works of development scholar Amartya Sen where the core concepts are capability and functioning. Functioning is the various things a person may value

'doing or being' (Sen, 1999, p. 75) and capability is the real freedom to make choices and achieve the functioning valuable to us. In this sense capabilities are collections of functionings which an individual can choose from and/or achieve. Following CA, doctoral capabilities in this project are conceptualised as not only the skills to effectively learn and carry out research, but also the freedom and capacity to convert available resources and opportunities to worthwhile outcomes. The primary attractiveness of CA in this project is that in its evaluation of the equality of participation, CA widens the scope of analysis to include not only the availability of resources but also considers the conversion factors which can enable or constrain the conversion of resources into worthwhile outcomes. Secondly, a key analytical feature of CA is that it is more concerned with the process of developing capabilities than with the actual outcomes of the individuals being evaluated (O'Donovan, et al., 2020). This feature is particularly attractive for us because it would help to identify crucial elements within the remit of doctoral education that may require attention and help us to develop interventions or supports to improve doctoral students' experiences.

From informal discussion with doctoral students and existing research we identified four broad conversion factors (individual, external, pedagogical, and institutional) which can expand or constrain the development of doctoral capabilities in relation to shift to remote learning during the pandemic. Individual factors comprise of elements in an individual's experience and immediate environments such as, previous learning experience and home environment. External factors refer to circumstances which have the potential to impact the doctoral journey, for example, the global pandemic created challenges for field-based research. Pedagogical factors include supervision, learning and development support and the overall delivery of doctoral education. Lastly, institutional factors comprise of policies, structures and processes pertaining to doctoral education.

The research involves determining the doctoral capabilities valued by doctoral students in doctoral education, and then determining how the conversion factors stated above enable or constrain the development of these capabilities. We adopted a qualitative

approach to conduct this investigation considering that the interpretive nature of this approach would help to gain a deeper understanding of doctoral capabilities and the conversion factors. The collection of empirical data involves semi-structured interviews with doctoral students at different stages of their studies during the pandemic, their supervisors and doctoral college staff in a university in West Midlands, UK. Data is analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis technique informed by CA. In addition to empirical data, documents relevant to the delivery of doctoral education are analysed.

References

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