

Book Review

Calitz, T.M.L. 2019. *Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish in Higher Education: Participation, Equality and Capabilities*. Abingden, Oxon: Routledge.

ISBN 9781138633827

Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish in Higher Education is the seventh book to be published in Routledge's excellent, Society for Research into Higher Education Series, focusing on 'the rapidly changing world of higher education, examined in a global context', edited by Jennifer Case and Jeroen Huisman. Talita Calitz's important contribution to the series is based on a methodologically innovative and systematically theorised narrative study of eight South African undergraduates. The six female and two male undergraduates (seven black, one female from a mixed ethnic background) have racial/ethnic backgrounds that, statistical analysis suggests, would severely impair their chances of doing well in the South African system of undergraduate education. The theorised results of this participatory study produced insightfully complex and nuanced accounts of students' experiences and outcomes. They illustrate how universities, in partnership with their students, are needed to transform the South African higher education system so that it helps black and coloured students, who are currently let down, to succeed. Calitz argues that the whole university system needs overhauling if universities are to make their contribution towards the transformation of wider society post-apartheid. She adds her voice to those of a burgeoning group of South African scholars, and student activists, by suggesting that 'new vocabularies' around 'questions of knowledge, race, redistribution and mutuality in a post-colonial cost apartheid context (2019: 180) are needed to achieve this. She argues that the redistribution of pedagogic and curricula resources across the different status institutions are needed because most black and other disadvantaged students access low status universities. She proposes this transformation requires new theoretical insights and research into higher education.

The argument is aptly organised into eight chapters. The first two chapters explain the context of national and international inequalities in higher education regarding student experiences and outcomes (Chapter One) and the impact of structural inequalities on 'pedagogical arrangements' of 'vulnerable students' (2019: 23) (Chapter Two). Global and national processes shape the current context and help constitute the social, economic and cultural pressures that push universities towards maintaining the status quo. In South Africa this means that the very few black students, who achieve going to university against the odds, mostly attend low status universities. Black students are more likely to dropout than complete their course and when they stay they rarely get access to pedagogies, curricula and wider experiences that allow them to succeed. This situation is maintained in South Africa by a range



of factors, for example, a national funding policy that ensures the high dropout rates of black students positively affects universities finances. Universities are rewarded for accepting black students rather than on their completion or results. Ideologically this is constructed as acceptable because black students' failure is blamed on the schooling system. The second chapter shows the particular effects of neoliberalisation (that accompanies massification globally) on South African universities.

Chapter Three introduces the three perspectives that inform the theoretical framing. The first, capability theory, initially based on the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and now taken up by higher education researchers, dominates. It forms the basis of Calitz's claim that universities should facilitate well-being which includes economic wealth but should equally consider developing those capabilities deemed important by the individuals and communities they are intended to benefit (including students). However, capabilities must contribute to an overall public-good. This perspective focuses the analysis of the data on what 'social contexts', universities provide, that allow 'students to exercise their agency and convert resources into capabilities' (2019: 46). Freire's critique of a banking system of education (pedagogies which require the absorption and reproduction of knowledge) form the second framing. Calitz mainly uses this to focus analysis on the type of pedagogies students encounter and the effects they have on students learning and their ability to convert the resources they access into capabilities. Nancy Fraser's concepts of recognition (e.g. the degree to which students' difficulties are recognised as systemic problems), representation (e.g. if students are represented as valid and valued participants), and redistribution (e.g. of educational resources and economic resources) are used to evaluate the students' educational experiences and outcomes. Calitz uses these three ideas to produce a new definition of participation (2019: 61). This theoretical framework structures the analysis (Chapters Five and Six) and the capabilities that are identified as valuable through the analysis form the basis of the recommendations for universities in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Chapter Four only briefly describes the methodology: repeated interviews, focus groups, and the students' construction of digital narratives about their lives using a shared multimedia platform, over the three years of the study. The sharing of experiences during the project facilitated the transformational effect the project had on students' lives. Most of this chapter describes the research participants, their schooling, and key life experiences prior to attending university. This gave me a feel for the nature of the students and their lives. It illustrates how more, and less, unjust schooling experiences affect the students' opportunities when they arrive at university, as well as the impact that varying family experiences and levels of support have on students. These analyses are helpful to explaining the way students could (not) engage with university education.

The next two chapters analyse cross-cutting themes. Five structural factors constraining students' participation are identified and illustrated (Chapter Five): the individualisation of failure; uncritical engagement with knowledge; lack of participation in decision making; alienation from lecturers; and different forms of misrecognition. Then, the way that the

'pedagogical and institutional structures' discussed and evidenced under these themes, intersect with other inequalities such as 'the unequal distribution of resources and historical patterns of race, class' etc. are presented (2019: 123). Things such as scarcity of resources to live decreased students' agency to access and utilise resources.

Chapter Six identified ways in which students use their agency to convert resources into capabilities and then turn them into functionings for equal participation. Students were helped by enabling affiliations with lecturers and peers, platforms for student voice, when they gained access to critical knowledge, and when their capabilities were recognised. As discussed above, the final two chapters focus on the implications of the study for the wider university system in South Africa and beyond.

There is much to value in this book. I found it important in its specific articulation of three key things that universities globally should be doing if they are serious about tackling inequalities. Firstly, it illustrates why universities should be putting huge efforts into root and branches transformations of their pedagogies and curricula if they are serious about tackling inequalities. Secondly, it demonstrates why universities need theorised research investigations to understand what actions they should undertake to tackle current injustices. Thirdly, it shows why students need to be part of any endeavours to transform current inequalities. It will be of interest to critical scholars of higher education studies for teaching and for research.

Reviewed by

Andrea Abbas, University of Bath