Rethinking inclusive learning outcomes in higher education: capability formation for socially just HE in the context of South Africa (0472)

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Abstract

This paper addresses learning outcomes in the context of South African higher education (HE). It speaks back to learning outcomes that are narrowly associated with a pre-determined set of measurable academic and employability outcomes, and discusses a capabilities approach based on the work of Sen, which considers the outcomes of learning in a broader, more open frame, rooted in the outcomes that students have reason to value for their lives and futures, and which provides a richer way of understanding inclusion and social justice. The paper draws on data collected from two sweeps of life-history interviews with 65 students from rural and township backgrounds, attending five different universities in South Africa. The paper examines what can be learned from their experience about the challenges and opportunities of not just gaining access to HE, but achieving both intended learning outcomes as well as outcomes that they have reason to value.

Higher education (HE) in South Africa in seen as playing a significant role in growing skills and a knowledge economy and contributing to social mobility. Yet South African HE is characterised by inequalities of access, participation and success. The transition from a racially segregated system has generated equity and quality challenges, especially affecting black students from disadvantaged rural and township backgrounds. The Miratho project (funded by ESRC DfID) seeks to investigate these challenges, and to understand how different factors interact in HE to inhibit or enable outcomes that are valuable to individuals and to building a decent society. A capabilities approach (Sen 1999) is central to the project. 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?

This paper discusses how the capabilities approach speaks back to learning outcomes that are associated with a pre-determined set of measurable academic and employability outcomes. In contrast to this, the capabilities approach (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 therefore 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.

In order to locate this approach within the context of wider debates, the paper considers literature that is particularly relevant to the South African context, and which debates questions of decolonization, whiteness, and epistemologies of the South (Connell 2017; de Sousa Santos 2015; Hlalele and Alexander 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014; Nguyen and Walker 2015; Soudien 2014, 2015; van der Westhuizen 2012), as well as literature from the global north that offers a critique of learning outcomes (for example Entwistle 2005; James 2007).

The paper draws on data collected from two sweeps of in-depth life-history interviews with 65 students from rural and township backgrounds, attending five different universities in South Africa. 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. The paper examines what can be learned from their experience about the challenges and opportunities of not just gaining access to higher education, but achieving learning outcomes at the end of the process. The issue of inclusive learning outcomes is however more than this, and the paper considers how the capability approach provides a basis for addressing not just intended learning outcomes, but the outcomes of learning in a broader and more open frame, which is rooted in the outcomes that students have reason to value for their lives and futures, and which provide a richer way of understanding inclusion and social justice.

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