

Widening access with success: Using the capabilities approach to confront injustices (0340)

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### **Abstract**

This paper sets out an argument for the value of the capabilities approach (CA) – originally developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum – as a normative framework that enables us to think differently about access and success from a social justice standpoint. In particular, the concepts of freedom, well-being, agency, capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors are covered, drawing on illustrative examples from access contexts to contextualise the theory. The value added to access research by the CA foundational assumption of human diversity, together with how diverse agents and social structures interact is emphasised. The paper draws on the CA and widening participation literature together with a multi-year study in South Africa through which a list of capabilities for socially just university access and success has been developed to illustrate the value of the capabilities approach for access research, policy and practice.

### **Paper**

*Justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live (Sen, 2009:18).*

Much research has documented the persistent inequalities in access to higher education (Dudley Jenkins & Moses, 2014; Mountford-Zimdars, Sabbagh, & Post, 2014). Beyond accessing higher education, these inequalities are further mirrored in student success and graduation trends. Particularly concerning are the global nature and the persistence of inequalities with respect to participation and performance in higher education, even in contexts where participation rates are relatively high. Clearly, widening participation or improving university access with success is an issue of social justice (Marginson, 2011). There are several different theoretical frameworks we might use for thinking about social justice in the context of university access. In this paper I argue for the value of the capabilities approach (CA) as a normative framework that enables us to think differently about access and success from a social justice standpoint.

With roots in the disciplines of economics, philosophy, and development studies, the CA sets out an alternative to the economic construct of utility and resource-based understandings of

social justice within philosophy by placing individual lives and well-being at the centre of our normative concerns. Nussbaum (2011:185) notes, “It is people who matter ultimately, profits are only instrumental to human lives.” This alternative conceptualisation is also helpful for rethinking university access, and in moving beyond human capital ideologies that underpin so much higher education policy and practice at present. In particular, the CA concepts of freedom, well-being, agency, capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors are covered, drawing on illustrative examples from access contexts. The value added to access research by the CA foundational assumption of human diversity, together with how diverse agents and social structures interact is emphasised. Also important is Sen’s (2009) notion of partial justice. He argues that since pragmatically the achievement of a perfectly just society (or university environment) might be unlikely under current conditions, we should thus seek to “clarify how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice, rather than to offer resolutions of questions about the nature of perfect justice” (Sen, 2009:ix).

In making a case for the value of the CA for work on access that seeks to remove injustice, it is useful to begin by posing Sen’s (1979) central question, ‘equality of what?’ in relation to university access. Typically, in access research and policy discussions, the focus is on the participation rates of young people entering and successfully completing their studies. Where participation rates and completion rates are similar, we assume equality of access. Yet, when we look deeper by posing Sen’s central normative questions – “What kind of life is she leading? What does she succeed in being and doing?” (Sen, 1985:195) we find that participation and completion rates tell us little about justice within universities. Like assuming that equality of income implies equality of well-being, assuming equality of access and success based on participation, retention and completion rates is insufficient. Instead, our answer to the question ‘equality of what?’ ought to be, equality of the capabilities to meaningfully participate in higher education and so achieve well-being as a student.

The growing body of research that applies the CA to access and widening participation is opening up our understanding of what the capability to participate in higher education might look like in different contexts (e.g. Hart, 2007; Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom 2015). This paper draws on the CA and widening participation literature together with a multi-year study in South Africa through which a list of capabilities for socially just university access and success has been developed to illustrate the value of the capabilities approach for access research (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Using this list of capabilities as a metric for assessing equality with respect to access and success, rather than enrolment and retention statistics only, would provide a much richer informational basis (Sen, 1999) for identifying the inequalities and injustices at play in students’ lives, and so points toward interventions that universities might consider in an effort to achieve greater equality of student experiences and well-being rather than merely considering equality of participation rates. Revisiting Sen’s question of ‘equality of what?’ – if we see expansion of university access as an issue of social justice, then we cannot be indifferent to the lives that our students can actually live once they enter university (Sen, 2009:18). Interventions seeking to improve access should take account of these capabilities and the personal, social, and environmental conversion factors that impact on their realisation. From this basis, institutions are better placed to create university environments that enable the multidimensional capabilities for participation.

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