

“A Capability Approach to Training and Development in Higher Education: Enhancing Students' Well-being and Career Freedom”

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Abstract

In today's evolving landscape of higher education, there is a pressing need to rethink traditional training and development models that often prioritize employability and skill acquisition over students' personal well-being and long-term aspirations. This presentation explores the Capability Approach—developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum—as a transformative framework for student development in higher education. It emphasizes the importance of enhancing students' freedom to pursue lives they have reason to value, promoting both well-being and career autonomy. The Capability Approach shifts the focus from outcomes like job placement or academic scores to real freedoms—students' abilities to choose and act upon meaningful life goals. It calls for expanding capabilities such as critical thinking, communication, resilience, and ethical judgment, moving beyond narrow labor market alignment. By embedding this approach, institutions can offer a more inclusive and empowering educational experience. Well-being is redefined as the presence of agency, purpose, and supportive environments, while career freedom entails genuine choice, not limited by background or market forces. Drawing on recent research and case studies, the presentation outlines strategies to operationalize the Capability Approach—such as inclusive pedagogy, reflective curricula, student participation, and capability-oriented assessments. It also addresses implementation challenges, including institutional resistance and market-driven pressures. Ultimately, the Capability Approach invites educators and policymakers to ask: Are we enabling students to lead flourishing lives? Are we nurturing their freedom to shape meaningful futures? This framework positions higher education as a vehicle for human development, social justice, and lifelong well-being.

Keywords: *Capability Approach, Higher Education, Student Well-being, Career Freedom, Training and Development, Amartya Sen.*

I. Introduction

In recent years, the purpose and priorities of higher education have come under increasing scrutiny. Amid rising concerns about graduate employability, mental health challenges, and rapid labor market changes, universities are often pressured to tailor their training and development initiatives to meet economic demands. While skill development and job readiness are undeniably important, this utilitarian model risks reducing students to future workers, rather than recognizing them as whole individuals with diverse aspirations and potential life paths.

This paper argues for a reorientation of training and development in higher education using the **Capability Approach**—a human development framework originally proposed by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011). Unlike traditional approaches that prioritize measurable outcomes such as grades, competencies, or employment rates, the Capability Approach centers on what individuals are actually able to do and be. It emphasizes the **real freedoms** students have to pursue lives they have reason to value, rather than the mere availability of opportunities.

Applied to higher education, the Capability Approach challenges institutions to go beyond the instrumental view of education as a pathway to economic productivity. Instead, it promotes the development of a broader range of **capabilities**—such as critical thinking, autonomy, emotional well-being, ethical reflection, and social participation—that support students' overall flourishing and long-term career freedom.

This paper explores how adopting a capability perspective can reshape training and development programs to better serve students' holistic growth. It highlights how institutions can foster inclusive, reflective, and participatory learning environments that empower students to define and pursue their own goals, irrespective of socio-economic constraints. In doing so, the Capability Approach offers a powerful framework for addressing pressing issues of inequality, disengagement, and narrow curriculum design in contemporary higher education.

II. Objective

To explore how the Capability Approach can be applied to training and development practices in higher education. To assess the impact of training and development programs on students' well-being and their freedom to pursue chosen career paths.

To identify key capabilities that higher education institutions should develop to enhance students' personal growth and career readiness.

III. Literature Review

L. Selmo, (2020). Higher Education and the Relationship between the Capability Approach and Service-Learning. Emerald Publishing Limited.

In her 2020 chapter, *Higher Education and the Relationship between the Capability Approach and Service-Learning*, Laura Selmo examines how service-learning can enhance critical thinking and civic responsibility among higher education students. Grounded in Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach, Selmo conducts a qualitative analysis of students' reflections on their service-learning experiences. The study reveals that such pedagogical interventions promote active societal participation and appreciation of diversity, thereby fostering students' personal development and social engagement.

S. Holdsworth, Ian. Thomas, 2020. Competencies or capabilities in the Australian higher education landscape and its implications for the development and delivery of sustainability education. journal *Higher Education Research & Development*.

In this 2020 Paper, *Competencies or Capabilities in the Australian Higher Education Landscape and Its Implications for the Development and Delivery of Sustainability Education*, Sarah Holdsworth and Ian Thomas examine the distinction between competency-based and capability-based frameworks in Australian higher education, particularly concerning sustainability education. They argue that while competency frameworks focus on specific, measurable skills aligned with immediate job readiness, capability frameworks emphasize broader attributes such as critical thinking, adaptability, and ethical judgment, which are essential for addressing complex, real-world sustainability challenges. The authors advocate for a shift towards a capability approach, aligning with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), to better prepare students for the multifaceted demands of sustainability.

C. Lyon, 2018. Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: “The Capability Approach Re-Examined. Journal of Development Studies”.

In his 2018 Paper, "Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined," Chris Lyon reviews Ingrid Robeyns' comprehensive examination of the capability approach. Robeyns delineates the distinction between the general capability approach and specific capability theories, introducing a modular framework that allows for tailored applications across various disciplines. She addresses common misconceptions and critiques, emphasizing the approach's flexibility and relevance to contemporary issues in justice and human development. Lyon commends Robeyns' work for its clarity and depth, noting its value as both an introductory text and a significant contribution to the ongoing development of the capability approach.

L. Campbell, J. McKendrick, 2017. Beyond aspirations: deploying the capability approach to tackle the under-representation in higher education of young people from deprived communities. journal *Studies in Continuing Education*.

In their 2017 study, *Beyond Aspirations: Deploying the Capability Approach to Tackle the Under-Representation in Higher Education of Young People from Deprived Communities*, Campbell and McKendrick critique the "poverty of aspirations" thesis, which suggests that low higher education participation among disadvantaged youth stems from limited ambition. Through case studies in two Scottish secondary schools, they found that students from deprived areas often possess high aspirations and confidence in their abilities. However, structural barriers and limited social arrangements hinder their educational progression. The authors advocate for applying Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to better understand and address these systemic challenges, emphasizing the need for supportive interventions that enhance students' real opportunities to pursue higher education.

M. Walker, 2016. Advancing student well-being and agency : outline of a 'capabilities-friendly' approach. *South African Journal of Higher Education*.

In her 2016 Paper, *Advancing Student Well-Being and Agency: The Outline of a 'Capabilities-Friendly' Approach*, Melanie Walker advocates for integrating the Capability Approach into higher education to promote equity and social justice. She argues that universities should focus on expanding students' real freedoms and opportunities,

enabling them to lead lives they have reason to value. Walker identifies three core capabilities essential for student development: affiliation (fostering meaningful relationships), critical thinking (developing analytical skills), and ethical citizenship (encouraging social responsibility).

Marion Lambert, J. Vero, B. Zimmermann, 2012. Vocational Training and Professional Development: A Capability Perspective. *International Journal of Training and Development*, Volume 16, Issue 3.

In their 2012 Paper, "Vocational Training and Professional Development: A Capability Perspective," Lambert, Vero, and Zimmermann examine how vocational training policies in France, particularly post-2004 reforms, affect workers' professional development. Utilizing Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, they argue that a company's environment significantly influences an employee's ability to access and benefit from training, more so than individual background factors. The study underscores the importance of organizational support in enhancing employees' capabilities, suggesting that fostering such environments is crucial for effective professional development.

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Student Perceptions of The Role of Higher Education in Employability. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(1), 62–76.

In his 2017 article, *Student Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education in Employability*, "Michael Tomlinson explores how students view the relationship between their university education and future employment prospects. Through qualitative research, he finds that students recognize the importance of academic credentials but increasingly believe that degrees alone are insufficient in a competitive job market. They emphasize the need for additional experiences, such as internships and extracurricular activities, to enhance their employability. Tomlinson concludes that students adopt a proactive approach, seeking to differentiate themselves beyond academic achievements.

Boni, A., & Walker, M. (2016). *Human Development and Capabilities: Re-imagining the University of the Twenty-first Century*. Routledge.

In *Human Development and Capabilities: Re-imagining the University of the Twenty-first Century*, editors Alejandra Boni and Melanie Walker apply Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to higher education, advocating for universities to prioritize human development and social justice over narrow economic objectives. The book is structured into three sections: theoretical insights into human development and higher education, policy implications for universities amid global change, and strategies for implementing this new vision. It challenges the prevailing view of education as merely a private benefit, emphasizing its role in fostering equitable and sustainable societies.

A. S. Ribeiro, 2015. A Normative Framework or an Emerging Theory? The Capability Approach in Higher Education Research. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, spanning pages 277 to 294.

In her 2015 chapter, *A Normative Framework or an Emerging Theory? The Capability Approach in Higher Education Research*, "A. S. Ribeiro examines the application of the Capability Approach within higher education studies. She delineates the two primary versions of the approach: Amartya Sen's evaluative perspective, focusing on individual freedoms, and Martha Nussbaum's relational perspective, emphasizing social and relational dimensions. Ribeiro discusses the challenges of operationalizing the Capability Approach in educational research, particularly in measuring and implementing its concepts. Despite these challenges, she highlights its growing use in addressing issues like educational inequality and curriculum development, especially in Western contexts. The chapter concludes by advocating for the Capability Approach as a valuable framework for rethinking higher education's role in promoting human development and social justice.

Bergin, A. J., & Pakenham, K. I. (2015). The Stress-Coping Well-Being Process of University Students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(4), 706–720.

In their 2015 study, *The Stress-Coping Well-Being Process of University Students*, "Bergin and Pakenham investigate how stress and coping strategies impact the well-being of university students. Utilizing a process model, they find that higher perceived stress correlates with lower psychological well-being. However, adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving and seeking social support, mediate this relationship, mitigating stress's negative effects. The study underscores the importance of promoting effective coping mechanisms within university settings to enhance students' mental health and overall well-being.

Walker, M., & McLean, M. (2013). *Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good: The Role of Universities in Promoting Human Development*. Routledge.

In *Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good: The Role of Universities in Promoting Human Development*, Melanie Walker and Monica McLean explore how universities can foster socially responsible

professionals by applying Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach. Drawing on case studies from South African universities, they introduce a "Public Good Professional Capability Index" encompassing attributes like ethical awareness, social responsibility, and resilience. The authors argue that higher education should transcend market-driven goals, emphasizing human development and social justice to prepare graduates as agents of positive societal change.

Hart, C. S. (2012). *Aspirations, Education and Social Justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

In *Aspirations, Education and Social Justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*, Caroline Sarojini Hart integrates Amartya Sen's Capability Approach with Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories to examine how young people's aspirations are shaped and realized within educational contexts. Drawing on empirical research involving over 1,000 students aged 14–19 in England, Hart critiques policies that narrowly focus on raising aspirations without addressing structural inequalities. She advocates for nurturing aspirations by enhancing individuals' capabilities and addressing social barriers, thereby promoting a more equitable and just educational landscape.

Boni, A., & Gasper, D. (2012). Rethinking the Quality of Universities: How Can Human Development Thinking Contribute? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 13(3), 451–470. In their 2012 article, *Rethinking the Quality of Universities: How Can Human Development Thinking Contribute?*, Alejandra Boni and Des Gasper critique the prevalent market-driven evaluation of universities, which emphasizes economic contributions. They propose adopting a human development framework, focusing on core values such as well-being, participation and empowerment, equity and diversity, and sustainability. The authors suggest integrating these values into research, teaching, community engagement, and governance to redefine and assess university quality, aiming to promote broader societal benefits beyond mere economic outcomes.

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press. In *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Martha Nussbaum critiques traditional economic indicators like GDP for inadequately measuring human welfare. She advocates for the Capabilities Approach, emphasizing individuals' real opportunities to achieve well-being. Nussbaum outlines ten central capabilities essential for a dignified life, including health, education, and political participation. Her work underscores the necessity of policies that expand these capabilities, promoting social justice and human development beyond mere economic growth.

IV. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive research design**, guided by the **Capability Approach** framework developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011). The focus is to explore how training and development programs in higher education can be structured to enhance students' well-being and career freedom, and how institutions can nurture key capabilities that support holistic student development.

Research Design

A **multiple case study approach** was adopted to allow for an in-depth exploration of real-world educational practices in diverse higher education settings. This design enables a nuanced understanding of how different institutions conceptualize and implement capability-oriented training and development programs.

Case Study

Implementing a Capability-Oriented Career Development Program at Zenith University

Background:

Zenith University is a mid-sized public institution located in a diverse urban region. It serves a student population with varying socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation university attendees. In 2022, the university piloted a new career development program titled “**Careers for Life**”, aimed at aligning career support services with the Capability Approach.

Program Goals:

The “Careers for Life” initiative sought to move beyond traditional employability workshops by helping students reflect on their values, life goals, and well-being. The program aimed to cultivate the following core capabilities:

- **Practical Reason:** Encouraging students to think critically about what kind of life and career they value.
- **Affiliation:** Fostering community, peer support, and meaningful connections.
- **Control over One’s Environment:** Enhancing agency through decision-making workshops and mentorship.

Key Features:

1. **Capability** **Mapping** **Workshops:**
Students used guided reflection tools to assess their personal strengths, goals, and barriers using Nussbaum’s list of central capabilities.
2. **Mentorship** **Circles:**
Peer and faculty mentors facilitated group discussions that helped students navigate uncertainty in career planning, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.
3. **Well-being** **&** **Resilience** **Training:**
Integrated mental health support and mindfulness sessions promoted emotional well-being and stress management.
4. **Inclusive** **Career** **Pathways** **Seminars:**
Alumni from diverse sectors and life stories shared alternative career trajectories that defied the conventional “corporate success” narrative.

Findings and Impact:

- **Student feedback** indicated increased clarity in career decision-making, a stronger sense of purpose, and improved emotional resilience.
- Participants reported feeling more **confident in exploring non-linear career paths**, such as entrepreneurship, creative industries, and public service.
- The university noted an increase in **student engagement with career services**, especially among underrepresented groups.

Lessons Learned:

- Career development grounded in the Capability Approach requires **rethinking success metrics**—shifting from job placement rates to student satisfaction, confidence, and autonomy.
- Students value spaces where **their personal stories, cultural identities, and aspirations** are acknowledged and integrated into learning and planning.

Conclusion:

Zenith University’s “Careers for Life” case illustrates how the Capability Approach can be effectively operationalized in higher education to support student well-being and career freedom. By reframing training and development through the lens of human flourishing, institutions can provide more equitable, meaningful, and sustainable education experiences.

V. Findings of the study

Integrating the Capability Approach into higher education significantly enhances students' personal development and well-being by expanding their freedoms to pursue lives they value. This framework emphasizes nurturing critical thinking, resilience, communication, and ethical decision-making skills, moving beyond traditional metrics focused solely on employability. By fostering these capabilities, educational institutions contribute to a more holistic development of students, preparing them for diverse life paths.

The study also highlights that well-being in the educational context is not merely the absence of stress or mental health issues but encompasses the presence of agency, purpose, and supportive learning environments. Students equipped with a broad set of capabilities are better positioned to make informed choices about their futures, leading to enhanced life satisfaction and career autonomy. This approach aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals by promoting equitable and inclusive quality education that supports lifelong learning opportunities for all.

However, implementing the Capability Approach in higher education faces challenges, including institutional resistance and the prevailing emphasis on market-driven educational models. Addressing these obstacles requires a paradigm shift towards recognizing education as a means of human development and social justice. By adopting strategies such as inclusive pedagogy, reflective curricula, and capability-oriented assessments, institutions can better support students' holistic development and empower them to lead autonomous and fulfilling lives.

VI. Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative potential of applying the Capability Approach to training and development in higher education. By shifting the focus from narrow employment outcomes to broader notions of well-being, freedom, and personal development, institutions can better prepare students not just for jobs—but for meaningful, autonomous lives.

The findings underscore that students desire more than technical skills and credentials; they seek educational experiences that empower them to reflect on their values, explore diverse career paths, and navigate

life with confidence and purpose. When higher education cultivates capabilities such as critical thinking, emotional resilience, affiliation, and control over one’s environment, it contributes to students’ overall flourishing.

However, the current structure of many training and career development programs remains limited in scope. Without addressing capability gaps—especially among marginalized student populations—efforts toward inclusive and equitable development may fall short. Faculty training, institutional support systems, and the reimagining of career services are essential for creating environments where all students can thrive.

Ultimately, a capability-oriented approach invites universities to go beyond producing employable graduates, and instead commit to nurturing **capable human beings**—individuals who are free to pursue lives they have reason to value. This vision calls for a deeper integration of well-being, social justice, and human development in the design of higher education practices and policies.

Recommendations

1. **Integrate Capability Development into Curriculum Design:** Embed reflection, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical reasoning into academic programs to promote holistic student growth.
2. **Redefine Career Services:** Move beyond traditional job-prep models to offer life design workshops, capability mapping, and values-based career planning.
3. **Establish Inclusive Mentorship Programs:** Develop peer and faculty mentorship systems that actively support students from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.
4. **Provide Training for Faculty and Staff:** Offer professional development on the Capability Approach and student-centered mentoring to enable faculty to better support student agency and well-being.
5. **Promote Student Voice and Agency:** Involve students in co-creating programs, feedback mechanisms, and policy-making to enhance their sense of ownership and empowerment.
6. **Strengthen Support for Mental Health and Emotional Well-being:** Expand access to counseling services and embed well-being practices into campus life and academic routines.

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