

Creating a capabilities-based persistence framework (or matrix) on university student persistence

A Framing Paper

Design of Study section

DRAFT

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Design of Study

Recruitment and participation

As previously mentioned, students were recruited from nine Australian universities in 2017, mainly via email and could choose to complete an anonymous online survey or participate an interview. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee from the lead institution (HREC 2017/078) and met all additional requirements of the participating universities. As a courtesy, permission for the research was also sought and gained at each institution based on ethics approval from the lead institution. Once all permissions were received, key personnel distributed the recruitment email on behalf of the researchers or via other channels (such as student newsletter or digital screen advertising). Students initiated interest in participating by either completing the anonymous online survey or contacting the researchers to arrange an interview. None of the students were known to the researchers.

The main criteria for involvement was that students be first in their immediate family to attend university, and be in the latter stages of an undergraduate degree (i.e. they had completed at least two years of full time study, or equivalent). Both the interview and survey guiding questions were the same, although the semi-structured interview format enabled some aspects of the experience to be explored in more depth. Both began with eliciting demographic information, followed by questions around three broad areas: self-reflections as a student; reflections on higher education; higher education participation and support from family/community, the institution and others.

Of the 306 surveys returned 239 were female, 50 male and 17 skipped; of the 69 interviews (with 70 interviewees i.e. one paired interview) 52 were female and 18 male. Participants self-selected the equity categories applicable to them (as detailed in the Intersectionality section). In addition to this 69 survey participants had children, 143 were partnered and 146 were single; 32 interview participants had children, 36 were partnered and 19 were single. Table (2) details the demographics of students, please note that students could choose more than one demographic category to ensure the diversity of this cohort was captured.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION	SURVEYS	INTERVIEWS ^{^*}
Female	239	52
Male	50	18
Other or skipped	17	0
<i>Note: more than one of the categories below could be selected</i>		
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	13	1
Disability	15	14
LSES	83	28
Rural/isolated	93	22
NESB	20	6
Refugee	4	1

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION	SURVEYS	INTERVIEWS ^{^*}
¹ Other (see further details below)	125	29
Participants with children	69	32
Partnered	143	36
Single	146	19

Table 1: Identifiers nominated by students in the Australian study

Note: this table does not include the [^]Institution 3 interview; *Institution 4: one interview was paired, thus counted as a single interview however demographics are recorded as two individuals (see Table 1)

Data Analysis

All the data was imported into NVivo11 and initially line by line coding was conducted on each of the interviews and the survey responses (N=376). Line-by-line coding was deliberately chosen to ensure that the framework emerged inductively from the data rather than a preconceived capabilities framing being applied to the data. This approach does differ to others in the field, for example, Wilson-Strydom (2015) who applied the ideal-theoretical list developed by Walker (2006) to the development of capabilities needed to access higher education. This difference is not an implied criticism of such an approach but rather offers a point of differentiation based on the methodological underpinning of this study which is informed by constructivist grounded theory.

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) focuses on the 'phenomena' that is being studied and regards facets of the research experience that include relationships with participants and shared experiences as intrinsic to the creation of data and analysis. This perspective emphasises the interpretative nature of theory generation and so reveals how theory is necessarily a construction that relies on researcher engagement with the data as well as being contextually bounded by temporal, geographical, cultural and situational contexts (Charmaz, 2006; Addison, 1999). As a constructivist grounded theorist, I am situated within the Symbolic Interactionist framework, which recognises the multiple realities of lived experiences as well as the negotiated framework that meanings exist within. When applied to this study it has ensured that the themes that developed were based inductively in the data; that is, these emerged through a reiterative engagement with the text, involving line by line coding, with the developing themes being grouped into three overarching 'nodes' with a series of sub-categories underpinning these.

This approach was adopted in order to avoid imposing a dominant 'analytic frame' to analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 62). The questions that were asked related to the actual data rather than preconceived and rigid categories. This is one of the strengths of constructivist grounded theory. The researcher engages with the data in an open-minded manner seeking to act on and react to the material, which places emphasis on the data itself rather than

¹ Comments in 'other' often included more information about the category/ies selected or indicated uncertainty about a category, such as being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds but not identifying as such. Categorising one's situation as LSES was sometimes difficult such as "I wouldn't say low-socioeconomic background but we definitely by no means rich" (Survey), or "My parents were [LSES] but I'm not now" (interview). Often 'other' was used to describe situations in more detail such as being or coming from coming from a single-parent family, divorced family or dysfunctional family, having to leave home to study, leaving home at an early age, being mature aged, being homeschooled, having mental health issues; returning to study after having a child, leaving prison; born or parents born elsewhere. Participants who identified as homosexual or LBGQTI indicated this, as did others their religion, such as Muslim.

existing frameworks or models obtained from external sources such as literature, policy or previous studies. Yet it is important to realise that ideas do not emerge solely from the data, instead deep understanding is generated via a movement between reading the data and reading the literature. While there is a definite place and indeed need for extensive consultation of existing literature, I deliberately timed this to occur after a preliminary engagement with data in order to avoid unintentional prescription or the imposition of existing frameworks on material. Hence, it was only after I completed the initial analysis of the data that I then engaged with the lists that have been developed by Wilson-Strydom (2015), Walker (2006) and Nussbaum (2006). The emerging nodes were mapped against these lists in order to address Robeyn's (2003) criteria of 'explicit formulation' and 'levels of generalisability'. This mapping process also ensured that the result was both connected to existing lists but equally nuanced to the particularities of both this student cohort and the Australian higher education context. Figure (2) maps out the process of analysis indicating how this was multi-staged to ensure that the data was handled with careful rigour.

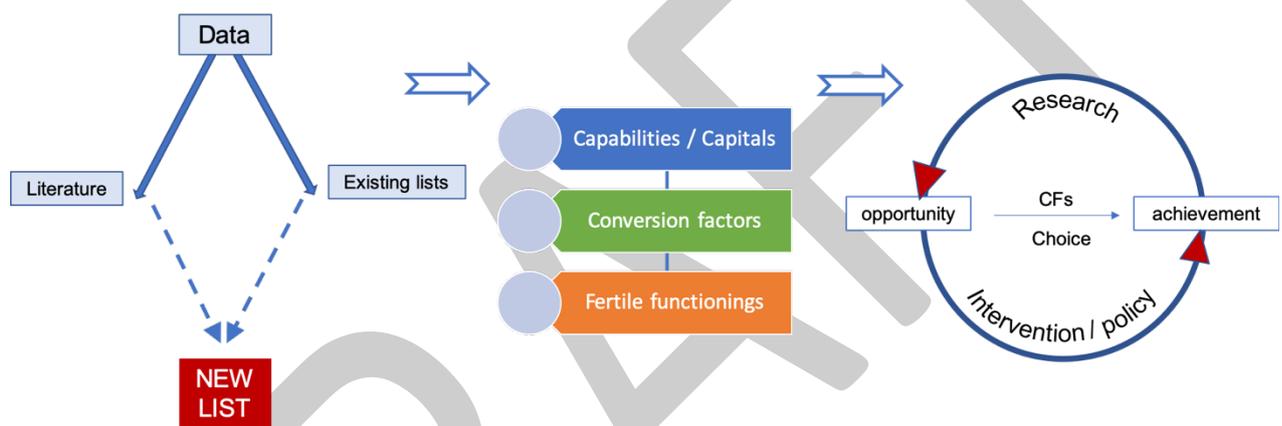


Figure 1: Visual of how the framework was designed and developed²

Error! Reference source not found. provides an overview of how the data was considered in relation to literature and existing lists to create the proposed 'persistence' list, each stage built upon the previous one but was given equal weight in this development. Obviously as a socially positioned actor I brought existing perspectives to this analysis so it was necessary to remain critically reflexive throughout analysis. I remained conscious of my own perspectives when analysing the words and stories of others, a process greatly assisted by constant reflective memoing. This process of writing enabled me to foreground my own positionality and also to question any taken for granted assumptions or perspectives within the data. This reflexivity was further assisted by the critical reference group, this expert group further challenged my thinking and encouraged me to consider how I had handled the data. As one member of the critical reference group stated: "if we're asking [...] questions about persistence, naturally most people want to think that they are persistent, so perhaps they're answering in a way that they are already valuing the concept of persistence as opposed to seeing it as something that is neutral". This type of critical feedback will be key to the next stages of the project which both involves translating the framework into

² This figure is based upon a diagram provided by Dr Tebeje Molla who was able to visualise the process of analysis in this highly effective way – Dr Molla was part of the critical reference group for this framework.

practical applications and also, considering further critical analysis and writing from the project.

Initial Coding and Analysis

The main themes that emerged from the line-by-line coding of the interviews (n=70) and surveys (n=306) resulted from open-coding. I deliberately coded based on what ‘jumped out’ of the data in a more holistic sense, rather than limiting coding to understandings of persistence; this form of open coding is vital in order to thoroughly interrogate the data being examined. These high-level nodes were inductively derived from the data and were populated with relevant content from across both the surveys and interviews. As this coding continued, patterns began to emerge in the data and as these emerged, sub-nodes were created. The coding continued until all the Australian data was exhausted and then each of the sub-nodes (or child nodes) was analysed, with those that seemed to be repetitive or very limited in application removed. Each of the nodes had also been carefully defined at the onset of coding; these initial definitions were later refined based on the emerging data. This was a rigorous process that required a continual dipping into the data, followed by written reflections and also, critical analysis.

A total of 24 overarching codes (See Appendix One) emerged across the data but these related to a diversity of areas that, while broadly related to persistence, were not related to the act of persistence, which underpins this framework. The resulting nodes were varied and have informed publications around meritocratic understandings of persistence and ‘success’ (Delahunty & O’Shea, 2019; O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018); how spaces between ‘fields’ and ‘border’ crossing inform persistence behaviours (O’Shea, 2020) and how HE persistence relates to negotiations around communities of practice (Groves & O’Shea, 2019).

Out of the 24 broad based nodes, there are three main nodes that underpin the framework outlined in this document:

- 1) Access to conversion factors
- 2) Capabilities and cultural strengths underpinning persistence
- 3) Fertile Functionings associated with persistence

Table 3 (below) details these three overarching nodes with the definition that emerged from analysis as well as the number of affiliated sub or child nodes, which numbered 26 in total:

Overarching Node	Definition	No of child nodes
Capabilities and Cultural Strengths underpinning persistence	<i>The range of capabilities and cultural strengths that students mentioned as underpinning their persistence behaviours. Cultural Strengths: The capitals that inform individuals’ movement and successes within fields. A capability is an ‘ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (Sen, 1993, p. 30).</i>	11

Overarching Node	Definition	No of child nodes
Fertile functionings associated with persistence	<i>Fertile functionings relate to the various parts of a person’s state of being that refer specifically to what they can ‘do’ or ‘be’ in life or in this case what can assist in persistence</i>	11
Access to conversion factors to achieve goals	<i>This node seeks to consider the access these students had to necessary <u>freedoms</u> or <u>conversion factors</u> that enabled them to perform or enact their aspirations.</i>	4

Table 2: Details of nodes and descriptors after the first pass over the data

Figure 2 (below) shows how these three overarching nodes were perceived to relate to each other. Based on my analysis and understanding, each was embedded within the other and existed in a relational state; meaning that all three were key to the successful enactment of persistence within HE.

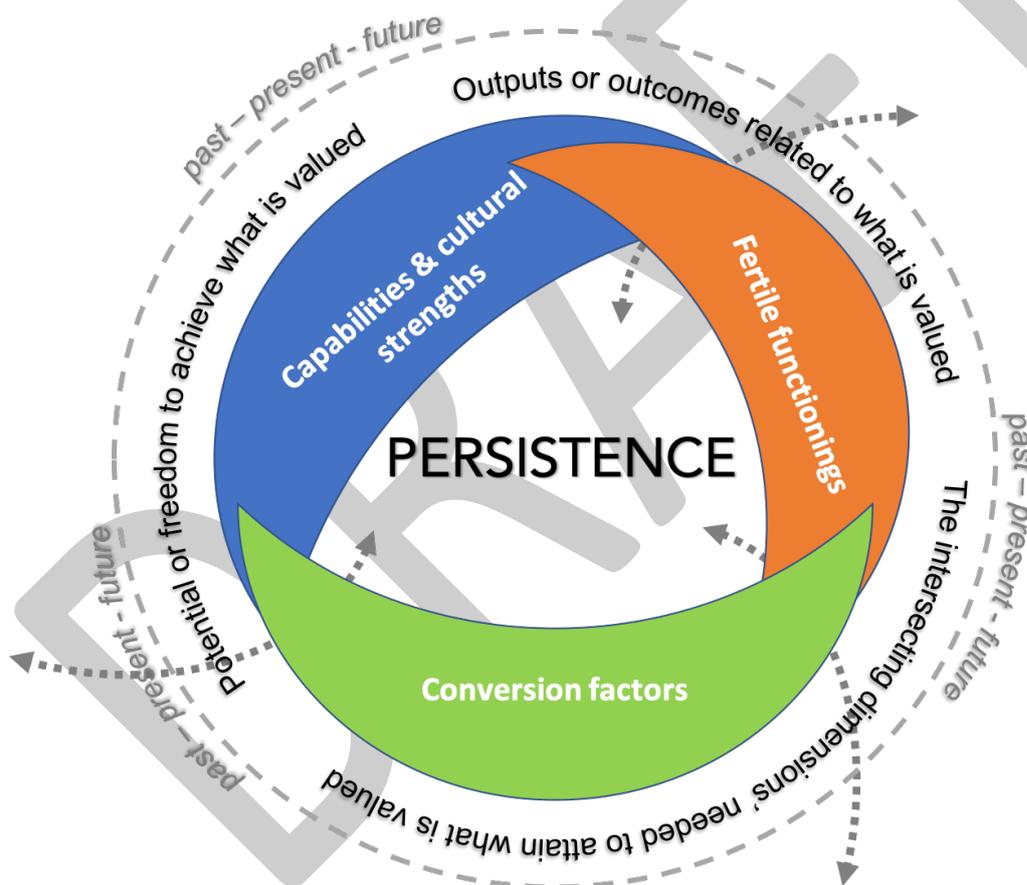


Figure 2: Overarching nodes: How each node informed the other in the enactment of persistence

Figure 3 conceptualises these as non-hierarchical, continually evolving relationships i.e. the capabilities and cultural strengths offer the potential for students to achieve what is valued (in this case it is persisting and ultimately degree attainment); ‘fertile functionings’ (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007) refer to the functionings (outputs / outcomes) that enabled the function of persistence; and conversion factors relate to who and/or what experiences (or intersecting

dimensions) are influential in this enactment. Thus the enactment of persistence is drawn from the past (positive and negative experiences, cultural/social capitals, behaviours), which are then drawn upon in the here-and-now (especially when the 'going gets tough'), and which are likely to inform future situations (informed by past positive and negative experiences, new cultural/social capitals, behaviours). Obviously, a person who has limited access to all of these areas would have difficulty in persisting **but equally**, if an individual was unable to achieve fertile functionings, this too would arguably foreclose or limit the act of persisting. Identifying access to fertile functionings can assist in 'pinpointing clusters of disadvantage as well as possible steps to remedy them' (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p51) the latter point is particularly key when designing practical strategies to improve HE persistence.

The following sections provide the necessary detail for each of these overarching nodes and then defines the various sub-nodes related to these. There is also an overview of the ways in which the coding occurred, including an indication of which nodes were most apparent in the data. As this volume or number of references indicates a greater thematic commonality, this numerical value partially informed inclusion within the final framework.