

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

A Framing Paper

Capabilities and Cultural Strengths section

Professor Sarah O'Shea
University of Wollongong
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Capabilities and Cultural Strengths underpinning persistence

Definition adopted for this study:

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).

There were eleven sub-nodes identified under this ‘parent’ or high-level node; the following hierarchy chart indicates the relative weightings or references associated with each of these categories. These weightings are represented through the ‘slice of the pie’ allocated to the various themes in order to provide a pictorial representation of the relative distribution across themes:

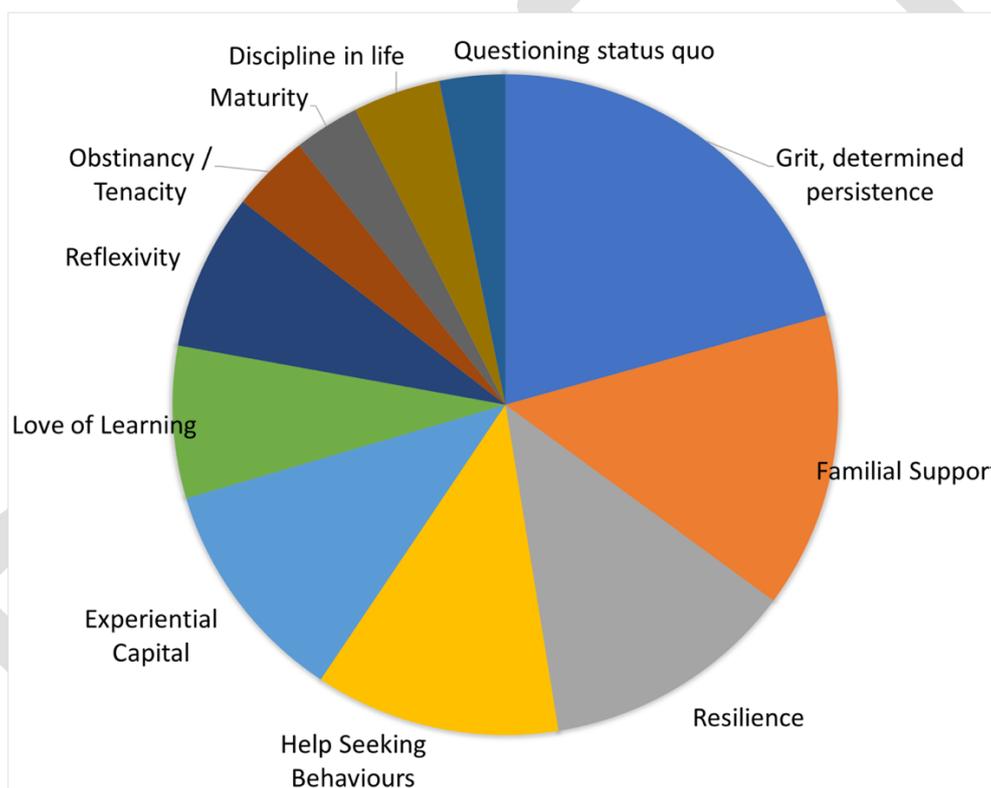


Figure 1: Hierarchy chart related to capabilities and cultural strengths identified in the data

As the size of the slices suggest, the top four nodes that were coded include:

Theme/Node	Definition
1. Grit or determined persistence	<i>A sense of having to fight or push back to attend - this is not an entitlement. This is more than just persistence but a determination to keep going</i>

2. Familial Support	<i>Specific reference to the support/influence of family as a motivator to persist - the connection between family and persistence is key</i>
3. Resilience	<i>The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; a toughness of spirit, not letting difficult circumstance become a reason or rationale not to persist</i>
4. Help Seeking Behaviours	<i>Students seek help and advice in a proactive manner - seeking out support themselves</i>

Table 1: Top four nodes

However, other thematics that emerged strongly included:

Theme / Node	Definition
Experiential Capital	<i>References to life skills or experiences that have enabled the student to dig deep and keep going - these experiences include those from life, work or family</i>
Love of learning	<i>Students refer to a love of learning that both challenges and motivates them in their pursuit of HE</i>
Reflexivity	<i>Skills at being able to reflect upon the self - students refer to their self-reflections or reflection on life as assisting them in their persistence</i>
Obstinacy or Tenacity	<i>Being tenacious or obstinate in dedication to continue with HE</i>
Maturity	<i>Students refer to their age as assisting them in persisting - this may be related to experiential capital</i>
Discipline manifested in various aspects of life	<i>When students refer to being disciplined in other areas of their life and how this discipline impacted on their persistence behaviours</i>
Questioning the status quo	<i>An ability to ask questions and seek out information - just not accepting the status quo. This is not about seeking assistance but rather refusing to accept things just because this is how it has always been</i>

Table 2: Additional nodes that emerged from one of the overarching themes

Fertile functionings associated with persistence

Definition adopted for this study: 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 assist in persistence.

The second high-level or ‘parent’ node that underpins this persistence framework has been called **fertile functionings associated with persistence**; this conceptually moves the data analysis along from just considering particular attributes or states of being that impact on persistence to actually consider access to ‘fertile functionings’ that enable or facilitate particular ‘states of being’. Sen (1993) defines functionings as directly relating to the various

parts of a person’s state of being that refer specifically to what they can ‘do’ or ‘be’ in life; whereas capabilities refer to the ‘alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve and from which he or she can choose...’ (p 31)

This overarching node also had a total of eleven subthemes or child nodes as follows (in no particular order):

Theme/Node	Description
Agency	<i>Students refer to personal agency around making HE work, this might include actively seeking out additional support to assist them in undertaking studies</i>
Altered or Fluid Trajectories	<i>Then and now statements that reveal changes to aspirations and how these have complemented movement through university</i>
Being an exemplar for others	<i>References to an awareness of being an example and how this assists in persistence</i>
Desiring More	<i>Passion or desire for getting more out of life which has underpinned this persistence at university</i>
Developing a sense of the self as persistent	<i>Students referring to themselves as persistent - recognising that trait in themselves - using 'self talk' to encourage continuation at uni</i>
Fearless or daunting	<i>Students refer to their decision to come to university as being an act of bravery - which might have negative repercussions</i>
Finding a passion	<i>This passion may include the learning / discipline area/ applying knowledge/ giving back to community and others. This passion has acted as a motivator</i>
Fluid identity	<i>Students articulate fluid identity positions with regard to the various roles they occupy in life</i>
Individual effort or independence	<i>When the HE journey feels like it has been the effort of the student alone, there has not been others involved in this journey of persistence</i>
Perception or awareness of natural ability	<i>Students refer to having a sense of ability; might be an affinity with learning or high IQ</i>
Resilient Biographies	<i>Examples of stories or biographical experiences that students refer to as almost preparing them for HE - these are often stories of struggles and overcoming obstacles to attend university</i>

Table 3: The nodes associated with the 'fertile functionings' theme

The top four for this particular theme were as follows:

1. Resilient Biographies
2. Finding a passion
3. Individual effort or independence
4. Developing a sense of the self as persistent

The following **Error! Reference source not found.** also indicates how the data spanned these themes indicating a relational matrix around key 'ways of being' that seemed to underpin the act of persisting:

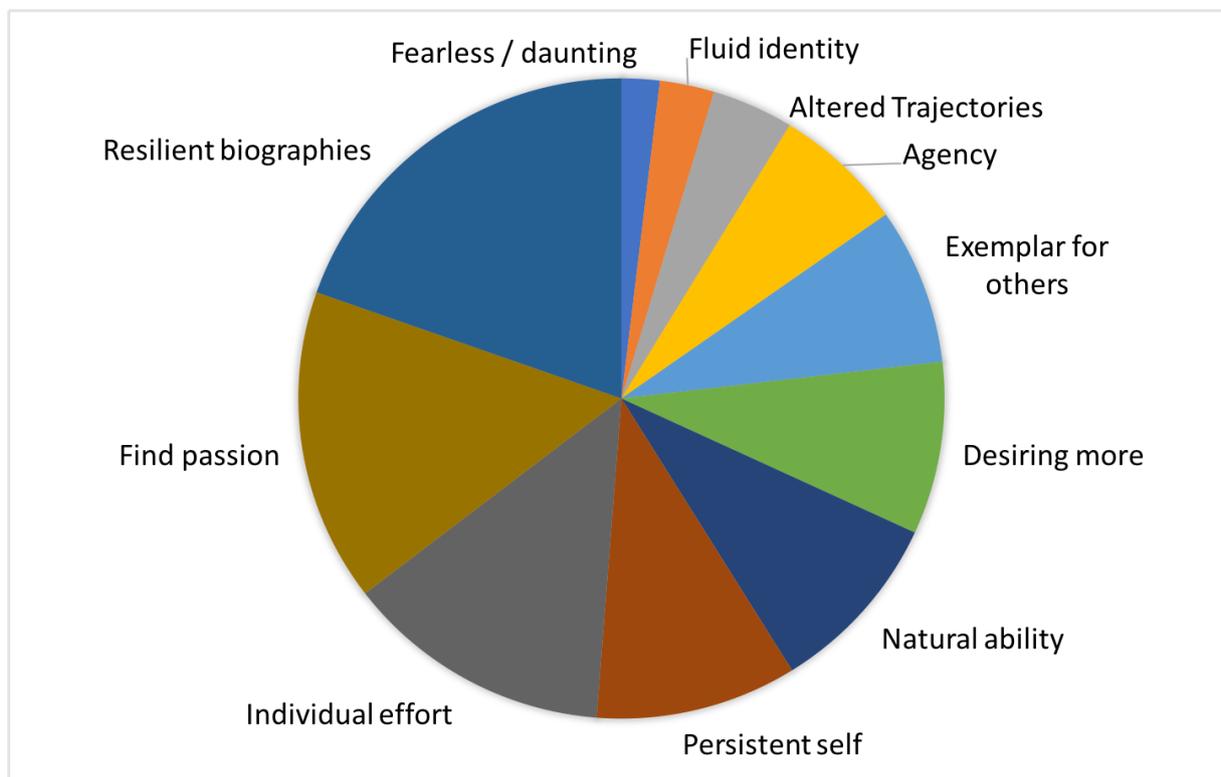


Figure 2: Hierarchy chart that shows the various fertile functionings identified

Access to conversion factors to achieve goals

Definition adopted for this study: *The access to conversion factors that these learners required in order to perform or enact persistence.*

The final node or theme that fundamentally relates to this persistence framework is one that seeks to provide context to our understandings of the field. The overarching node is entitled: *Access to conversion factors to achieve goals*, which refers to the contexts and conditions under which agency goals are developed. In other words, what this node seeks to consider is the conversion factors that people actually have access to that enable them to perform or enact their aspirations.

This node was not as broad as the other two and consisted of four main categories. As a context node, this is largely descriptive rather than analytical in nature. The four sub categories or nodes are:

<i>Theme / Node</i>	<i>Description</i>
Social networks of support	<i>The act of drawing upon developed/ing social networks that enabled students to maintain persistence</i>
Networks of influential people	<i>References to people that have assisted in this journey who are not family members, they may be in a position of power or relative power compared to the student</i>
Engagement with industry and discipline	<i>The blending of experience in both the industry and academic discipline which effectively facilitated opportunities for some learners</i>
Complementary institutional experiences	<i>How some learners considered their experience in one education institutional environment as fundamental to sustaining their ongoing journey in HE.</i>

Table 4: Details of the conversion factors

It is important to note that capabilities or capitals do not equate to personal qualities as such, in this study the students spoke about personal qualities in their persistence (including persistence, motivation, resilience etc) but capabilities relate more to an ability or opportunity to reach desired states of being. What this actually means is that people can attest to have characteristics or qualities that assist them but still not achieve what it is that they desire in life perhaps because their access to conversion factors may be limited or constrained. Equally, the conversion factors identified by these participants are also only partial, as these rely on thematic commonality as opposed to individual contexts or idiosyncrasies. The result of this analysis is the creation of an ideal-theoretical framework initially, which is then further refined to produce a more applied framework for the field. As stated, this is not presented as an unique or comprehensive overview but rather as one translation of how this particular cohort of first-in-family students represented and articulated their persistence behaviours.

Developing the Elements of the Framework

Once the coding of all the data was completed, the initial analysis was then revisited to consider possible overlaps between themes and those that seemed to be repetitive or could not be differentiated were collapsed into a broader node. This stage of analysis required constant reading and memoing, this deep engagement with the data enabled patterns and replication to be recognised across nodes. This was an iterative process that required movement between the nodes, their definitions and the data. **Appendix Two** details exactly how various nodes were grouped and / or collapsed to create new nodes (based on existing data). This stage also involved constant reflection to ensure that this analysis remained deeply embedded within the data. Two examples of how these were collapsed is presented in Figure 6 but for more detailed explanation please refer to Appendix Two:

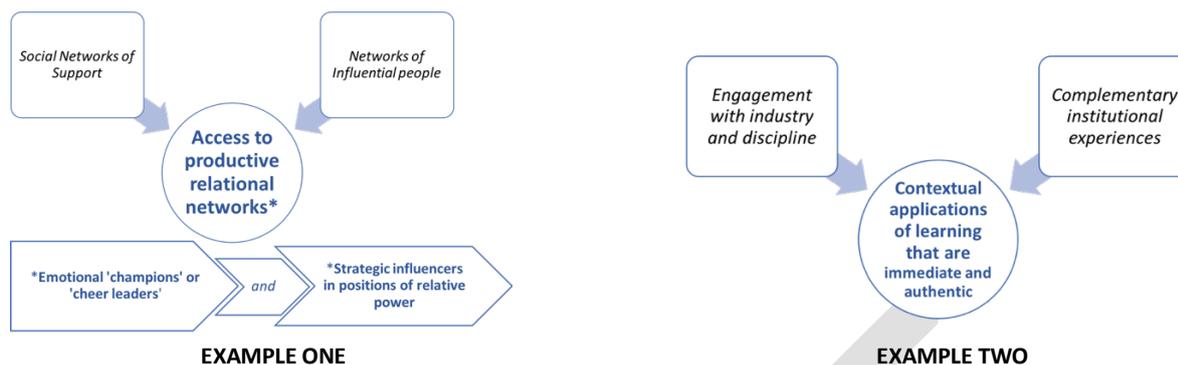


Figure 3: Two examples of collapsing of nodes and the resulting 'conversion factors'

The two examples above show how nodes were grouped, analysed and then collapsed:

Example One: The conversion factor 'Access to productive relational networks' emerged from two nodes, namely 1) *Social networks of support* and 2) *Networks of influential people*. When the content of both of these was examined it was clear that each detailed relationships that are supportive in nature, support was both emotional and strategic in nature. To capture this nuance, the resulting conversion factor was further delineated to differentiate between 'emotional' champions or 'cheer leaders' for students as well as more strategic relationships with people in relative positions of power.

Example Two: The conversion factor: 'Contextual applications of learning that are immediate and authentic' was derived from closely analysing the content in the following two nodes: 1) *Engagement with industry* and 2) *Discipline and complementary institutional experiences*. Overall, this data collectively related to an opportunity to apply learning to practical situations, so having access to a job or volunteer role that allowed immediate application of learning was defined as another key conversion factor for these learners.

Both examples above relate to conversion factors but equally a small number of the capabilities were also collapsed. The most complex of these is detailed in Figure 7, where three nodes: 1) *Grit or determined persistence*, 2) *Fearless or daunting* and 3) *Obstinacy and tenacity* all similarly referred to a level of determination, an ability to keep going even in the face of adversity or when feeling fearful of what is ahead. Having reflected at length about this, I realised that there was not a word in English that accurately captured what this capability spoke to; however there is a word in Finnish! This capability was renamed 'Demonstrating Sisu' as the term *sisu* more accurately captures the inner strengths and capabilities that these students referred to in their narratives (see Table 8 for details).

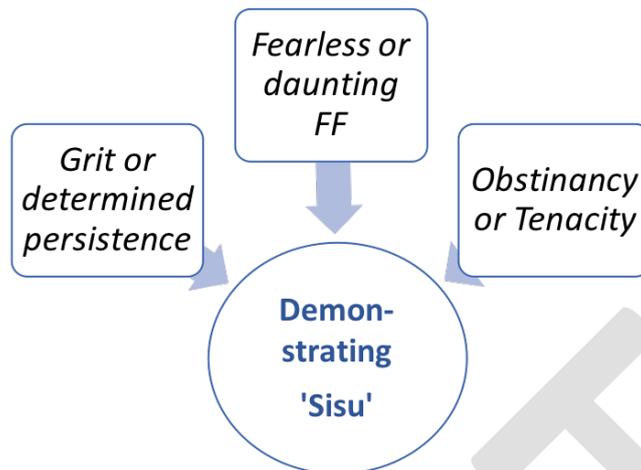


Figure 4: Demonstrating 'Sisu'

Tables 8 & 9 further detail the final list of capabilities and conversion factors with clear definitions, this is followed by Table 10 where each of the capabilities is situated in relation to existing lists, extant literature and also example statements from the students themselves.