

# Capability, Belonging and Mis/recognition In Higher Education (0128)

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## Abstract

Although deficit discourses shape assumptions and judgements about student capability, there is a dearth of research that examines those constructions. Questions of ‘mattering’ are deeply tied to processes of subjective construction in which unequal positionings profoundly shape student ‘capability’ across pedagogical spaces. Through a critical analysis of empirical data from research conducted in Australia, this paper explores the meanings attached to ‘capability’ and considers the ways that these meanings shape the experiences, practices and sense of belonging of students from non-traditional backgrounds. This analysis is informed by a post-structural framework, which understands subjectivity as formed through discourses and performatives that are deeply entangled with the politics of mis/recognition. By bringing this politics to the fore, we seek to better understand the ‘politics of access and participation ... of who is seen as having the right to higher education’ (Author, 2012, p. 2).

## Paper

Meritocratic views significantly frame questions of equity in higher education (HE), including assumptions about who is capable of being a university student (Leyva, 2009; Morley and Lugg, 2009; Karabel, 2005; Southgate and Bennett, 2014). This is often expressed through the principle that HE should be available to all who have the potential and/or capability to benefit from university study, regardless of social background (Author 1, 2012). Although ‘capability’ carries multiple and contested meanings, there has been little attention given to the problematic ways that judgements of capability are made, as they often unwittingly perpetuating social and cultural inequalities in HE. For example, research by Author 1 (2009) in the UK context has shown that the recognition of ‘potential’ and ‘ability’—or conversely being misrecognised as ‘lacking potential or ability’—often depends on the ways that those with the institutional authority to make such judgements construct ‘capability’ in particular disciplinary and institutional contexts. Carole Leathwood (2008) argues that the meanings that circulate around capability mark out differences between types of students (gendered, raced and classed), different subjects of study (in particular those designated as vocational and academic) and differentiated HE institutions. This often contributes to the legitimisation of inequality in patterns of HE access and participation and impacts on students’ perceptions of self-worth (Leathwood, 2008; Author 1, 2012). This body of work points to the need to develop richer and more nuanced analyses of how ‘capability’ is constructed in order to develop more sophisticated strategies to support widening participation and equity in HE.

Although deficit constructions often shape assumptions and judgements about student capability, and this tends to be entangled with historical patterns of under-representation in HE, there is a dearth of research that examines those constructions and their effects on equity. Questions of ‘mattering’ are deeply tied in to processes of subjective construction, in which unequal positionings and polarising discourses profoundly shape the construction of student ‘capability’ across pedagogical spaces. Through a critical analysis of empirical data, this paper explores and identifies the different meanings attached to ‘capability’ and considers the ways these meanings shape the experiences, practices and sense of belonging of students from non-traditional backgrounds. The paper addresses the following questions: What are the different meanings of capability at play in HE? In what ways do these shape, constrain and/or enable equity in HE?

This paper draws from the 2015 project 'Capability, Belonging and Equity in Higher Education: Developing Inclusive Approaches', conducted by researchers from the University of Newcastle's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education and funded by Australia's National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. The project utilises mixed-methods, including a validated survey instrument (Dweck, 2000), focus groups and in-depth interviews in order to triangulate the data. It is multi-phased, with preliminary findings generated by a 2014 pilot study and a deepening of the approach to include more qualitative data in the current iteration.

Students and staff across five faculties and two large university access programs were asked to complete a survey using Dweck's (2000) self-theory instrument, which has high internal consistency (alpha ranging from .94–.98) and high test–retest reliability ( $r = .80$ ,  $N = 62$ ) (Gutshall, 2013, p. 1076). Although this method has been used in ways that tend to individualise, rather than contextualise, experiences of learning, we are interested in drawing on the 'personal' to emphasise the public or structural aspects of learning, in terms of how the personal is political (Burawoy, 2005).

We found from the 772 completed surveys that students with a higher ATAR band and higher household income are less likely to question their capability or level of intelligence, while students from the access program for young people (17-20 years) are less confident about their capability and intelligence level. Students who have family members with a university education are six (6) times more likely to be confident about their academic capability and ability to learn new work. We have also found that students' views of capability as dynamic and contextual often conflict with their conception of, and confidence in, their own individual capability – their sense of self and of belonging in HE. This is revealing about how constructions of capability are deeply connected to sensibilities of belonging in higher education.

From the preliminary data based on approx. half the focus groups and in-depth interviews we have conducted so far (which will number 36 staff and 38 students in total), we have found that students describe 'capability' in an overall sense as socially constructed, but they also explain how they often feel 'anxious' about their ability to learn new work. Students talk about the university's 'independent learning' approach and how this reinforces their concerns about personal in/ability. They say they often feel unsure about where they stand in relation to others. Students also provide detailed accounts of the ways in which their 'sense' of capability is connected to embodied habitus and familiarity with/in institutional contexts, and how dis/connected knowledge is significant in shaping feelings of individual incompetence.

Staff teaching access and first year courses also reveal competing discourses about student capability: they report a dynamic theory on the one hand, which then conflicts with the expression of other de-contextualised, essentialist notions on the other. The essential attributes, which were described as already needing to be formed before study, were described as: 'having a basic level of intelligence', 'the right attitude', 'confidence', 'resilience', 'interest', 'engagement' and the ability to 'strategise'. This study therefore uncovers the subtle, yet powerful role of what is un/intelligible in constituting what matters (Butler 2000) in HE, and by bringing this politics to the fore, we seek to better understand the 'politics of access and participation ... of who is seen as having the right to higher education' (Author 1, 2012, p. 2).

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