

BOOK REVIEW

***Low-income students, human development and higher education in South Africa: Opportunities, obstacles and outcomes* by M. Walker, M. McLean, M. Mathebula & P. Mukwambo (2022). Cape Town, South Africa: African Minds.**

Reviewed by Paul Othusitse Dipitso\*

Issues concerned with access, quality and equity remain topical in South African higher education research. Higher education researchers grapple with research that attempts to find solutions for educational deprivation, structural inequalities, and socio-economic issues related to poverty and lack of employment opportunities. These complexities constrain the advancement of human development and social justice. It is pertinent for higher education to advance equity, inclusion and humanistic values. Access to higher education is discussed both in national and international contexts as well as linked to learning outcomes (Jappie, 2020). Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to understand higher education learning outcomes and the effects of university education on equity as well as how they contribute to the research agenda.

Walker, McLean, Mathebula & Mukwambo provide valuable insights into underexplored educational experiences in *Low-income Students, Human Development and Higher Education in South Africa: Opportunities, Obstacles and Outcomes*. The book informs readers about the capability-based approach to understanding higher education learning outcomes for low-income students who encounter multi-modal challenges in pursuit of education. It has its origin in the Miratho Project which sought to examine the contextual realities of low-income students concerning how they access, succeed at university and transition beyond the university into the world of work. Walker et al. investigate the complex biographical, socio-economic, policy and educational factors that enable/inhibit pathways for rural youth to exit university with valuable learning outcomes. The book demonstrates how structural inequalities, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, affect students' experiences in higher education.

The book consists of nine thematic chapters. In the first chapter, the authors focus on the educational experiences of students from low-income families and how they access university, succeed and transition into the world of work or further study. The chapter argues that structural inequalities limit human development thus inhibiting students' abilities to expand their choices to overcome the effects of poverty. The students' life

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histories are in part shaped by legacies of colonialism and apartheid which continue to constrain the redistribution of resources equitably.

Chapter 2 makes a case for the capability approach as a foundation for reconceptualising learning outcomes to foster equitable inclusive higher education which prioritises students' well-being. The authors argue that the approach measures learning outcomes beyond economic terms by focusing on the quality students' attributes rather than attaining a qualification to enhance human capital.

The fundamental theme of Chapter 3 is understanding how context, history and intersecting factors enable/constrain capabilities for well-being. The authors contend that income inequality restricts agency to expand human capabilities thereby creating barriers to access and success in higher education. The authors emphasise that, despite fee-free higher education, some students still experience financial difficulties in accessing university education.

In Chapter 4 the authors highlight that the university should be a transformative space which should support a conceptualisation of learning outcomes that moves beyond students' intellectual development. This calls for an approach to learning outcomes with the potential to improve students' well-being holistically. Central to this chapter is the Miratho capabilitarian matrix characterised by eight domains, namely epistemic contribution which emerged as architectonic for transformative higher education, *ubuntu*, practical reason, navigation, narrative, emotional, inclusion and participation and future work/study. These domains are necessary for enabling students to choose what they value as a basis for evaluating the justice of higher education.

Chapter 5 focuses on examining the factors enabling and constraining access to higher education and emphasises that the students' life histories reveal the inequality in democratic South Africa's education system. The authors argue that it is necessary to increase access to funding support to enable wider participation and secure equal opportunities for previously marginalised groups. Students from low-income families often negotiate access to higher education due to their social and personal circumstances, therefore universities should consider minimising entry barriers for applicants, for example, revising the high school passes required of low-income students to gain entry to university.

Chapter 6 illuminates the participant students' experiences of being at university by considering the extent to which university participation was transformative. The authors argue that transformational learning in higher education should enhance freedoms and what students value as definitive of a good life thus creating better opportunities. Freedoms and the good life are terms that emerge from the capability approach which is grounded in human development.

Chapter 7 sees the authors critically examine the factors enabling/constraining successful completion of degrees and movement into employment. The authors allude that some students utilise their navigation capital to traverse the challenges of transitioning beyond university. The chapter shows that although students enhance their epistemic contribution and obtained university qualification, some nonetheless remain stuck due to a lack of employment opportunities.

Using life-history synopses and detailing participant students' experiences with access to and participation in university, Chapter 8 discusses the experiences of students to reveal the conditions that open opportunities and present obstacles in their everyday educational lives. The authors argue that structural inequalities restrict and limit the development of all the aforementioned eight capability domains.

The final chapter investigates the aspects that constitute learning outcomes for low-income students in South Africa. The authors call for reimagining inclusive learning outcomes that encompass the multi-dimensional value of university education. The authors argue that achieving higher education goals in a manner that dignifies human life will ensure that talent is not wasted, intergenerational poverty is interrupted and social cohesion is advanced.

The authors deliver their key message in a consistent manner which is relatable to higher education researchers and accessible to the general reader. They demonstrate that the issue of access to higher education is of great concern for students from low-income families. The book clearly articulates the challenges of equitable access to higher education and how this constrains the contribution of higher education to human development. Despite free public higher education, a large number of students still experience obstacles to access education thus affecting student learning outcomes in universities. Cloete (2016) argues that it is necessary to build a stronger higher education system that provides affordable funding for poor and middle-class students.

The challenges of inequalities in higher education, effects of poverty on low-income students and educational deprivation remain critical. In reading this book one appreciates that universities need to expand access and participation in higher education, which is valuable for advancing human development. Higher education provides a ladder for low-income students to elevate to the middle class. Family income is an important determining factor in accessing higher education in South Africa. McCowan (2016) argues that the advantage/disadvantage accrued from the chance of one's birth in a particular social class should not be considered as fair grounds to allow/disallow a person from entering university.

The key strength of the book lies in the approach of reconceptualising learning outcomes to reflect equitable and inclusive higher education. The capability approach emphasises that learning outcomes should move beyond intellectual development. In this regard, learning outcomes should foster freedoms and opportunities that aim to improve equitable higher education for students from low-income backgrounds. The authors do this by demonstrating that the measurement of learning outcomes should focus on quality of learning outcomes and students' values rather than attaining a qualification to enhance human capital. One cannot dismiss the marketization of student learning outcomes since they fulfil the accountability principles of new managerialism.

The authors show that distribution of funding and resources remains a challenge in historically disadvantaged universities that host students from rural areas. Peripheral institutions which serve a diverse population of students are often disadvantaged concerning the distribution of funds and resources (Schendel & McCowan, 2016).

Therefore, inadequate resource allocation inhibits universities' ability to provide effective and targeted student support, particularly for low-income students. Universities furthermore lack the resources to ensure academic support programmes for students at risk (Jappie, 2020).

The book demonstrated the value of transitioning to the world of work and beyond using navigation capital. This aligns with the pressing issue of employment opportunities and employability. Graduates with a tertiary qualification have the highest unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The book draws attention to how the structural inequities within the labour market disadvantage students from low-income families even after they obtain a qualification. It is worth noting that limited opportunities within the labour market compel graduates to utilise their navigational capability to secure employment in uneven contexts. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have further affected employment prospects in a context characterised by the scarcity of formal employment opportunities.

The other strength of this book is that it has generated valuable theoretical insights that connect issues of access and equity for low-income students in higher education through the capability approach. The authors emphasise that social capital plays a key role in aiding these students to access and succeed despite the challenges they previously encountered as well as during university life. This timely book strives to contribute to the current debates on critical conversations concerning inclusive education and human development.

This book presents an opportunity for researchers to engage and advance knowledge on access to higher education, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. The authors present an interesting approach to reconceptualising learning outcomes that promote social justice. Researchers in the field of higher education and policymakers will gain critical insights from reading this book. Universities would also appreciate the prospect of improving the access and participation of low-income students. This could be achieved through fostering equal student participation and reducing barriers that limit students from low-income backgrounds from accessing university education. Future investigation could possibly explore the measurement of the capability domains of the capability-based Miratho Matrix to determine how they contribute to inclusive higher education. This could possibly identify the necessary indicators to measure the contribution of these domains.

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