University access and theories of social justice: contributions of the capabilities approach

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Abstract   Issues of social justice in higher education together with a focus on access or widening participation have become of increasing importance globally. Given the complex theoretical terrain of social justice and the tensions inherent in applying social justice frameworks within higher education, and particularly in the area of access, this paper argues that it is necessary to take a step back and reflect on key theories of social justice and their implications for higher education. The paper considers three leading theorists of social justice whose work is commonly applied in higher education contexts and provides an account of the implications of this work for a specific social justice challenge, that of increasing access to university. The complexities of access and success in South African higher education are used as an illustrative case. On the basis of this conceptual analysis an argument is presented for the capabilities approach as a particularly productive theoretical approach in the context of university access for promoting more just outcomes, through a specific consideration of student agency and the interaction of this agency with institutional contexts.

Keywords   Social justice · Capabilities approach · Access · Widening participation

Introduction

'Social justice' is currently a mantra in higher education and various other fields, and together with related terms such as equity for example tend to "have a *feel good* flavour to them that can cover up the absence of precise meaning" (Brennan and Naidoo 2008, p. 287, emphasis in original). When used as a mantra, the term loses much of its meaning

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and particularly its value in understanding the complexities of higher education. As such, it is necessary to interrogate the notion of social justice, what it means, and why it is helpful in understanding inequality in a higher education context. Debates about justice and fairness are common in the field of university access or participation, and so this provides a useful focus point for a discussion of theories of social justice in relation to higher education more broadly. The difference between increased participation and widened participation and the ways in which these terms are used in policy discourse and practice is one example of how competing social justice claims play out in the access terrain. For example, it is possible to increase participation (more enrolments) without widening participation (more enrolments from previously under-represented groups) (Archer et al. 2003; James 2007). In his analysis of equity and status in Australian higher education, Marginson (2011) points out the inherent tension in higher education equity policy based on whether equity is understood as fairness or inclusion. Equity as fairness argues for, and measures, growth in the absolute numbers of underrepresented groups in higher education, while equity as inclusion considers the proportional representation of underrepresented groups. Depending on the understanding of equity used, quite different pictures emerge as is demonstrated in the South African higher education context.

Higher education transformation in South Africa, since the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s, presents a particularly interesting case study of these social justice dilemmas. Any consideration of higher education in South Africa must take cognisance of the complex historical legacy, and the fact that the country is emerging from a deeply discriminatory, repressive and socially unjust past. From the early 1990s, major changes took place across all levels of society including within higher education. During apartheid there were 36 higher education institutions serving different race and ethnic groups. Following a comprehensive restructuring process these 36 institutions were merged to form 23 institutions; eleven universities, five universities of technology, and six comprehensive universities (CHE 2004). The policy context changed rapidly and explicitly supported increasing and broadening access to university study as one aspect of a strong focus on the redress of past inequalities (Cloete 2002). This commitment to equity and access was reflected in policy documents of the time (MoE 1997, 2001) and continues to be emphasised in more recent policymaking (DHET 2011; NPC 2011). The changing policy environment has translated into many visible changes in the sector. In terms of increasing access/participation (massification), the headcount enrolment in South African higher education increased from 394,700 in 1990 to 892,943 in 2010. With respect to equity, in 1993 African students accounted for 40 % of total enrolment, and by 2010 this had increased to 67 % (CHE 2004, p. 62, 2012, p. 1). Despite these gains, when we look at proportional representation or participation rate per population grouping (equity as inclusion) we see that the participation rate for African students was only 14 % in 2010, compared to 57 % for white students (CHE 2012, p. 3). Further, national cohort studies showed that while 44 % of white students completed a 3 year bachelor's degree in minimum time, only 16 % of African students did so. After 6 years, only 41 % of African students had completed a three-year degree (CHE 2012, p. 51). The sector thus remains plagued with skewed participation and very high dropout, with many students exiting the system with no qualification but having accumulated debt (DHET 2010). The costs of this large drop out, in developmental, human capital, monetary and personal terms, are enormous.

Meaningfully engaging with such complexities and contradictions requires careful consideration of what is meant by social justice and how this translates into policy and practice. Returning to the work of theorists of social justice, and the application of these

theories to the higher education context, is thus critical. Building a deeper understanding of theories of social justice is essential for efforts to identify an approach that can provide a basis for formulating interventions in the interests of a more just higher education system. In this paper the ideas of three key theorists of social justice whose work is commonly used in an educational context are analysed. Using university access in South Africa as the entry point, the paper examines the implications of each theory for tackling the challenges and contradictions of broadening access, identifies gaps, and then presents an argument for the value of the capabilities approach as a particularly productive means of moving the debate forward, within South Africa and internationally.

Examining theories of social justice for a higher education context

Falling within the intersecting realms of philosophy, politics and legal theory, social justice is a topic that has received attention from various perspectives. Miller (1999) provides a useful definition as a starting point for sketching a theoretical landscape of social justice in relation to higher education.

> When we talk and argue about social justice, what exactly are we talking and arguing about? Very crudely, I think, we are discussing how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society. When, more concretely, we attack some policy or some state of affairs as (being) socially unjust, we are claiming that a person, or more usually a category of persons, enjoys fewer advantages than that person or group of persons ought to enjoy (or bears more of the burdens than they ought to bear), given how other members of the society in question are faring (Miller 1999, p. 1).

Drawing on Miller's definition, social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different individuals or groups are faring in comparison with others in a specific context (such as a university) or more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages. One of the leading theorists working in the area of distributive justice is John Rawls.

John Rawls: justice as fairness

In his seminal book, "A Theory of Justice" Rawls presents his case for 'Justice as Fairness.' In order to establish what a fair society would look like Rawls proposes a thought experiment that he calls the 'original position'. The original position is a space in which the thinker is placed behind a 'veil of ignorance' in the sense that one has no knowledge of one's place in society, one's gender, colour of one's skin, social class, profession, abilities etc. Rawls describes the original position as a hypothetical situation in which "no one knows his [sic] place in society, his class position or social status, nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like" (Rawls 1999, p. 11, see also p. 118). He argues further that when behind the veil of ignorance one does not even know what their specific conception of the good life (well-being) is. In this way, his theory of justice was set up to explicitly respect the many different views of what constitutes the good life common in a pluralist society. When deciding on principles of justice from the original position we would not privilege specific individual characteristics, talents, social positions, social institutions, values or judgments about what is good, but would select principles of justice that would be fair to everyone as

we would not be able to select principles more favourable to the type of person that we actually are or our position in society. This line of thinking can be contrasted to utilitarianism which argues that justice implies acting in a manner that benefits the greatest number even if some must be disadvantaged in the process (Rawls 1999; Robeyns 2009; Sandel 2010). Thinking from the original position, Rawls then articulates two main principles that he believes would be chosen as the basis of a just society.

Rawl's first principle states that our position in society—be it economically, socially, due to our family's standing, or in terms of our natural talents and abilities—is the outcome of a "natural lottery" and so is arbitrary from a moral point of view. As a result, one's social position cannot be said to be just and thus cannot be used as the basis for making decisions about fair distribution (Rawls 1999; Sandel 2010, p. 154).[1] The second principle of justice specifically tackles the issue of distribution in the context of social and economic inequalities. This principle is known as the 'difference principle', and argues that inequalities in wealth and social standing are just only if they are of greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (Rawls 1999; Robeyns 2009). Rawls identifies the worst off in society by assessing their holdings of what he calls primary goods which are required for pursuing the good life (Rawls 1999). Primary goods can be described as means or resources. "Primary goods are, according to Rawls, those goods that anyone would want regardless of whatever else they wanted" (Robeyns and Brighouse 2010, p. 1). Thus, in sum, Rawls' work argues for a conception of social justice as fairness, where inequalities can only be seen as just should the inequality lead to the greatest benefit for the least well off (in terms of their holdings of primary goods). In an ideal society, primary goods would be equally distributed.

Applying Rawls' theory to university access

Some aspects of Rawl's theory are useful for understanding access and social justice. Rawl's critique of unfair advantage and the related concept of meritocracy, as well as the idea that policy decisions should be made such that the worst off benefit most are important in the context of access, for example, in making decisions about how bursary funding for needy students should be allocated. However, there are two main criticisms of Rawl's approach to social justice that are pertinent. Arguing against Rawl's identification of the worst off in society on the basis of their access to primary goods, Sen (1979, 2006) points out that this approach does not adequately account for the differences in the extent to which unique individuals are able to actually make use of resources in their lives. For example, consider two first-year South African university students, both from equally poor homes and similar schooling backgrounds, who each receive a student loan of the same amount. Student A lives on campus in residence and is able to meet her financial needs with the loan and a part-time job she has at the university library in the evenings. Student B must take two taxis to reach his home in a nearby township. In addition, his mother is ill with cancer and he must also assist with the costs of her medication as well as her care. Despite the fact that students A and B both have a place at university, and have access to the same financial resource—an equivalent loan—student A is more able to convert this resource into successful university study than student B. As such, considering distribution of resources as the primary means of determining justice hides important aspects of inequality and so potentially perpetuates injustice—as has arguably been the case with

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[1] Sandel (2010, p. 154) applies this principle to the concept of fair meritocracy regarding university admissions criteria.

respect to broadening access in South Africa, the result of which has been high dropout for many students, often with accumulated debt (DHET 2010; Wilson-Strydom 2012).

Secondly, several authors (Fraser 1996; Gewirtz 1998; Robeyns 2009; Young 1990) argue that the focus of Rawl's work on distributive justice is a limiting conception of social justice which embodies much more than distributive elements only. In particular, the works of Iris Marion Young (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1996, 1997)—who both start off from a critique of distributive justice—have been quite widely used in education and higher education contexts, and it is to the work of these two theorists that the paper now turns.

Iris Marion Young: justice and the politics of difference

In "Justice and the Politics of Difference" Young begins with a detailed critique of distributive approaches to justice (Young 1990). There are two main aspects to her critique of distributive theories of justice. The first is that a focus on the allocation of resources (wealth, income and positions in society) and/or material goods masks important social structures and institutional contexts (including decision-making power, procedures, division of labour and culture) which determine distribution patterns and so impact on social justice. Related is the concern that distributive theories of justice tend to take the form of ideal theories and so assume that ideal social structures and institutions are in place (Young 1990, pp. 18–24). In seeking to overcome these difficulties, theorists of distributive justice often argue that they do not only focus on material goods, but also include non-material goods such as respect, power, or opportunity. Rawl's list of primary goods is an example in point; including, amongst others, basic liberties, freedom of movement and choice, and the social basis of self-respect (Rawls 1999; see also, Robeyns and Brighouse 2010). This argument does not convince Young. Instead, she argues that this understanding of non-material social goods assumes that they are static end-state patterns (or things) rather than complex social processes based on, often conflicting, rules and relationships making up social life (Young 1990).

Although she critiques theories of distributive justice, Young does not argue that distribution is unimportant, but rather that a focus on distribution of resources alone is not sufficient. She contends that there are two social conditions that define injustice; namely: oppression and domination (Young 1990). Young identifies 'five faces of oppression'—exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. She argues that these five faces of oppression make up a family of concepts and conditions that constitute injustice. These ideas have been usefully applied in an education context by various authors (see for example, Eisenberg 2006; Gewirtz 1998, 2006).[2] Gewirtz (2006) uses Young's formulation of justice—particularly the notions of understanding social justice as a multidimensional concept, in context rather than as an ideal theory—to analyse educational policy in England. Although specifically noting that Young did not directly apply her ideas on social justice to education policy, Eisenberg (2006) uses Young's work to think through the many challenges that arise in the politics of education. She demonstrates how Young's ideas apply to the challenge within an education context of "equalising and expanding the opportunities of individuals both in terms of the jobs they might have access to and therefore the material resources they can hope to enjoy, and in terms of their role as citizens and therefore in terms of their cultural status, inclusion and political power" (Eisenberg 2006, p. 13). Concrete strategies for breaking down structures of

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[2] In 2006 a special edition of the journal Educational Philosophy and Theory focusing on the application of Young's work in education was published.

oppression in an education context would include for example, curricula and programmes that both reflect and raise awareness of societies consisting of multicultural, multinational and multilingual groupings, as well as tackling issues of oppression and domination such as racism, sexism and so on. The targeted appointment of decision makers in education contexts who represent disadvantaged groups is also important (Eisenberg 2006). This focus on disadvantaged *groups* is a central theoretical standpoint taken by Young (1990, 2001).

Young (1990, p. 40, see also 2001) is explicit in her formulation of oppression and injustice that "oppression is a condition of groups." As such, oppression occurs when a group experiences any of the five faces of oppression. In this context, a group is defined as "a collection of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life" (Young 1990, p. 43). Young argues that groups—as social processes—constitute the individual's notion of self, and as such, the unit of analysis should be at the level of the group and not at the level of the person. Taking this line of argumentation further, she states that social justice "requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression" (Young 1990, p. 47, see also 2006a, b). In some of her later writing (including a 2006 paper specifically focused on education), Young (2001, 2006a) clarifies her standing with regard to viewing injustice as a condition of groups. She argues that structural injustices (inequalities produced through social processes) tend to operate on various groupings of people—be it groupings based on race, gender, age, ability and so on—rather than on individuals. However, this does not mean that the ultimate purpose of promoting justice and equality should be limited to groups. Instead, Young (2001, p. 6) notes that "the ultimate purpose for making assessments of inequality is to promote the well-being of individuals considered as irreducible moral equals" but that this assessment should take place at the level of the group since "groups are positioned by social structures that constrain and enable individual lives in ways largely beyond their individual control." This argument bears similarity to some of the tenets of the capabilities approach presented below. However, the fundamental limitation for understanding social justice in higher education contexts is that Young's approach does not provide sufficient analytical space for understanding individual differences and agency which is critical in an education context.

Applying Young's theory to university access

Applying Young's approach to university access would require that the unit of analysis become various groupings of students—perhaps by gender, race or class, first generation students, or students with poor schooling backgrounds. The focus would be on how the university can ensure that these groups are recognised and respected and that they do not experience any or all of the five faces of oppression. Young would argue that the social groups that are marginalised in a university setting must be provided a meaningful space to participate in the life of the institution and in decision making processes (Young 2006b). While the representation of marginalised groups within the university is important, as is an institutional understanding of how group membership impacts on access and success, Young's approach does not provide a means for understanding individual agency and individual differences. When one works with students, the importance of seeing a student as part of a group (or multiple groups) as well as an individual who is operating within a specific personal, social, economic and familial context that may be quite different from the context of other group members is clear. Working in the context of widening

participation in Britain, Hart (2011, p. 2) argues that "whilst significant group differences can be helpful in indicating patterns of inequality this is not adequate to comprehensively identify disadvantage for specific individuals." We cannot assume that all first-generation students for example are grappling with the same issues, although we know that there are likely to be areas of commonality. The example of the two students who receive equivalent loans presented above is a case in point. Thus, Young's analytical privileging of the group over the individual limits the value of this approach for fully understanding inequality and injustice in higher education.

Nancy Fraser: parity of participation

Like Young, the feminist philosopher, Fraser (1996, 1997, 2009) takes issue with too narrow a focus on distributive justice. She argues instead that distributive justice (socio-economic dimension), justice as recognition (cultural dimension), and justice as representation (political dimension) should be accommodated in theory of social justice. She thus presents an argument for a multidimensional approach to justice that she calls parity of participation (Fraser 1996, 1997, 2009; see also, Tikly and Barrett 2011). For Fraser,

> [the] meaning of justice is parity of participation…justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social life (Fraser 2009, p. 16).

The work of Fraser further deepens our understanding of the forms (in)justice can take, and how these forms are interrelated. The first dimension, *redistribution*, is a form of socioeconomic justice. In a social, political and economic climate of injustice, this dimension requires the redistribution of wealth, opportunity, and material resources to those from whom this has been excluded. The second dimension, *recognition*, is related to cultural and symbolic issues and is "rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication" (Fraser 1997, p. 71). Injustices in this dimension include cultural domination, rendering certain cultures or groups 'invisible', disrespect of difference and stereotyping for example. The third dimension, *representation*, falls into the political realm. Representation is about who belongs or is included within a community or society, decision making and contestation procedures, and how participation occurs. Fraser (2009, p. 16) argues that this political dimension of justice "furnishes the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out." Thus, social justice understood as *parity of participation*, "requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers" (Fraser 1996, p. 30). For this participatory parity to be realised it the distribution of material resources must allow for participants to be independent and have a voice, as well as that "institutionalized cultural patterns of interpretation and evaluation express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem" (Fraser 1996, p. 31).

Applying Fraser's theory to university access

The concept of parity of participation can also be usefully applied in understanding the complexities of university access. At the broadest level, widening access is about expanding participation. The dimension of redistribution can be applied to issues of funding, changing student demographics and is seen in arguments about the need to increase the proportion of young black people in higher education and the need to ensure

that those from poor backgrounds are provided with financial support. The dimension of recognition is particularly important, and arguably, not always given sufficient attention in the context of access. This aspect of social justice requires attention to be drawn to issues of students learning in a language different from their mother tongue, the extent to which diverse groups of students are respected in the manner in which the university welcomes its new students, and the extent to which the university and academic staff make assumptions about individual students based on their group membership. The increasing concern with identifying 'at risk' students and what this means in terms of how such students are positioned within the university would be an example in point (Smit 2012). The final dimension, representation, operates at the level of the political. In the context of access, this would turn our attention to the manner in which access decisions are made, the way in which students are represented by student leaders, and broader decision making processes regarding the organisation of the first year of university.

The relevance of Fraser's work notwithstanding, the concept of participatory parity does not pay sufficient attention to individual agency. For example, based on her work, also in the South African higher education context, Leibowitz states that "with an emphasis on social structure and inequality is the potential tendency to attribute deficit, pathology or victimhood to members of oppressed groups" (Leibowitz 2009, p. 94) and so to assume that higher education is an activity that is done to students and not with them, an approach she suggests is a one-dimensional view of social justice in education and also of human development more broadly. In proposing a model for teaching and learning as a pedagogy of possibility, Leibowitz argues for the importance of adding to Fraser's three dimensions a clear formulation of how agency and structure interact. Privileging structural issues over agency is potentially deterministic and "seems to fail to account for the existence of agency, or the will to succeed against the odds, despite one's social class background" (Leibowitz 2009, p. 95). A similar argument can be made regarding access. Although Leibowitz makes passing reference to the capabilities approach and the work of Walker (2006) as a means of doing this, she does not take up this line of argument specifically (Leibowitz 2009). It is to this complex challenge of adequately accounting for individual agency and heterogeneity together with social/institutional structures in our understanding of social justice that the final section of this paper is directed.

Social justice and the capabilities approach

While each of the three theories of social justice discussed above make important contributions to our understanding of access and social justice, each also has gaps. For example, Rawls's theory does not pay sufficient attention to the conversion of resources into abilities to function, Young's focus on groups as the unit of analysis might obscure understanding of individual differences and agency, and similarly Fraser's work does not allow sufficient analytical space to account for agency and the lived realities of students' lives. This section argues that the capabilities approach—as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum—provides a productive means of filling these gaps, particularly in the context of university access. The capabilities approach takes as the starting point the well-being of individuals and asks about the extent to which individuals are able to be and do what they have reason to value being and doing, i.e. their quality of life (Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Sen 1985, 1999). When applied to university access, the starting point would then be an assessment of what students are able to be and do and what students have reason to value being and doing when they enter university. This focus on wellbeing can be

contrasted with the tendency to assess access gains largely by presenting measurable statistics that count enrolment numbers of students from different demographic groupings (Hart 2008), important as these numbers are for understanding part of the access picture. Within the capabilities approach, functionings are akin to outcomes and refer to the achievement of being and doing what one has reason to value. Capabilities, closely related to functionings though distinctive, refer to opportunity freedoms, or the freedom an individual has to enjoy the functionings necessary for their well-being (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999). When we consider issues of justice or injustice we cannot merely ask whether different students have achieved the same outcome (equity), but rather, whether different students have had the same opportunities to achieve the outcome (consider again the example of students A and B presented above). Agency is central, together with notions of opportunity and choice. However, agency is not given primacy to the extent that social structures, institutions and contexts are insufficiently accounted for. Indeed, it is the manner in which the capabilities approach foregrounds agency together with the interaction of agents and social contexts that potentially breaks new ground. The conceptual device used within the capabilities approach for bringing structure and agency together is the notion of conversion factors (Robeyns 2003; Sen 1999; Walker and Unterhalter 2007).[3]

People differ in many ways and these differences affect the extent to which they can convert opportunities into achievements (functionings) (Sen 1979, 1985, 1999). While differences do not inherently imply inequality, differences become inequalities when they impact on capabilities (opportunity freedoms). Sen reminds us that "there is evidence that the conversion of goods to capabilities varies from person to person substantially, and the equality of the former may still be far from the equality of the latter" (Sen 1979, p. 219). Conversion factors such as personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives, and distribution within the family (Sen 1999, p. 71) impact on the extent to which a given individual is able to make use of available resources to achieve capabilities and functionings. For example, a student who is blind is different from a student who can see. This difference is not inherently a form of inequality, but if Braille text books and other learning support needed for blind students is not provided, then the educational capabilities of the blind student will be limited compared to the student who is not blind (see also, Nussbaum 2000, 2003). This would be an instance of injustice. The blind student requires different resources and conditions compared to the sighted student, to be afforded an equivalent opportunity to perform (see also, Walker and Unterhalter 2007).

Paying attention to conversion factors provides a mechanism for understanding what is needed to realise potential outcomes (functionings) (Walker and Unterhalter 2007). A focus on conversion factors is particularly useful in the context of an unequal education system, and in seeking to formulate ways in which to enhance the capabilities of those who currently have limited options, often due to the social contexts in which they find themselves (Student B for example). The provision of educational resources or providing more places at university is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure a more just and equitable higher education system. It is the relationship between the available resources and the ability of each student to convert these into valued capabilities and then make choices

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[3] In the context of adult education in OECD countries, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) incorporate the capabilities approach within their framework of 'Bounded Agency' which also seeks to bring agency, social and institutional structures together in useful ways. This is done by considering the interdependence of welfare state policies and educational opportunities and barriers. A full consideration of the role of the welfare state and related policies is beyond the scope of this paper, but potentially opens up a fruitful space for further research in the South African higher education context.

which will inform their actual functionings (outcomes) that ought to be evaluated (Walker 2006). Thus, the capabilities approach emphasises the role of individual agency and choice, but reminds us that the agency freedom individuals have is qualified and constrained by social, political and economic factors and opportunities. In a higher education context, it is important to analyse the interplay between individual student's agency and social arrangements or institutional conditions of possibility that enable or constrain opportunities for diverse students (Walker 2006). The relatively small, but growing body of research applying the capabilities approach to higher education begins to point towards methodologies for exploring the role of agency within institutional contexts. In this way, the capabilities approach provides a means for researching the processes underlying both different and similar outcomes (functionings) of broadened access in a manner that exposes injustices that may otherwise be masked, and hence unintentionally lead to the unjust outcomes of extremely high dropout for many students.

Applying the capabilities approach to access

When applied in the context of university access, the capabilities approach draws attention to the importance of understanding students' everyday lives and experiences, and the conditions (personal, social, economic, environmental) that enable and constrain students' wellbeing and performance. As such, the capabilities approach shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions (social contexts) that enable diverse students (agents) to make choices about what they want to be and do (Walker 2006). A capabilities approach to university access can thus bring to the fore the unequal conversion of higher education opportunities that arguably perpetuate everyday injustices that work against the development of a more just higher education environment. The potential of this approach to uncover masked injustices was demonstrated above with the example of Students A and B.

While policy and practice that seeks to provide access opportunities for students who are typically excluded from universities is critical, increasing equity in terms of numbers participating is not sufficient if the educational experience of students does not enable success (Hart 2008). Instead, we need to shift our analytical focus to understanding the conversion factors that enhance or limit students' capabilities to convert their place at university into successful functioning as a university student. Drawing on the theoretical developments of Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) the identification of 'fertile functionings' (achievements and conditions that are enabling of other functionings), and 'corrosive disadvantages' (disadvantages that compound and lead to further disadvantage) provide important entry points for the formulation of interventions that can enhance capabilities for success. Using a capabilities-based framework for tackling issues of injustice thus emphasises a depth of analysis that takes account of individual differences and how these play out in the context of particular institutional arrangements. A capabilities informed approach to access would require universities to put in place policies and practices that recognise the complexity of student lives and to invest in interventions that seek to overcome factors identified as corrosive disadvantages whilst building on fertile functionings. For example, Wilson-Strydom (2012, p. 274) applied the capabilities approach to the transition to university in South Africa to identify key points of intervention at school and university levels. The research showed that although equity of access is important, to be meaningful and to avoid creating new forms of injustice as discussed above, interventions are needed that tackle personal and social conversion factors that include (1) learning cultures in schools and universities that undermine student wellbeing and performance, (2) the need to foster the will and confidence to learn at school and university,

(3) the actions of school teachers and principals in promoting awareness of university readiness and, (4) broadening the role of university marketing beyond selling/promoting specific universities to enhancing readiness through the provision of meaningful information about what is required at university.

Conclusion

This theoretical paper has presented an overview of how the work of key theorists of social justice might be applied in the context of access to university. It has been argued that although the work of Rawls, Young, and Fraser offer important insights, that each is limited in specific ways. Rawls's work contributes to access for social justice by advancing a critique of unfair advantage and meritocracy as well as by drawing attention to the need to focus on benefits for the least well-off when making social justice claims. Young's approach details the role of social structures, institutions, and group membership in creating and maintaining injustices, and Fraser's multidimensional account of social justice (and in particular her concept of participatory parity) help us to interrogate structural aspects of the access terrain. Nonetheless, it was argued that Rawl's focus on primary goods was limiting in the context of access because conversion of the resource of a place at university into successful performance is not a given. Further, both Young and Fraser's theories that emphasise social and institutional structures do not take sufficient account of students' agency and individual differences. In response, the capabilities approach was advanced as a generative approach for theorising social justice in the context of university access that potentially opens up new ways of understanding these limitations, and then opportunities for overcoming them, by placing students' lives and well-being centrally. As such, the capabilities approach provides a means of understanding the deeply divided South African higher education system in a manner that usefully weaves together individual agency and choice with the impact of social contexts on this agency, using the analytical device of conversion factors. This understanding provides the foundations for paving the way towards institutional interventions that could contribute to creating a more just university environment.

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