

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

A Framing Paper

Summative Overview section

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## Summative overview of capital and capabilities

When exploring these capabilities and capitals closely, it is clear these exist on a continuum with each defined in relation to the other. For example, when we reflect upon 'Sisu', it is clear that this '*grim, gritty, white knuckle form of courage*' is frequently developed or derived from various forms of experiential capitals or even familial capital where the desire to succeed is firmly grounded in previous difficult or contested situational contexts. To further explore this continuity and the relationship between capabilities, the following sections provide a brief summative overview of each capital / capability based on the additional data generated from the participant interviews and surveys in this study.

### Demonstrating 'Sisu':

When students reflected upon Sisu it was often situated as a quality derived from their family or personal backgrounds but it was characterised in different ways. For some, it was regarded as a trait or quality that was correlated with being 'working class' or 'poor'. As Erin so eloquently described:

*it [perseverance] 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)*

Equally, Sisu was developed through facing adversity or difficulties in life that provided a stubborn mentality or a desire to achieve that students variously characterised as being 'a fighter'; 'digging deep' or an 'unwillingness to take no for an answer.' As both Dyahn and Skye explain:

*I think coming from a family where I had nothing, I don't want to provide that for my family so I'm determined to finish uni and secure the job that I want so that my children have a really good life. (Dyahn)*

*if you want to be a life-long learner, if you want to be the best you that you can be, you have to keep going. You have to keep going for yourself, you have to keep going for your kids, you have to show them that whatever choices you make in life, you can always make other choices and you can always move forward from wherever it is that you are. (Skye)*

### Familial Capital:

Closely linked to 'Sisu' and at times informing its character, is what I have termed as 'familial capital' where the connection between the act of persistence and the family (or members therein) are explicitly linked by the participant. Again, this featured strongly in the data and was generally characterised by individuals making explicit links between persisting at university and their family background, circumstances or support. Importantly these references to family or family were not always positive in nature but equally could reflect a level of negativity or criticality towards this educational undertaking. However, regardless of the nature of this support or the ways it was manifested, this was a capital that provided an impetus or desire within the learner to continue in their educational endeavours:

*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)*

*Yeah, and I just didn't do it because there was no much pressure to... "No, university is no good. You just read books" and the whole family is dead against it; "Get a proper job" – they didn't even like me doing Year 11, like, "No, get a job. Everyone else got a job. Why can't you?" But I'd say to myself now, "Just do it. Don't listen. Just do it". (Aaron)*

While the quotes from Aaron and Nicole represent different attitudes and perspectives from others on their educational decisions, both indicate a resource used for persistence derived from the family unit. In Aaron's case the fluidity between capabilities is demonstrated as while indicating a form of familial capital, equally this quote also represents a form of Sisu.

### Help Seeking Behaviours

The ability to actively seek out help or assistance was also a capability identified in the data, student participants reflected upon this behaviour as being key to their persistence and success within the HE environment. This capability is action-orientated and involves the student defining or describing the ways in which they strategise to obtain information and also, a recognition that this is a quality that has assisted them to pursue their educational endeavours. Bradley for example, explained how his 'help seeking behaviour' was a capability he had developed over a period of time, as he gradually overcame his sense of being 'overawed' by the university:

*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 (Bradley)*

Similarly, Fiona explained how recognising that her own knowledge set was somehow limited forced her to explore other options and to actively seek out alternative sources of critical information:

*not knowing what uni was like in any small or great aspect and not really getting prepped that much by school or anyone that really knew what to expect and then early on, just like with help and kind of if you didn't go "Stuff it, I'm struggling. I'm going to ask 20 people how to get myself out of a hole" then I wouldn't have probably passed a few of those papers. (Fiona)*

### Experiential Capital

As mentioned previously, experiential capital is closely aligned to familial capital in some cases and also underpins the capability termed as 'Sisu' in this project. This form of capital was key to a number of students' narratives of persistence, with many reflecting on how apriori experiences enabled them to maintain their persistence in the face of adverse or difficult circumstances. This capital was derived from a range of contexts and circumstances including family, employment, personal issues and also, broader relational situations. Again, the common theme in this capital was a direct correlation being made between the actual experience and the act of persisting at university. As the following quotes highlight :

*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 think my resilience. I think I'm very proud of that. Very, very long stories that I could go through but I've had to be resilient – I dropped out of high school, I was homeless for a while, the father of my first born child passed away, then I got married, my husband and I had a child that passed away – I've had a whole huge massive difficult life (Isabel)*

### Reflexivity

This capability reflected on individuals' capacity to reflexively develop and grow from previous events or situations, this action underpinning their perspective and attitude on university persistence. Reflexivity is more intangible than the other capitals and capabilities identified in the data but largely this referred to an examination of feelings, attitudes or perspectives that positively impacted on perseverance within higher education. Sometimes this 'reflexivity' took the form of a personal sentiment or 'maxim' that individuals referred to when encountering difficulties or obstacles:

*I've always found it's not about how you fail, it's how you pick yourself up and learn from it and apply that to the next situation. (Leon)*

For others, this capability was manifested in terms of recognising the need for internal change and an openness to implementing such change in order to persist and achieve at university:

*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)*

*You know, I've really pushed myself to my limits in this and I think I keep finding new ceilings of those limits. I think, "Okay, I can't possibly do anymore" and then I find something else that I can just stretch a tiny bit more. So I think finding those capacities that, you know, is reaffirming – that's been good. It's also been really hard but yeah, just finding those inner strengths I didn't know that I had. (Miriam)*

### Maturity

Beginning university as an older or 'mature' learner remains largely constructed as a non-normative transition as the foci in the HE sector remains fixed on the school leaver age group. However, the older cohort is a significant proportion of our student population in Australia with 39% of HE learners being aged 25 years or older (Department of Education & Training (DET), 2016). This older cohort continues to be defined in terms of a 'narrative of disadvantage (Woodfield, 2012, p410) with one recent study reporting that age increases the likelihood of early departure from tertiary studies (Burke, 2017). These characteristics are particularly interesting when we consider that the older students in this study that had successfully persisted to the end of their degree largely regarded this maturity in positive ways, a capability that enabled them to maintain momentum in their studies:

*Being a mature age student as well, I think I've had plenty of years to reflect and think about what I would do if I could go to uni if I had that opportunity and I think it's more pronounced as you get older because you can narrow things down and you can follow that path because you know that that's what you want. (Helen)*

Having this maturity and the associated life experiences could also compensate for the initial gaps in understanding related to being the first in the family. In this way, maturity was reflected upon as a compensating factor for FiF status:

*I feel like if I was younger and I went into university as the first person in my family, I didn't have support at home and then all of the other students then looked down on me, I would not have been able to cope with that and I probably would have dropped out. (Isabel)*

Considering maturity as a form of capability has important implications for how students are constructed particularly older learners, and will be returned to in the recommendations section of this report.

#### Discipline manifested in various aspects of life

Related to maturity and also, experiential capital was the ways in which students reflected upon their ability to apply learnings about being disciplined to areas of study. This cross fertilisation of knowledge provided learners with additional capability tools that could be applied to their persistence behaviours within HE. The references to this discipline included a diversity of referents that centred on an ability to productively apply approaches or skills used in other facets of life (i.e. sport, work or parenting etc) to the HE space:

*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)*

#### Questioning the status quo

The final capability that emerged strongly from the data was participants' capacity to question and, in some cases, reject the 'status quo'. The latter defined as the expected and/or existing situations or contexts that participants encountered in their learning journeys. This capability was sometimes articulated in terms of an individuals' deliberate contravening or rejection of social or relational expectations or requirements. For women this was often the act of disrupting perceived gender norms and choosing university instead of caregiving or marital responsibilities. Belinda described this in terms of her 'drive' to do something different to what was expected by those around her:

*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 probably remain in small communities or marry a farmer or something like that. I knew that wasn't for me but because I really hadn't seen much of the world... (Belinda)*

Others spoke about how their persistence was galvanised by the limitations that were assumed by their life circumstances and/or those around them; questioning and rejecting such expectations providing a solid framing from which to maintain their persistence behaviours:

*other students' negativity and the put-downs, "You can't do it. You can't achieve it from the low social background and you can't do it. People don't go to university from families that are born in low social backgrounds". Other than that, but I overcame that (Raina)*

Firmly rejecting the expected or anticipated life course provided a number of students with the determination or motivation to continue their study despite hardships:

*If anything, I think about what life would be if I didn't go to uni, and aim away from that by continuing to study. (Survey respondent)*

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