

# 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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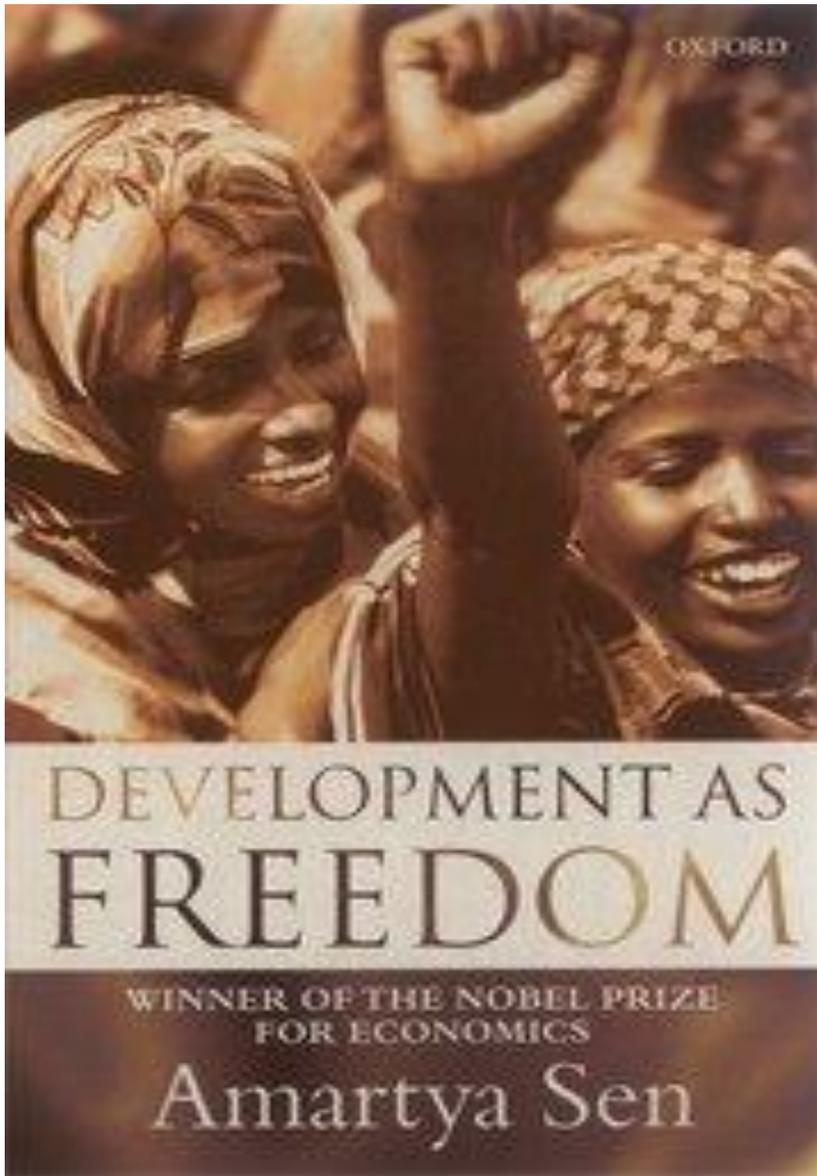
# Outline

- 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





Martha C. Nussbaum

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WOMEN AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
The Capabilities Approach

# 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



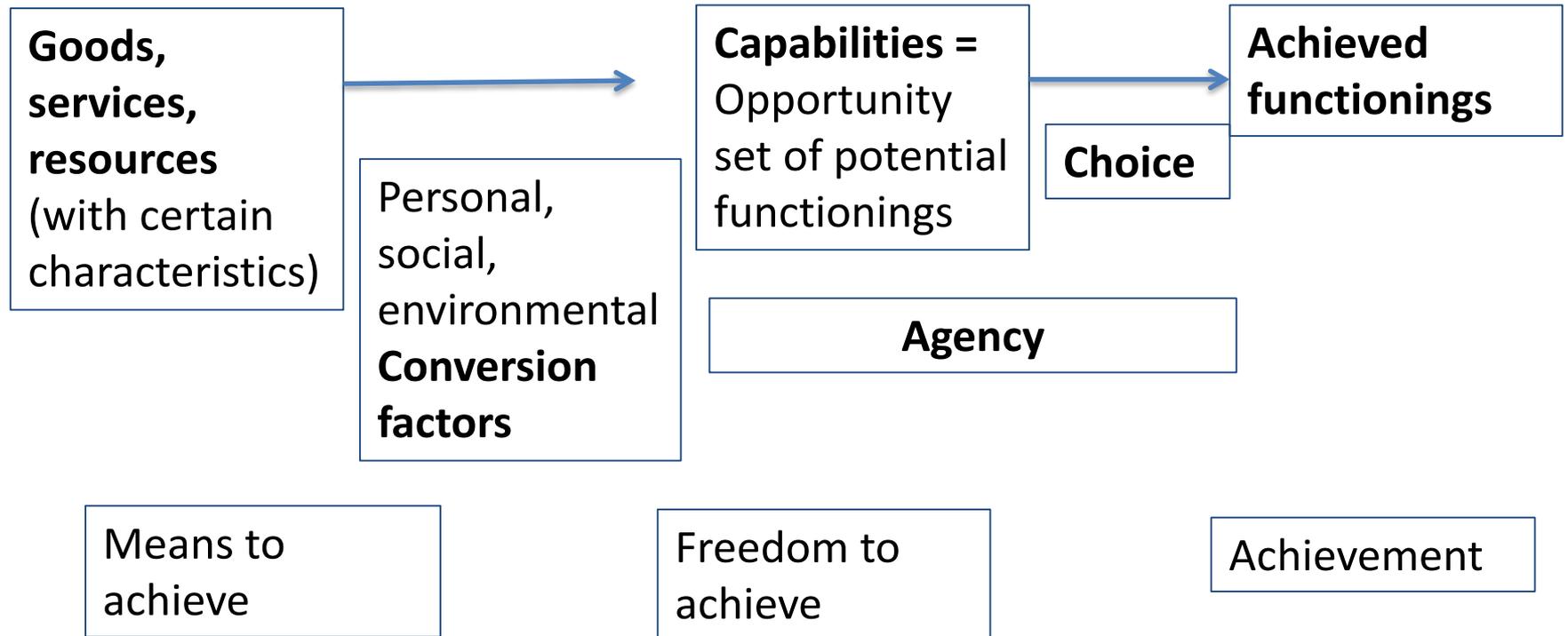
# 3 core components

- 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

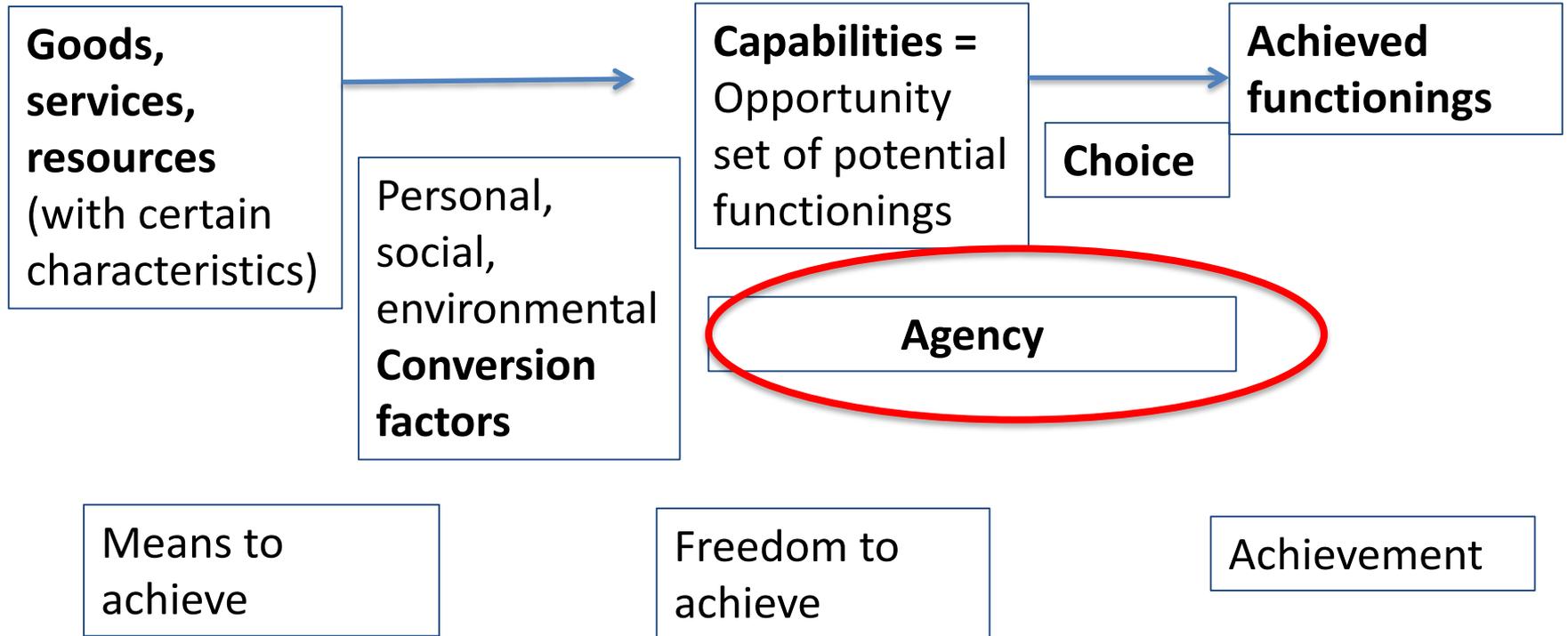
- *Goods or services or resources* that provide the means to achieve functionings
- *Conversion factors* – characteristics of society & environment in which people live (Bryson 2015)

# Bryson



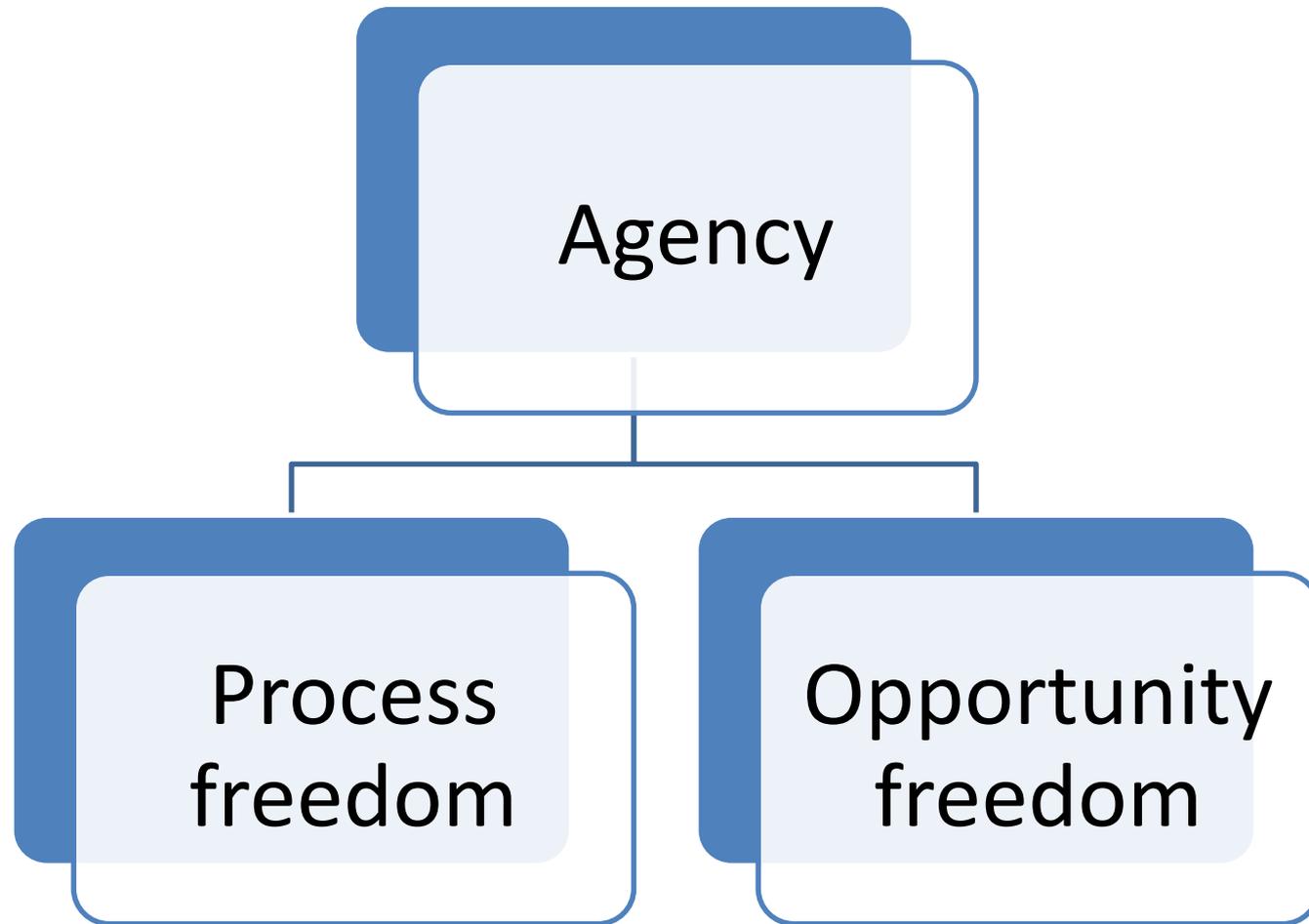
From: Jane Bryson (2015: 557) Putting skill in its place  
Journal of Vocational Education & Work, early online

# Bryson



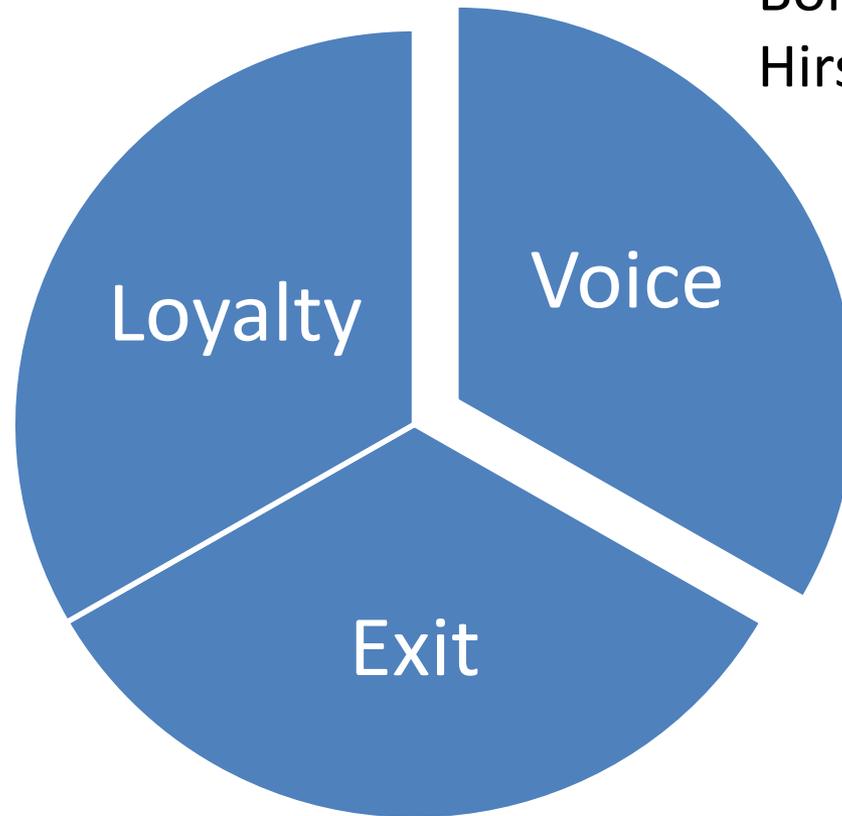
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# Dimensions of agency (& freedom)



# 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...



Formal  
freedom

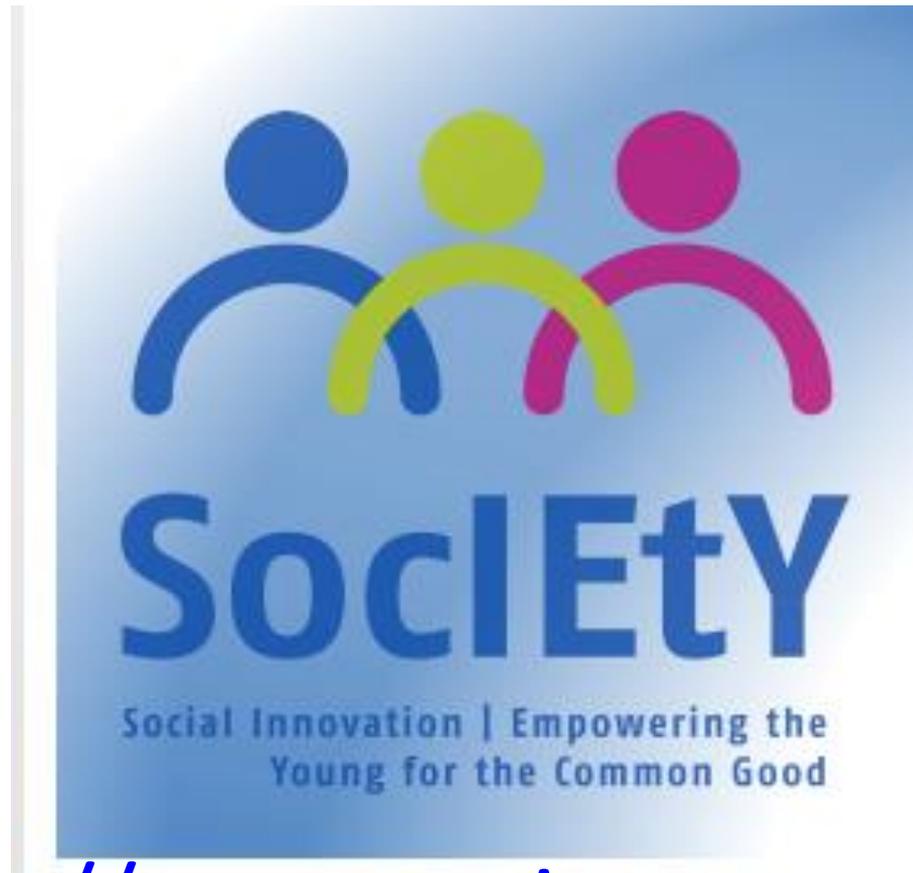
Paternalism



# What are the implications for policy & research?

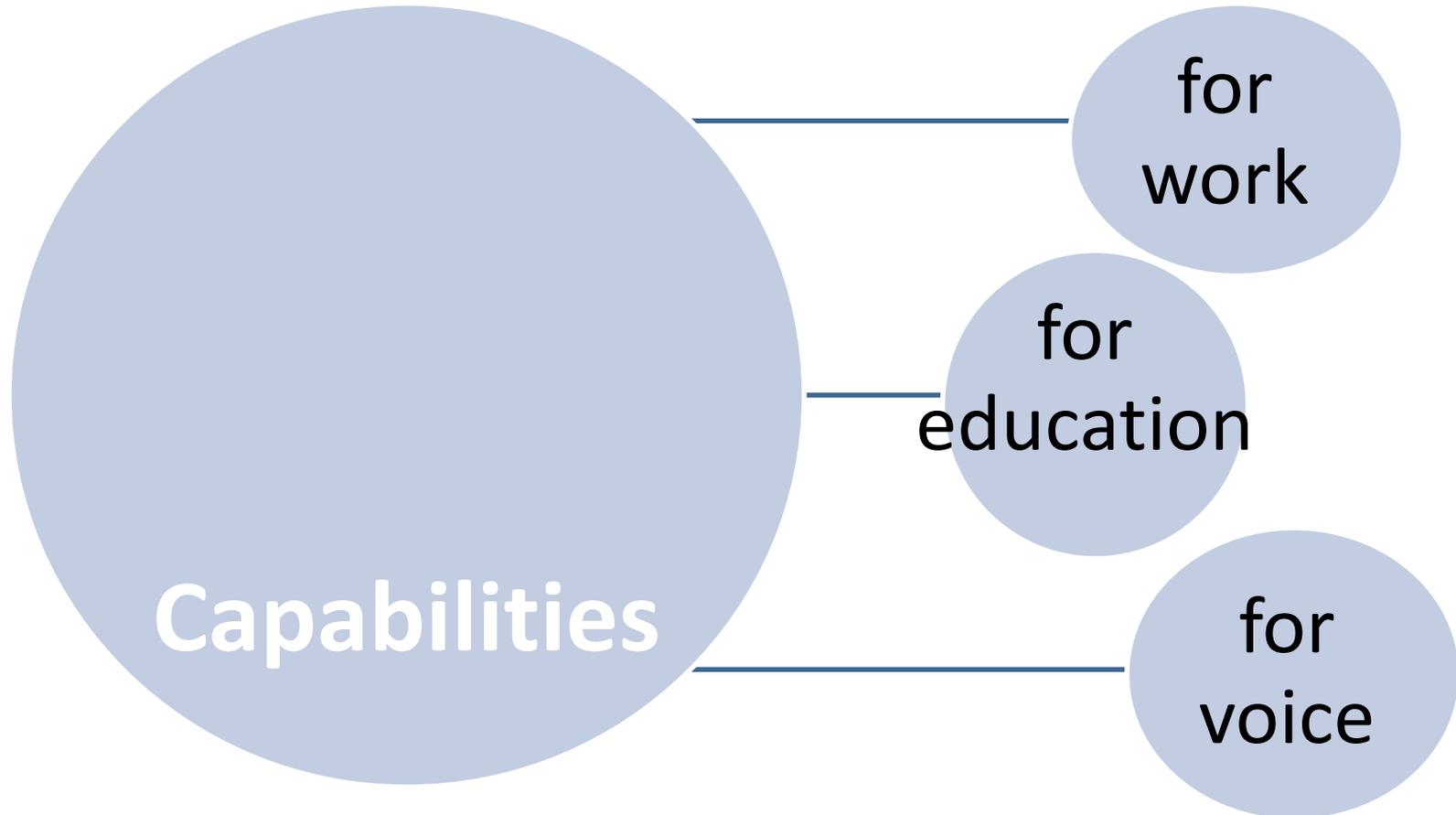
- “...placing the focus of public policies on capabilities rather than functionings makes a huge difference – and not only to empirical research...The objective will not be to adequately equip young people in terms of resources or skills and competences but to provide them with capabilities, i.e. with 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: Schröder 2015



# 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](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



# Andrew Sayer 2012

- “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
- Klein, Elise. (2015). *A critical review of the capability approach in Australian Indigenous policy*:  
<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2015WP102.php>

# 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



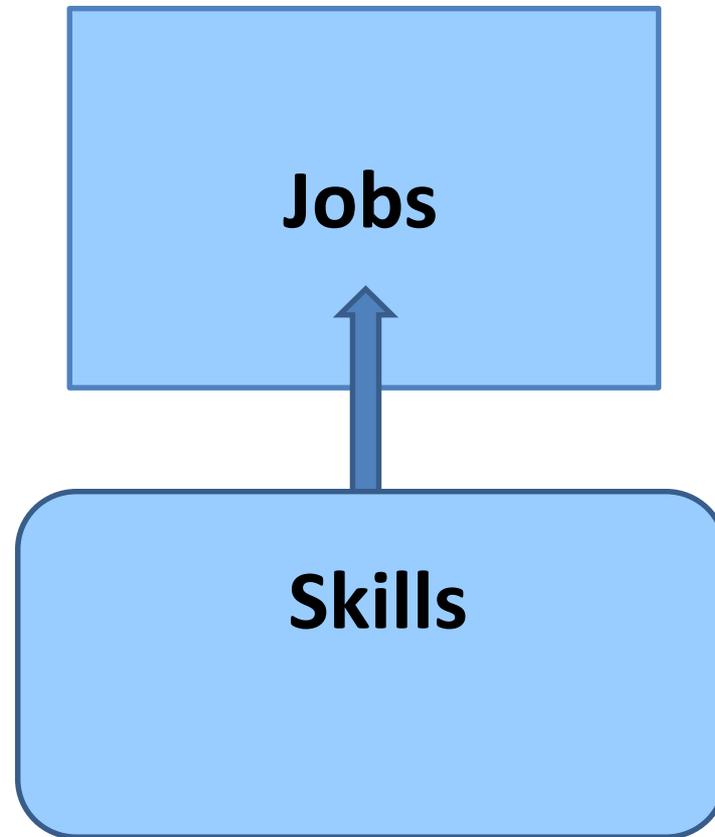
# Starts with the person & not specific skills

- 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

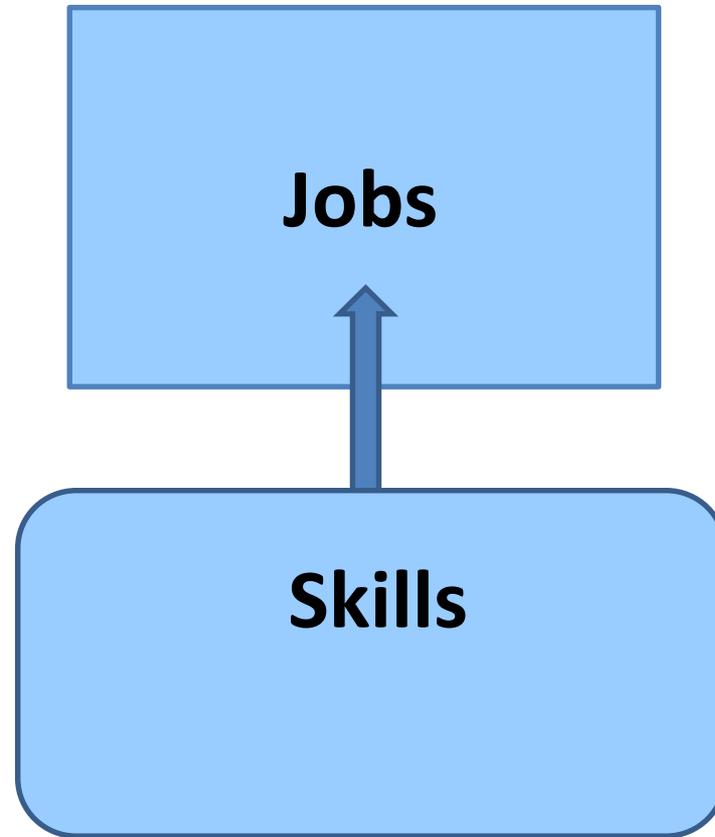
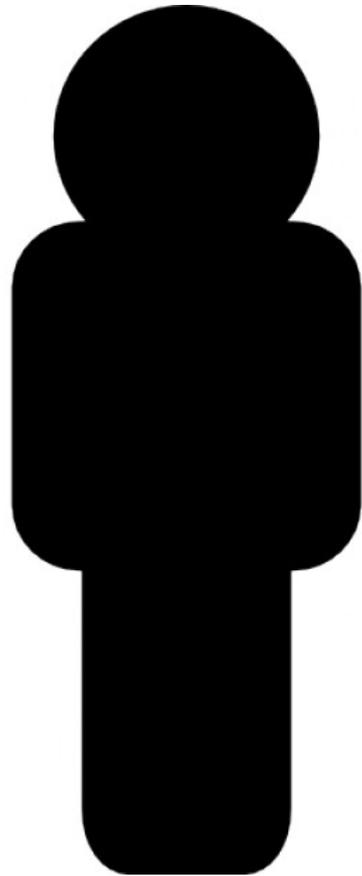


# How we've used the capabilities approach in our work on vocational education

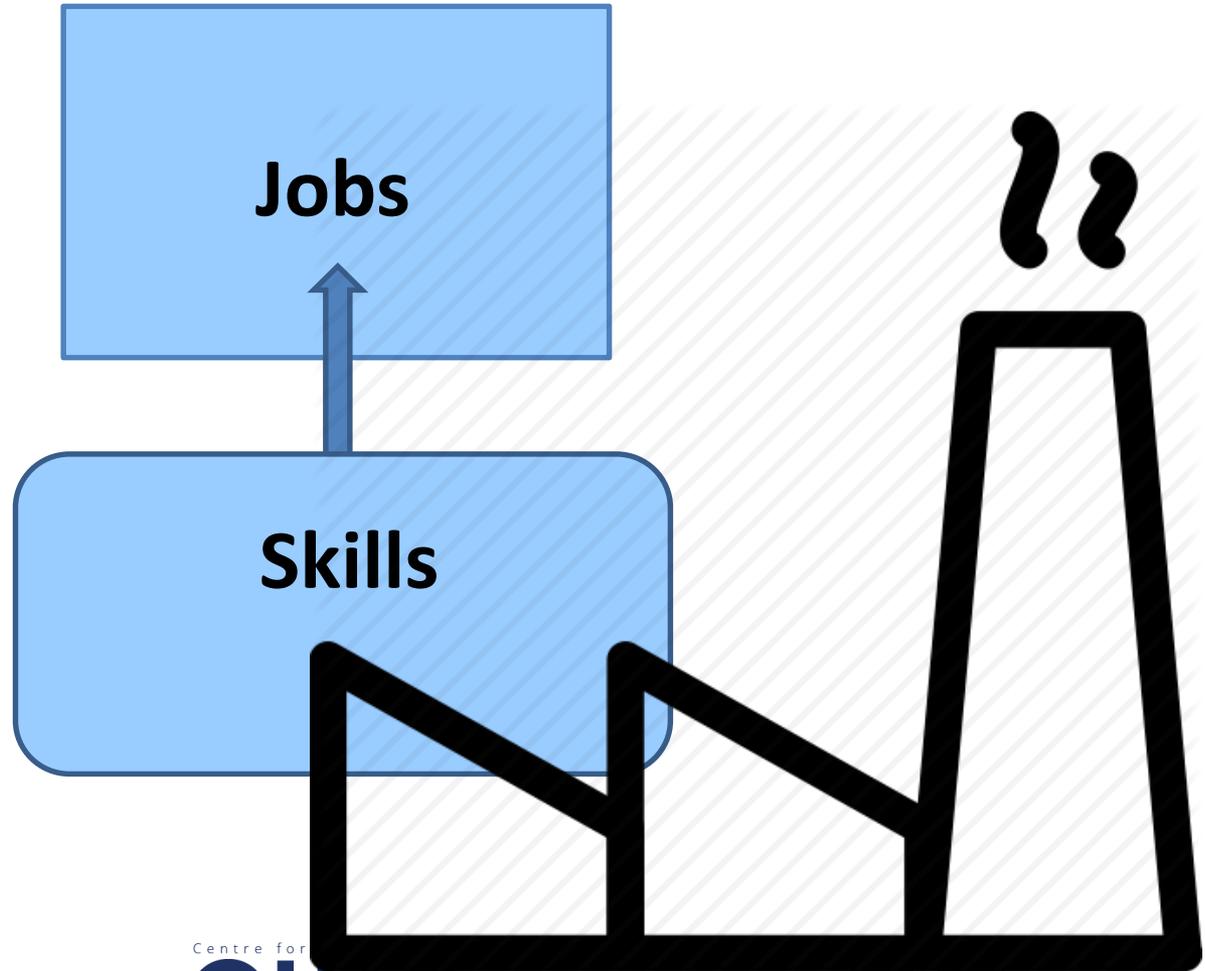
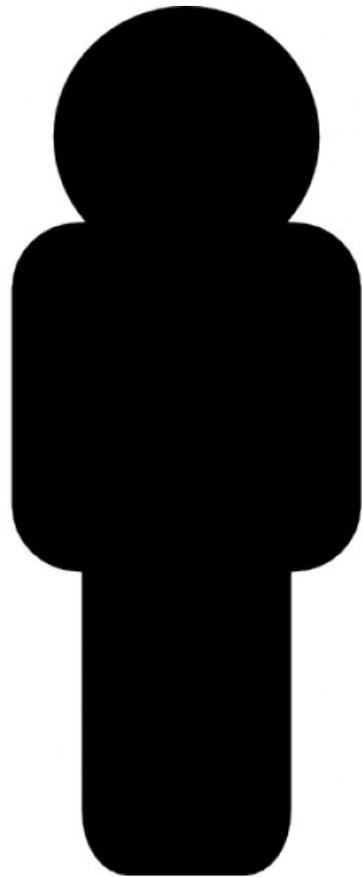
# Current models of skills development



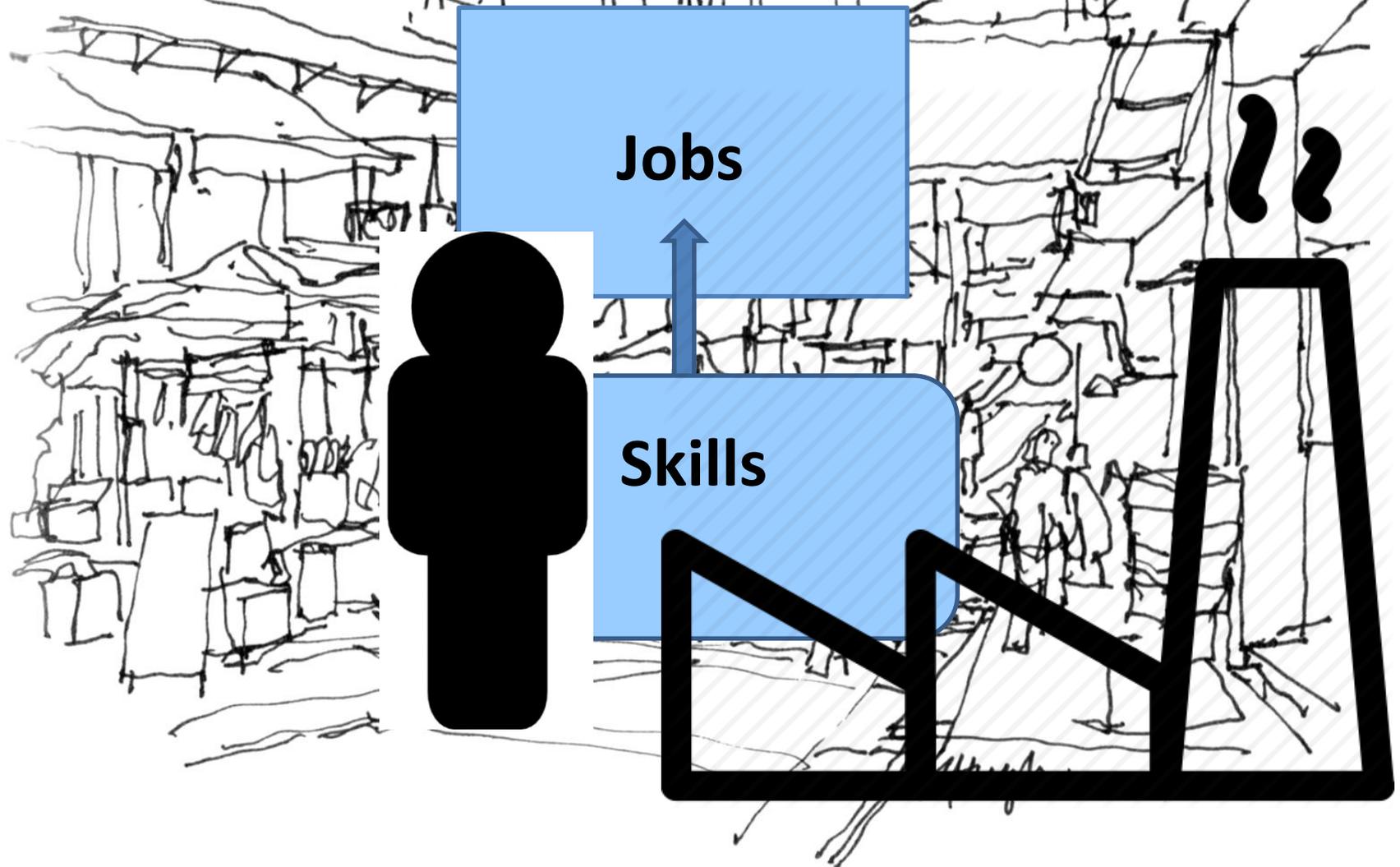
# What's missing? Current models of skills development



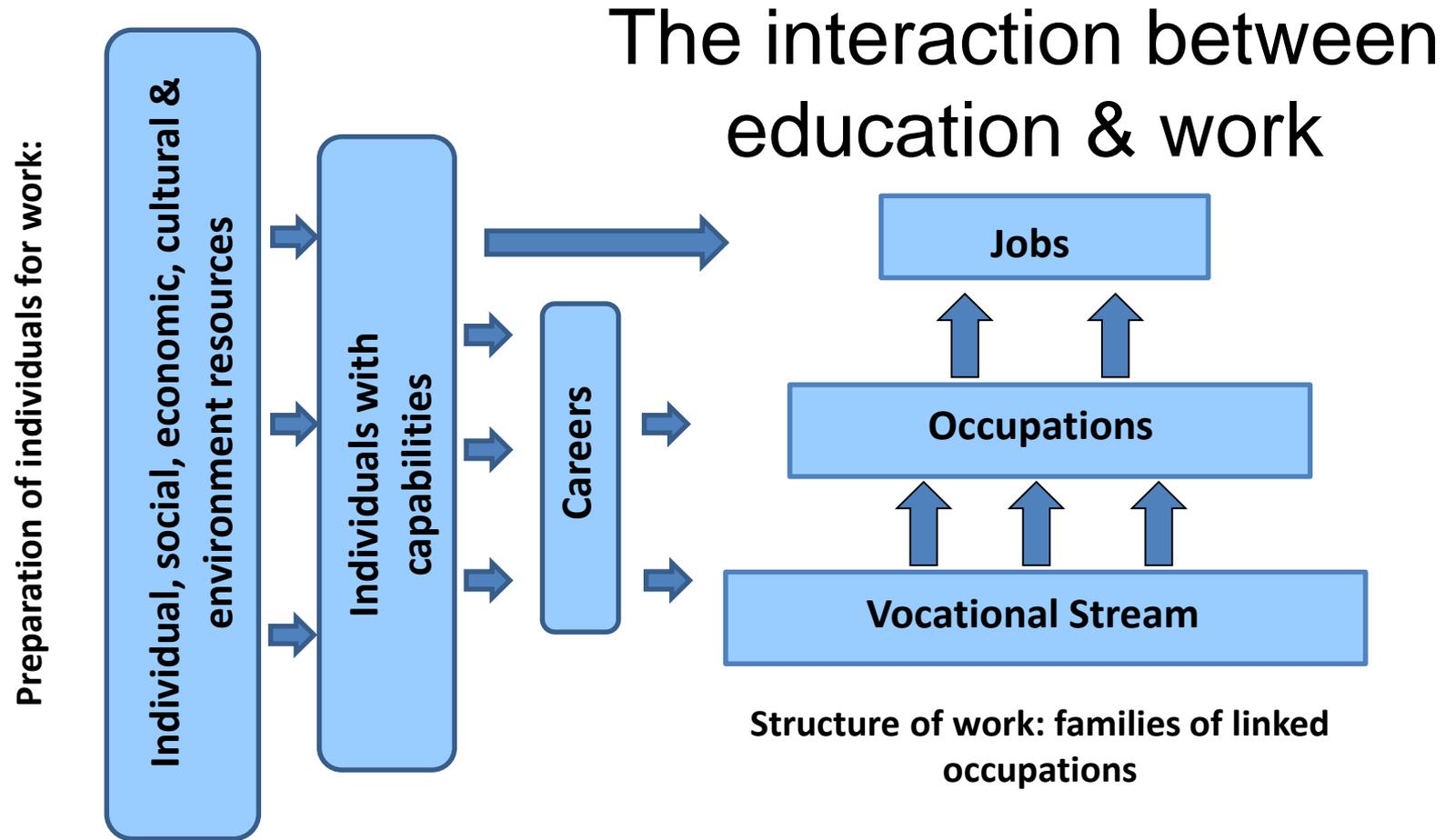
# What's missing? Current models of skills development



# What's missing? Current models of skills development



# The capabilities approach



# 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...

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

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# 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!