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**Title** Epistemological access and epistemic access among university students from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa  
**Submitter** Prof. Monica McLean, Prof. Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Dr. Mikateko Hoepfener, Prof. Melanie Walker, Dr. Merridy Wilson-Strydom, Mr. Mukhove Masutha

## Introduction

In developing countries, a central policy concern is to provide higher education which enables those who have until now been excluded from participation to gain access, to make successful progress, and to build future lives. This paper reports on analysis undertaken in the first year of a four-year mixed-methods longitudinal research project funded by the ESRC-DfID<sup>1</sup> on inclusive higher education learning outcomes for disadvantaged youth in South Africa, who are mainly from rural areas<sup>2</sup>. The research project applies and interrogates the capability approach originally developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000)<sup>3</sup>. Aligned with this approach, university education is conceptualised as expanding individuals' capabilities for intrinsic personal development, for earning a living, and for social inclusion, including democratic participation. It is also seen as a space for the formation of values, where students learn to make reasoned choices about what to be and do ('functionings' in capability terms). The capability approach allows evaluation of the purposes, outcomes, policies and practices of university education from the point of view of students' well-being and agency.

## Theoretical framework

The key question for the capabilities approach is 'equality of what?'. Here we focus on equality of access to university knowledge or 'epistemological access', arguing that it is a condition for 'epistemic contribution' (Fricker, 2015) in society. Scholars have drawn up lists of capabilities for higher education<sup>4</sup> and the capability for 'knowledge' always appears in some form in these lists. The argument here is that coming to understand specific bodies of knowledge at university has a special role as a capability that expands what people value being and doing -their achieved functionings (McLean et al, 2017). We argue that the

1 We acknowledge funding from ESRC-DfID grant number ES/NO0094/1 and the NRF Grant number 86540. The research project (see [www.miratho.com](http://www.miratho.com)) is based on a partnership with the Thusanani Foundation ([www.thusananifoundation.org](http://www.thusananifoundation.org)).

2 The project team includes the Thusanani Foundation, a youth-led organisation supporting disadvantaged South African students gain access to and succeed at university.

3 A key research outcome is the iterative development with diverse academic and non-academic stakeholders of a capabilities-based higher education learning outcomes Index.

4 Boni and Waker, 2013; Bridges, 2013; Calitz, 2016; Crosbie, 2013; Flores-Crespo, 2007; Hoppener, 2016; Loots and Walker, 2016; Ongera, 2016; Walker, 2006; Walker and Fongwa, 2016; Walker and Mclean, 2013.

capability of knowing a specific body of knowledge and being a specific knower forms powerful social identities. Therefore, being such a knower can be considered ‘architectonic’ in Nussbaum’s terms, that is, it should ‘organize and suffuse’ (2000, p.82) all the other capabilities that university education might expand.

Miranda Fricker (2015) has taken up Nussbaum’s ideas. She conceptualises individuals as having rights as knowers, enquirers and tellers in society. These rights can be denied in two ways: first, by way of distributive injustice when people do not have access to epistemic goods, such as education; and, secondly, discriminatory injustice whereby people’s knowledge is not taken as credible or is not understood (Fricker 2009). Epistemic injustice is done to people when they can’t contribute on an equal basis to the shared stock of society’s meanings, ideas, arguments and so on. To express this contribution, she uses Nussbaum’s idea of comprehensive human capabilities to propose that one of these should be ‘epistemic contribution’ (2015). For the purposes of this paper, we take epistemic contribution to be a function of the freedom, power and opportunity (capability) that the knowledge acquired and the knower identity formed at university can open up. Our empirical aim is to explore how the students in the study engaged with the bodies of knowledge they were learning at university.

### **Disadvantaged South African university students’ engagement with knowledge**

We draw on rich reflective life-history interviews with second-year students from five South African universities (n = 65). During the interviews, the students discussed choosing higher education, and the part played by others in getting to university. They also discussed their experiences at university, and their aspirations beyond university. Here we interrogate the data for the role of knowledge acquisition in students’ accounts of being at university.

The students in our study are unusual: few disadvantaged black students access university and, if they do, they are highly likely to drop out. In capability terms, the stories that unfolded about getting to and staying at university until the second year involved the conversion of local resources (family, community and school) into the highly-valued opportunity to go to university. However, with no family or community support, we often heard that being at university was more difficult than getting in. Lack of adequate funding left many deprived of the basic capabilities (Sen, 1987) to eat enough, have somewhere to sleep, and money for basic personal hygiene. Additionally, they did not have money for registration and fees; had long, difficult daily journeys to university; had limited access to technology (with which they were usually wholly unfamiliar) and other resources; and no money for leisure activities.

In these circumstances of severe hardship, students valued learning and knowledge very highly: for them, not only getting a degree but also acquiring useful knowledge will position them to achieve their aspirations for themselves, for their families and for others from poor communities like their own. We will first show how students were employing strategies to maximise their engagement with their courses and to break down the almost impermeable structural barriers that they face: for example, positioning themselves as strong, confident, hardworking ‘knowers’ worthy of their place, differentiating themselves from others both at school and at university. Secondly, we discuss how pedagogical and policy arrangements at the different universities enabled or constrained the students’ capacity for perseverance; hard work; love of discipline or field of study; and the holding of aspirations. We conclude that even without the capability of ‘sufficiency of economic resources’ (Walker,

2017) these students are dedicated to gaining epistemic access which is strongly related to their imaginings about a better life for themselves and others.

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