

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

A Framing Paper

## Overarching elements of the framework section

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## Overarching Elements of the Framework

Ideal Theoretical List of Capabilities / Capitals	Overall Description
<b>Demonstrating 'Sisu'</b>	<p><i>This is a Finnish word that is used to refer to courage or an ability to keep going despite obstacles. This is more than Grit or determination (adopting Duckworth's 2016 definition of Grit as a 'passion and perseverance for long-term and meaningful goals'). I have used this word as it seems to capture the nuances of what the students reflected upon.</i></p> <p><i>Sisu is Finnish for 'inner determination' and 'courage, tenacity, stubborn determination, energy and a will and an ability to get things done' (Sinkkonen, 2013); 'courage, determination, with just a trace of Finnish stubbornness' (Stoller, 1996, p.154), 'guts or stamina' that characterises the Finns, especially when the small nation fought for its independence in WWII (Oinas, 2005, p. 1232)</i></p> <p><i>Sisu 'preserves and transmits core community values' which 'then shape (and are shaped by) day-to-day behaviours' (Lucas &amp; Buzzanell, 2004 p. 280). Sisu is enacted through 'labour' and struggle, and is called upon to deal with new challenges. Sisu enables the discursive construction of a strong persistence culture that enables people 'to find dignity and meaning' in what they do despite others' perceptions of these endeavours (Lucas &amp; Buzzanell, 2004, p. 285).</i></p>
<b>Familial Capital</b>	<i>Specific reference to the support/influence of family as a motivator to persist - the connection between family and persistence is key</i>
<b>Help Seeking Behaviours</b>	<i>Students seek help and advice in a proactive manner - seeking out support themselves rather than waiting for this to come to them – this may also be related to an action mindset.</i>
<b>Experiential Capital</b>	<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>
<b>Reflexivity</b>	<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>
<b>Maturity</b>	<i>Students refer to their age as assisting them in persisting - this is often related to experiential capital</i>
<b>Discipline manifested in various aspects of life</b>	<i>When students refer to being disciplined in other areas of their life and how this discipline impacted on their persistence behaviours</i>
<b>Questioning the status quo</b>	<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 and may also be related to maturity and experiential capital</i>

Table 1: Details of overarching list of capabilities with definitions

### Conversion factors required to enact persistence

Conversion Factors	Overall Description
<b>Personal Agency and Fluidity</b>	This not only includes a personal agency but also an ability to enact fluid identity positions and trajectories. This would include a fluidity in relation to how HE attendance is maintained and incorporated in life; sometimes this fluidity is manifested in flexibility in life course directions and aspirations.
<b>HE attendance understood in an embodied sense as an act of passion or love</b>	This is a deliberate characterisation of HE as being an act of love or passion; this embodied nature sustains the learners in times of difficulty. This also appears to be a type of substantive freedom or conversion factor in the way that doing something that is 'loved' or engenders 'passion' enables persistence in times of difficulty. References include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A deep love of learning that can be both challenging and motivating</li> <li>- A passion to give back to the community and others.</li> </ul>
<b>Resilient Lived Experience</b>	This is more than just reflecting on 'being resilient' or defining the self as resilient but actually is derived from a <b>lived experience</b> of resilience. This lived resilience is manifested by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A capacity to recover quickly from difficulties;</li> <li>- A toughness of spirit that does not allow difficult circumstances become a reason or rationale not to persist</li> <li>- Biographical experiences that students refer to as almost preparing them for HE</li> <li>- Using resilient self-talk to manage their persistence</li> </ul>
<b>Well-developed self-concept or efficacy</b>	This refers to a sense of being able to achieve without the assistance or intervention of others, it may also manifest itself as an innate confidence in abilities (such as a high IQ) or perhaps an awareness of the self as being a role model or exemplar for others and the responsibilities this positionality holds
<b>Access to productive Relational Networks</b>	These networks provide two key functions: <p>Emotional 'champions' or 'cheer leaders', usually friends who may or may not have any direct experience of HE <u>AND</u></p> <p>Strategic influencers, often in positions of relative power who provide instrumental encouragement &amp; support</p>
<b>Access to contextual applications of learning that are immediate and authentic.</b>	This relates to an opportunity to apply learning to practical situations so having the opportunity in the form of a job or volunteer role that allows immediate application of learning.

Table 2: Details of the overarching list of conversion factors with definitions

Each of the capabilities, capitals and conversion factors emerged inductively from the data and so initially had no bearing on existing lists or literature in the field. However, this initial pass over the data was then mapped against existing capabilities lists including those related to the higher education (HE) field such as Walker's (2006) *Ideal-Theoretical list of HE capabilities* and Wilson-Strydom's (2015) list *relating to transition to HE*. In addition, Nussbaum's list of *ten central human capabilities* was also referred to in this process (2006).

By mapping this capabilities list against other existing lists, the intent is to consider any possible gaps or oversights in the analysis. Such mapping required a continual movement between the actual data (how students themselves articulate their persistence), the literature (how research and policy reflects upon persistence) and existing lists (how other theorists have translated the Capabilities approach within and beyond the HE sector). This mapping process further ensured Robeyns' stage of 'explicit formulation' (2003) in the creation of this list and also, sought to develop a solid methodological justification.

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## Overarching Elements of the Framework

Suggested Capabilities / Capitals	How this relates to other broad lists of capabilities Walkers / Wilson-Strydom = HE focus Nussbaum = Life focus	Relevant Literature or further rationale / explanation	Illustrative quotes from the data
<i>Demonstrating 'Sisu'</i>	<p><u>Educational Resilience</u> (Walker 2006, Wilson-Strydom, 2015) which includes being able to 'negotiate risk', 'persevere academically', 'adapt to constraints', being 'self-reliant'.</p> <p>This also relates to '<u>practical reasoning</u>' or as Nussbaum defines an ability to 'engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life' (Nussbaum, 2006)</p>	<p><i>Sisu</i> is particularly evident in students from disadvantaged groups, who persist despite barriers outside of their control such as 'cumulative inequalities' especially as these often impede persistence and achievement of goals (Contini, Cugnata &amp; Scagni, 2018).</p> <p>Verdinelli, &amp; Kutner, (2016) highlight how persistence factors included "resiliency, self-determination, motivation, goal commitment, institutional assistance, and other external sources of support" (p. 353) can be strong forces in enacting success</p> <p>Khattub (2018) argues that this investment in further education may also be a type of 'defiance strategy' particularly for those from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds ( p. 469)</p>	<p><i>My perseverance. My perseverance – never to give up. It was something that everyone in our family has; it was something that we were taught when we were younger that if you really want something, nothing in life is ever going to be handed to you on a silver platter and that's probably because of that working class ethic in our family, just to never give up – where there's a will, there's a way. (Erin)</i></p> <p><i>As a student, I hit that many obstacles, even just getting in these doors that I guess ... I've just been relentless. I just have not given up so I think that, you know, whether it be a hard assessment, a hard subject...I banged on so many doors in this place to make sure it happened and I could have easily given up but I didn't, thankfully. I think that's probably one of the biggest qualities is that I'm a fighter and a lot of that I think comes from my background as well. You know, you've got to be a fighter. (Molly)</i></p> <p><i>I'm self-motivated, so everything I do I'm motivated because of the hard life I went through so I see education like it's very important and especially I'm the first one to go to university in my family ever, from my mum – so my mum never gone to school and my grandma, never. (Labreisha)</i></p>
<i>Familial Capital</i>	<p><u>Social relations and social networks</u> (Walker 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015): Forming quality networks and relationships that underpin or support HE learning</p>	<p>Roksa and Kinsley (2017) demonstrated that the more emotionally supported by family that low income students felt, the greater their sense of psychological well-being and belonging to the institution. Family emotional support and student engagement were found to be closely</p>	<p><i>I guess that value of putting in an effort, yeah, treatment, achievement, seeing the task through to the end. We've got a bit of a family mantra that you don't give up, you'll do what you said you were going to do. We don't do things half-heartedly. (Nicole)</i></p>

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	<p><u>Imagination and thought</u> (Nussbaum, 2006): The importance of having attachments to things and persons outside ourselves.</p>	<p>linked, even more so than family financial support.</p> <p>Samuels, Beach &amp; Palmer (2011) highlight that support from significant people such as family members (spouses, partners and children) is critical, as is wider family support such as childminding or helping out in the home and support which is emotional, financial, physical or practical. Students often acknowledge that without extensive family support achieving their degree would not have been possible, neither would the opportunity to break cycles of disadvantage.</p> <p>Bui &amp; Rush (2016) found that having high educational expectations in the years following high school was one of the biggest impacts on college attendance.</p> <p>The influence of memorable messages from family members was noted by Wang (2014) as a strong enabler for first-generation students making the transition into and through university study. Significant parental messages were around remembering their roots and the shared struggles; and family remaining integral to their lives, which may mean making decisions and talking through how to balance family/study.</p>	<p><i>I took them to university with me and showed them around the campus and they were like, "Oh, we want to come here mummy", whereas that was never given to me. I was always told, "You can be a waitress or maybe an air hostess and that's about it. That's as clever as you can be and you're no good at maths and you'll never amount to anything so don't aspire to anything above what you can possibly achieve". So I've changed that. Actually that was probably my primary motivation is to change that cycle and stop that toxic cycle and to motivate my children. (Lara)</i></p> <p><i>My achievements are also my parents' achievements because without them I wouldn't have been able to do this. (Erin)</i></p>
<p><i>Help Seeking Behaviours</i></p>	<p><u>Learning disposition</u> (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015): Being an 'active inquirer';</p>	<p>The literature points to how 'successful' students tend to be active help-seekers, and when they</p>	<p><i>I ask for help, I apply for extensions. If I didn't have that ability, I couldn't do university as a mother, as an adult carer,</i></p>

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	<p>having 'curiosity' and also, 'confidence in one's ability to learn'</p>	<p>encounter "obstacles, uncertainty or confusion" seek help from resources that were available (Morales, 2012, p. 93). Morales (2012) argues that in order to foster active help seeking behaviours there is a need for HE to maximise the resources available as well as "instill in students the desire and ability to actively seek out help" (p. 98)</p> <p>However, Kahu &amp; Nelson, (2018) caution against the possible negative repercussions of help seeking behaviours which can be influenced by anxiety. Equally, recognising that some anxiety may serve to be a motivating force which promotes 'greater behavioural engagement' (Kahu &amp; Nelson, 2018, p. 65)</p>	<p><i>as the only person in my family who's been to university because I can't ask anyone in my family for advice, I can't get help with assignments so I've had to find it. (Isabel)</i></p> <p><i>I was a bit overawed by the university website at the time and seeking information on that website was kind of like "Oh, there's too much here. Where do I start?" Overcoming that, I had to use people like careers advisors and year advisors and they were fundamental but, again, I think friendship and friend relationships were really important because we were able to seek out and acquire that information together. (Bradley)</i></p>
<p><i>Experiential Capital</i></p>	<p><u>Respect, dignity and recognition</u> (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015): Specifically, how this relates to 'being treated with dignity' and not being 'diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race' – I would include understanding the value and application of existing life experiences and to draw on these without prejudice or devaluing.</p> <p><u>Sense</u> (Nussbaum, 2006): Freedom to use existing 'senses, imagine, think, and reason.'</p>	<p>Persistence can be motivated when significant negative past experiences are transformed into positive attributes, especially for students from backgrounds of educational disadvantage (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey &amp; Wicks, 2014)</p> <p>Whitehall, Hill, Yost &amp; Kidwell (2018) argue that life skills such as managing conflict, being open to change and effective communication are highly beneficial to students' and support their success during and beyond university.</p> <p>Anya Kamenetz (2015) acknowledges the importance of a range of non-academic skills as key to student success. Even if there is debate about nomenclature, the fact remains that skills</p>	<p><i>The really kick-ass exciting thing about this is I feel that I've been able to put a lot of the experiences that I've had in a toolbox, you know, it's really exciting because I thought the worst thing that could ever happen in my life is if I ever ended up just being a victim of it and I'm not. (Michelle)</i></p> <p><i>It's kind of those "If it doesn't kill you it does make you really stronger" and you say "Well, I coped with that so I can cope", you know. (Josie)</i></p> <p><i>I have had some negative experiences which I believe have actually benefited me in ways because I am more motivated to set high goals and work hard to achieve them. (survey respondent)</i></p>

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		<p>such as social and emotional, growth mindset, 'soft' and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and qualities such as grit, character, non-cognitive traits and habits contribute significantly to the student's 'tool box'</p> <p>Gordon and Cooper (2010) found that drawing on skills derived from a range of different experiences and kinds of knowledge (such as personal, contextual and experiential understandings) enriches and informs practice.</p>	
<p><i>Reflexivity</i></p>	<p><u>Knowledge and imagination</u> (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) Specifically the ability to 'gain knowledge of chosen academic subjects' and using 'critical thinking and imagination' to understand different perspectives and form opinions.</p> <p><u>Practical reason</u> (Nussbaum, 2006): Being able to 'engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life'.</p>	<p>Hernandez-Martinez &amp; Williams (2013) argue that in times of personal crisis or situations where students experiences 'lack of fit' are not necessarily negative – instead this emotion may engender "the space where reflexivity can emerge" which can challenge core assumptions about "how the world works and provide resilience to pursue further education" (2013, p. 49)</p> <p>Drawing on the theory of human agency (Archer in Lockett &amp; Lockett, 2009), argues that a (re)positioning in society can become possible when individuals reflect upon "their objective positioning in society (the me)" (p. 475). Internal conversations may be followed by practical action. When these kinds of internal conversations are externalised i.e. in conversation with trusted others, reflexivity is aided and so is the practice of developing more accurate evaluations of one's place in the world, helping to develop clarity in plans for action and</p>	<p><i>I think having that critical view that you get from being at uni, you seem to have more control over what's happening to you. (Aaron)</i></p> <p><i>I think I'm a lot more critically reflective of myself and I looked at why I failed and I worked out it was because of me and then I realised that well, if I change my habits then I can easily get through (Drew)</i></p> <p><i>But to get the most out of university, you have to be willing to take apart a bit of yourself and realise that we don't know everything. I unlearned so much to learn what I now know and it was the most rewarding thing I've ever done. (Evelyn)</i></p> <p><i>Yeah, I had to change my perceptions of myself to be able to be like, "Okay, everyone's path is different. You're not the same as everyone else" and that's why I had to overcome that barrier. (Layla)</i></p>

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		confidence in abilities. (Lockett & Lockett, 2009, p. 475, 477)	
<i>Maturity</i>	<p>This is related to experiential capital and so can be equated to:</p> <p><u>Respect dignity and recognition</u> (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015): Having 'respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity and not being diminished or devalued...' in this case this devaluing might occur due to age.</p>	<p>Samuel, Beach &amp; Palmer (2011) identify how maturity is often driven by internal motivation to achieve goals, and therefore to persist. There is also an expectation (realised or not) that the degree experience will open up more opportunities for advancement and career choice than if they did not study. Being a role model (especially for children) is also a strong motivator to for mature students to persist</p> <p>The development of confidence can occur through validating and recognising the prior knowledge that mature learners bring to their university study (Toynton, 2005). In particular skills such as self-directedness independent decision-making (Knowles et al 2012) and time management skills developed through experience as a worker or managing home life can be often translated across to university studies, especially by mature women (Trueman &amp; Hartley (1996).</p> <p>According to Shanahan (2000) one of the great advantages of being mature age at university is the level of confidence brought by the experience of life and the world of work.</p>	<p><i>My younger self? Yeah, I think my younger self would have been too distracted. Yeah, probably wait till you've had some life experience and then consider higher studies. (Nicole)</i></p> <p><i>I'm very thankful that I decided to go through with this and that it was the right choice for me. But like I said, it took me a really long time to get here and I don't think as a school leaver, I would have been in this situation. (Danielle)</i></p> <p><i>So in some aspects, I worked a lot harder than the young students coming straight from school, however, in other aspects because of my vast working experience, it all makes a lot more sense; I can connect to real life and in those aspects, it was a lot easier (Helen)</i></p>
<i>Discipline manifested in</i>	Broadly, this relates to Nussbaum's 'central human capabilities' specifically: <u>Control over</u>	Natalie Gil (2014) presents evidence that juggling an academic career with sport can be beneficial to performance in both. The discipline and stimulation of having a different outlet (of either	<i>When I was younger I used to do dancing and I just danced my whole life and it's kind of instilled in me with the whole fact that if you want something you need to work hard for it, you need to work hard every day to get to your goal and the</i>

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<i>various aspects of life</i>	<u>one's environment in terms of being 'able to live one's own life and no one else's.'</u>	<p>sport or study) can help students deal with challenges and setbacks, as well as enhanced motivation, time management, self-discipline and stress relief.</p> <p>Shipman and Payton (2017) found that students participating in dance programs help them be "more creative in the way they approached problem-solving in the laboratory or classroom" (para 6) as they had learned how to work in a group, using these skills for in academic problem-solving. There was a 'sense of rigor' (para 7) being mirrored in the discipline of dance as well as in academic pursuits.</p>	<p><i>only way to do that is if you set yourself goals and incentives to work hard towards it. (Lily)</i></p> <p><i>I'm very organised. I think that comes from my background of event organising too. I know what has to be done and I set myself up before each semester, beginning of every week, I know exactly what has to be done that week. (Trish)</i></p>
<i>Questioning the status quo</i>	In order to enable this capability, it is necessary to have ' <u>bodily integrity</u> ' (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) where this is understood to be 'safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in HE' and also, 'Control over one's environment' (Nussbaum, 2006)	<p>Both Myklebust (2018) and Luckett &amp; Luckette (2009) highlight the importance of challenging cultural beliefs for HE students but this was argued in relation to gender equality (Myklebust, 2018) and gendered structures (Luckett &amp; Luckett, 2009)</p> <p>Samuels et al (2011) also highlight the need to challenge stereotyping of those coming from background of poverty – these students often become role models, achieve their goals despite negativity towards their endeavours, and are determined to make the change needed for themselves and their families in order to enhance life choices through education.</p>	<p><i>That drive to want to get out and see the world was really important. Yeah, it sort of made me then probably wanting to decide what I wanted to do because I didn't really have any idea; being in such a small community it was just you were expected to This is something I just wanted to do all my life; I wasn't just able to accept like say for instance, "Why is there water on the grass when it hasn't rained?" You know, I would question things like this and, you know, things like that so I've always wanted to do this and the fact that it is a more male dominant degree and I am older and all these odds stacked against me, it's just something that I wanted to do. (Pippa)</i></p> <p><i>I also felt that going to university would help me escape I guess what I would call "the under-class" community – within housing commission you know, I saw a lot of drug abuse and mental illness and I saw a lot of despair and they also have in</i></p>

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		However, this capability refers more to the ability of the individual learner to 'challenge' – having this strength and also, agency, to do this bodes well for persistence	<i>the under-class community, they reject the mainstream community's kind of values, aspirations and justice system and so they have their own internal justice system and I kind of rejected a lot of that culture that was from my under-class, from that community. (Eleanor)</i>

Table 3: Mapping the final list against existing capability lists and relevant literature

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