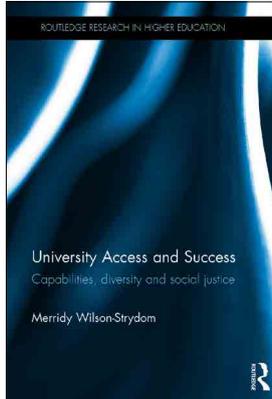


University access and success: An issue of social justice

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AUTHOR:

Merridy Wilson-Strydom

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REVIEWER:

Alejandra Boni 

EMAIL:

aboni@ingenio.upv.es

AFFILIATION:

INGENIO Institute, Universitat
Politècnica de València,
Valencia, Spain

POSTAL ADDRESS:

INGENIO, Universitat Politècnica
de València, Camino de Vera s/n,
46022 Valencia, Spain

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University Access and Success represents an extremely valuable contribution to the higher education literature related to access to universities. But, contrary to the mainstream approaches to access which rely on school performance and admissions tests, Wilson-Strydom poses at the centre of the analysis *the issue of social justice*.

As Wilson-Strydom explains: 'When we consider issues of justice or injustice, we cannot merely ask whether different people have achieved the same outcome, but rather, whether different people have had the same opportunities to achieve this outcome' (p. 151). This shift from outcomes to opportunities is very different from other approaches to access and readiness in higher education (see Chapter 2).

The theoretical framework is provided by the capabilities approach, which is well known thanks to the writings of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen¹ and the contributions of philosopher Martha Nussbaum². Capabilities could be defined as the substantive freedoms or real opportunities that people have to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value.³ Those real opportunities are shaped and mediated not only by the personal characteristics of people (personal conversion factors in the capabilities literature), but also by the social context (social conversion factors), which is very different from other approaches to readiness which are more focused on the personal characteristics of the learners (see Chapters 3 and 4).

Wilson-Strydom explores 'the capability to participate in higher education' – the real opportunities first-year students have to participate in higher education. She conducted excellent research between 2009 and 2014 with high-school learners and first-year university students in the Free State Province in South Africa. The data collection methods included a quantitative survey, individual interviews, focus groups, visual methods and written reflections. From a methodological perspective, this book is an excellent contribution in the educational research domain and it brings a richness of data that allow the author to explore in a deeper way the personal and social conversion factors that influence the capability to participate (see Chapters 5 and 7).

Wilson-Strydom draws a vivid picture of students entering university, in which feelings such as loss, fear and confusion have a big impact on their confidence to learn. Students' personal conversion factors – such as the will to learn, the confidence to learn and home language – are affecting the readiness of the students and so need to be carefully considered by universities.

Moreover, Wilson-Strydom highlights the social conversion factors that affect students' opportunities. The school context is of paramount importance; and absent or poor-quality teachers, a general lack of resources, limited subject choices, and few opportunities to engage with a diversity of ideas and people are major influencing factors in the capabilities of learners.

Also, the socio-economic context has proved to be relevant in the way learners spend their time outside school. Learners living in township areas spent more time than other students walking to school and caring for family members than engaging in educational enrichment activities. This finding is especially remarkable for girls: they tend to have more responsibility than boys at home, but at the same time girls tended to be better prepared academically for university than boys; in that sense, gender appears to operate in 'somewhat conflicting ways' (p. 144).

It is not only the richness of data and its interpretations that make this book worthwhile, but its theoretical contributions are also extremely valuable. Rooted in previous work that has used the capabilities approach in higher education,³⁻⁵ Wilson-Strydom proposes 'a list of capabilities for the transition to university' (p. 131) formulated using a comprehensive theoretical analysis and taking into account the voices of learners that emerged from the research.

The list, presented in Chapter 6, includes the following capabilities: (1) practical reason, (2) knowledge and imagination, (3) learning disposition, (4) social relations and social networks, (5) respect, dignity and recognition, (6) emotional health and (7) language, competence and confidence.

This list could provide a normative framework for understanding what is needed for access to university. This framework poses at its centre, the well-being of students, and raises issues of equity, participation and diversity. Also, as Wilson-Strydom points out (p. 132), the capability of language takes us beyond the traditional focus of access to research on measurable performance as a basis for making admission decisions and predicting the likelihood of success.

In that sense, this book offers interesting avenues for action in the university realm. As Wilson-Strydom notes in Chapter 8, universities should confront injustice, and even if the changes are complex and difficult to achieve, scholars and researchers committed to social justice should take action to focus on the 'remediable injustices we see around us'.⁶ Coherently, Wilson-Strydom not only proposes some ideas, but she also translates them into practice and provides some preliminary results of a workshop with students in a Social Work department. Her honest and coherent commitment to social justice that you can perceive through the pages of this book, makes this contribution, in my view, even more valuable.

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