



Capability, Belonging and Equity In Higher Education:

Developing Inclusive Approaches

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Project description:

Deficit discourses shape assumptions and judgments about student capability, yet there is a dearth of research that examines 'capability'. Although 'capability' carries multiple and contested meanings across different disciplines and pedagogical contexts, there has been little attention given to the problematic ways that judgements of capability might be entangled with histories of exclusion and who is seen as having the 'right to higher education' (Burke, 2012). The project aims to contribute a richer and more nuanced analyses of how 'capability' is constructed in order to develop more sophisticated strategies to support widening participation and equity in HE.

Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This research explores the nuances in which identities are formed around constructions of 'capability' and how these constructions are entwined with cultural processes of 'recognition' about who might be seen, and see themselves, as 'capable' of participating in higher education. The project interrogates constructions of deficit while developing a detailed understanding of the ways that discourses of capability might shape feelings of self-confidence and belonging in the process of becoming a university student. The qualitative analysis was framed by Fraser's concept of recognition (Fraser 1997) to examine the ways that inequalities might not always operate at the explicit level, but are often subtle, symbolic and insidious, and formed through lived and embodied experiences of misrecognition (Burke, 2012). The research explored two main questions: What are the different meanings of capability at play in higher education? and, In what ways do these shape, constrain and/or enable equity in higher education?

This project employed a mixed methods research design, building on a pilot study conducted in 2014 and gathering further qualitative data. The project team drew on students' responses to a survey (n = 772), as well as interviews with 41 students (focus groups/ individual interviews). Additionally, 19 university teachers (lecturers/ academics) participated in focus groups/ individual interviews.

Preliminary findings:

From the survey:

- Students with high ATARs and older enabling students (mature age students; aged 20+) have higher levels of confidence;
- 1/3 of students at the end of Year 1 did not feel confident about their academic ability;

- Males are more likely to feel confident about their intelligence and capability than females; and
- Mature age students/ students from non-traditional pathways were more likely to have a 'growth view' of their capability.

From the qualitative/interview data:

- Capability appears to be strongly connected to identity formations, and constructions of capability are best characterised as complex and fluid, not static;
- Students are often aware of how deficit discourses and views impact on perceptions of capability;
- Teachers' expectations about students' dispositions to learning can result in misrecognition of students lacking capability;
- Family members/ influences shape confidence and perceptions of capability;
- Affective consequences of perceived lack of capability or misrecognition can be described as shame, fear and anxiety;
- Inclusive pedagogical environments are best for engendering confidence in students;
- Discourses that blame individuals (rather than acknowledging broader sociocultural influences and institutional power) increases feelings of incapability;
- Academic confidence appears to have an impact on academic success; and
- Teachers saw discourses of collaboration and competition as having a negative impact on student's (perceptions of) capability.

Implications for the future:

The project will be generating continuing professional development (CPD) resources and materials to address this aim, drawing on the themes, data and analysis presented in this report. This will be freely available and accessible to all stakeholders across the higher education sector by late 2016, through both the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au>) and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE: www.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe) websites.

References:

- Burke, P. J. (2012). *The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation*. Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (2007) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge.