What is the capabilities approach? What is its potential and limitations in post-secondary education research?

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Purpose

• To provide an outline of the capabilities approach
• Explore its potential & limitations in post-secondary education research
• Demonstrate how we’ve applied it in our work
  – Pathways between education & the labour market
  – Privatisation of vocational education in Australia
  – Education International – social justice in TVET
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Leping Mou  |  Aiman Jafar  |  Dr. Saewan Koh

Edmund Adam  |  Jennifer Hounsell  |  Norin Taj

Current members
Education International project
SSHRC project
Outline

• Briefly discuss origins
• Outline the capabilities approach
• Compare capabilities & human capital approaches
• Use it to think about education & training
• Discuss caveats
• How we’ve used capabilities
• ‘Productive’ capabilities
• Moving from the individual to systems & institutions
Capabilities approach

- Amartya Sen
  - Economist Nobel Laureate

- Martha Nussbaum
  - US Philosopher
The capability (or capabilities) approach

• “The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society.” (Robeyns, 2005: 95)
Capabilities

• Ability to make choices to live the life we have reason to value: “to be & do”
• Capacities that people have to make choices about how they will live, love and live a life they have reason to value.
Yardstick of measurement

• “Capabilities do not necessarily coincide with the possession of commodities or with happiness. Rather, the capability approach proposes that individual assessment should be concerned with what the persons are actually capable of being and doing, i.e. their capability.” Bonvin 2015
Difference between human capital & capabilities

• “At the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that the literature on human capital tends to concentrate on the agency of human beings in augmenting production possibilities. The perspective of human capability focuses, on the other hand, on the ability – the substantive freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have. The two perspectives cannot but be related, since both are concerned with the role of human beings, and in particular with the actual abilities that they achieve and acquire.

• But the yardstick of assessment concentrates on different achievements” (Sen 2007: 99).
Why not a focus on equality of access to resources?

• “…different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage.” (Robeyns 2005: 97)

• Taken up very early by the disabilities movement – focus on resources to ensure people had equality of capabilities rather than equal access to resources
3 core components

- **Capabilities**
  - The freedom & capacities & resources needed to make choices about how to live

- **Functionings**
  - The outcomes people achieve through using their capabilities

- **Agency**
  - Ability to pursue & realise goals have reason to value

- **Capabilities are relational**
Two more key concepts

• **Goods or services or resources** that provide the means to achieve functionings

• **Conversion factors** – characteristics of society & environment in which people live (Bryson 2015)
Bryson

Goods, services, resources (with certain characteristics)

Capabilities = Opportunity set of potential functionings

Achieved functionings

Choice

Agency

Freedom to achieve

Means to achieve

Personal, social, environmental Conversion factors

From: Jane Bryson (2015: 557) Putting skill in its place
Journal of Vocational Education & Work, early online
Bryson

Goods, services, resources (with certain characteristics)

Capabilities = Opportunity set of potential functionings

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Freedom to achieve

From: Jane Bryson (2015: 557) Putting skill in its place Journal of Vocational Education & Work, early online
Dimensions of agency (& freedom)

- Agency
  - Process freedom
  - Opportunity freedom
Process freedom – individuals should be free to choose

Bonvin 2012: 12 citing Hirschman 1970
Opportunity freedom
Without both we get…

Formal freedom
Without both we get…

Paternalism

Formal freedom
What are the implications for policy & research?

• “…placing the focus of public policies on capabilities rather than functionings makes a huge difference – and not only to empirical research…The objective will not be to adequately equip young people in terms of resources or skills and competences but to provide them with capabilities, i.e. with as much real freedom to choose their way of living as possible.”

Kjeldsen & Bonvin 2015
Lovely work from European Union project

http://www.society-youth.eu/
Employability versus Capability: Schröer 2015

Capabilities

- for work
- for education
- for voice
Commodity fetishism – Marx

• “In Karl Marx’s critique of political economy, commodity fetishism is the perception of the social relationships involved in production, not as relationships among people, but as economic relationships among the money and commodities exchanged in market trade. As such, commodity fetishism transforms the subjective, abstract aspects of economic value into objective, real things that people believe have intrinsic value.”

• https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodity_fetishism
Caveats in using the capabilities approach
Caveat 1: not a prescription

- Tikly (2013: 22) “the capability approach should not be seen as providing ready made answers to the policy issues and challenges facing TVET today…it should be seen as a way of framing issues and as a starting point for evaluating policy choices”
Caveat 2: doesn’t replace social analysis

- Capabilities don’t *explain* causes of disadvantage – this requires a substantive social analysis
- Need to provide a *social context* for development of capabilities
“The tendency to imagine that training skilled workers produces skilled jobs for them to fill is a common, though scarcely innocent, delusion in the discourse of the ‘knowledge based economy’. Thus the tendency to elaborate internal conditions but not external conditions of their achievement easily becomes complicit in neoliberal discourses that attempt to shift responsibility from the state to individuals and from welfare to workfare…”
Exhibit A: Indigenous policy in Far North Queensland in Australia

- Used to justify paternalistic & directive policies – eg, income management, welfare to work policies, re-engineer social norms
- Seeks to create individual responsibility by denying agency, & thus a core component of the approach
Caveat 3: can’t fix problems in the labour market

- May help qualifications & curriculum be more holistic & developmental but...
- Realisation of capabilities requires transforming broader social relations, particularly in work – need jobs & expansive learning environments
- Government policy needs to focus on labour market as well as VET
McGrath & Powell 2015: 18
VET must be reimagined

• “We argue that the reimagined purpose of VET should be grounded in a view of work, and hence skills for work, that is decent, life-enhancing, solidaristic, gender-aware, environmentally-sensitive and intergenerationally-minded. Such a view must confront the reality that much current VET is complicit in preparing people for work that lacks some or all of these characteristics…” ”
Caveat 4: can’t teach capabilities in abstract

- Can’t directly ‘teach’ capabilities, can only provide the conditions for agency
- Lists don’t help VET – results in generic skills
- Requires a notion of the agent, their context & broader social conditions
Starts with the person & not specific skills

• Capacity to exercise skill at work is emergent property of complexity

• Arises from inter-relationship between personal, social & working lives

• Learning for work needs to go beyond work
How we’ve used the capabilities approach in our work on vocational education
Current models of skills development

- Jobs
- Skills
What’s missing? Current models of skills development
What’s missing? Current models of skills development
What’s missing? Current models of skills development
The capabilities approach

The interaction between education & work

Structure of work: families of linked occupations
So what are *productive* capabilities?

- A response to employability skills & generic skills (which are a fantasy)
- Can’t have a ‘list’ of capabilities
- Capabilities for work, education, & voice need to reflect the broad field of practice
  - Individuals need knowledge, skills & attributes to participate in their field
  - Individuals need to be citizens *in their occupation* as well as in society
Moving from the individual to institutions – the impact of privatisation

- Sen explains that we live and operate in a world of institutions: “Our opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function…Not only do institutions contribute to our freedoms, their roles can be sensibly evaluated in the light of their contributions to our freedoms” (1999: 123).
The capabilities approach and vocational education systems

• Implications for the vocational education system, funding & governance
• Importance of local actors – the role of colleges
• Capabilities as the basis of qualifications (not outcomes based education tied to work)
Importance of local actors

- Institutional frameworks & social partnerships underpin the development of capabilities
- Requires contextually appropriate approaches & local actors to mediate
Central intervention vs local autonomy

• The capability framework does not call for the disappearance of all forms of central intervention, but it requires that it should be framed in such a way as to allow the local actors to have their say at all stages of the policy process. (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2006: 136)
Importance of anchor institutions – what colleges do

• Link local institutions & social partners in developing local solutions that support sustainable social & economic development, particularly in partnership with local communities

• Requires high trust in local actors & flexible national policy

• Colleges not an interchangeable actor in the market
Conclusion

- Capabilities approach helpful in:
  - Developing policy
  - Evaluating policy
- Different starting point to human capital
- But caveats in how it can be used – these matter
- However, it has much to offer us…
References


More references

Some specific HE readings (not so much on colleges or VET)

You may want to visit:

• Professor Melanie Walker, University of The Free State
  – https://www.ufs.ac.za/hehd/home/general/professor-melanie-walker

• The Human Development and Capability Association
  – https://www.hd-ca.org/

• Journal of Human Development and Capabilities
  – https://search.library.utoronto.ca/details?7724987&uuid=caf6b3b9-e59f-46ce-b87b-3edb39fac8f9
Thank you!