

THE CAPABILITY FOR EPISTEMIC CONTRIBUTION: A CASE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Tuesday 26th June 2018
14.00 to 15.30

The Edge Management Suite University of Bath

Professor Monica McLean

Abstract

The paper is based on 64 life history interviews with second-year university students in five South African universities carried out in the first year of a ESRC-DFID & NRF¹ funded four-year project (Miratho, 2016-2020). The project's interest is higher education access, participation and outcomes for rural and (fewer) township youth. The conceptual framework is provided by the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which emphasises the extent to which people have opportunities and the freedom (known as capabilities) to be and do what they value (known as functionings). In this conceptualisation, poverty is capability reducing and a university education (potentially) capability expanding.



Here the focus is the experience of participation in university learning. Two capabilities have emerged as central. The first is the capability for sufficient and secure financial resources, which most of the 64 students interviewed did not have. The second, which this paper concentrates on, is the capability for epistemic contribution to society. The latter is defined by the philosopher Miranda Fricker as having the freedom and the capacity to choose to contribute as knower, enquirer and teller in society. We propose that equality of access to (inter) disciplinary knowledge or 'epistemological access' is a condition for developing this capability. People have a right to contribute on an equal basis to the shared stock of society's meanings, ideas, arguments, therefore, coming to understand specific bodies of knowledge at university has a special role in expanding this capability. The empirical question which this paper addresses is what enables or hinders students to engage with university bodies of knowledge and therefore to gain the freedom to choose to make epistemic contributions to society.

Biography

Monica McLean is Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. Her main area of expertise is university curriculum and pedagogy and its relationship to social justice. Her recent research projects, both funded by the ESRC, have investigated the relevance of the capability approach to university-based professional education for the public-good in South Africa; and quality and inequality in social science departments in UK universities of different reputation. She is currently a co-investigator for a ESRC/DFID-funded project focused on raising the learning outcomes of rural and township youth in South Africa. Her books are: 'Pedagogy and the University: Critical theory and practice' (Continuum, 2008); 'Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good' (Routledge, 2013); and 'Quality in Undergraduate Education: How Powerful Knowledge Disrupts Inequalities' (2017).

All welcome. Please register [here](#)
