

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

A Framing Paper

Considering Conversion Factors section

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Considering Conversion Factors

Sen (2002) argues that we need to deeply examine the actual freedoms people have to actually ‘formulate capabilities’ or valued doings and beings. Conversion factors ‘impact on the extent to which a person is able to make use of the resources available to them to create capabilities or opportunities’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p.50). Robeyns (2005, p99) identifies three groups of conversion factors which include *personal conversion factors* are internal to an individual and include factors such as physical form, intelligence or health; *social conversion factors* are located within society and include policies, social norms, family practices / relationships, gender roles etc and *environmental conversion factors* emerge from the physical or built arena that the individual inhabits such as (geographic location or context, climate etc. Conversion factors are key to capability, as this is not simply about a person’s ability or personal resources but equally about the internal and external conversion factors that an individual is situated within or in relation to.

The following table considers the various conversion types in the data and expands upon these in terms of **type** and **definition** as well as grounding these within the literature and the data:

Conversion Factors	Conversion type	Summary Definition	Relevant Literature or further rationale / explanation	Illustrative quotes from the data
Personal Agency and Fluidity	Personal	<i>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. This level of fluidity also implies a degree of agency</i>	<p>Personal agency is often born from the skill or practice of self-reflexivity, which is key to understanding how resilience develops by some students who manage to ‘escape the failures of the system’ (Hernandez-Martinez & Williams, 2013, p. 49)</p> <p>Prins & Schafft (2009) highlight how there are different pathways taken to persistence. These are the long-term pathway (steady prolonged participation), the mandated pathway (i.e. enforced by some authority), the tryout out pathway (student may leave if not deemed suitable)</p>	<p><i>Being able to do the job that you choose and having control over your future I think is the biggest benefit as I see it. Now that I’ve almost got my degree, I feel in charge of what’s coming next. (Aaron)</i></p> <p><i>...Any minute I get things done – when the kids are watching tv or after cooking, or after cleaning the house I would do the online learning work, so I always make myself disciplined. I don’t want to procrastinate, to keep putting it off, I don’t want to ... always doing it ahead of time... (Labriesha)</i></p>

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			or to their liking), the intermittent pathway (punctuated by periods of dropping out and in), and short-term pathway (student achieves goals and moves on) (p. 2285). Hence in order to take the different pathways a level of agency and fluidity is needed on the part of the learner	
HE attendance understood in an embodied sense	Personal and social	<i>A recognition and articulation of HE attendance in embodied terms that is sustaining for the learners</i>	<p>Lifelong learning and striving to achieve aspirations gives some students an insatiable desire to keep learning. This is an embodied response that can instil confidence for further study, and act as an escape route from poverty (Samuels, Beach and Palmer, 2011)</p> <p>Kahu and Nelson (2018) similarly point to this emotionally laden nature of learning particularly when students find their interests and experiences intersect with what they are learning – this promotes “interest and enthusiasm” (Kahu & Nelson, 2018, p. 65)</p>	<p><i>If I wasn’t passionate about it, I wouldn’t... be so invested I don’t think. I mean if I wasn’t passionate about it I probably wouldn’t be doing it. I’ve gotten to that point in my life where I realise that if you don’t love something fully and don’t really give a rat’s about it, don’t do it. (Danielle)</i></p> <p><i>When I came to [REGIONAL NSW CITY], it was like going to, I don’t know, a closed room where you had nothing, just school, coming, going and then when I came back to university it was like the world opened up again (Deshan)</i></p> <p><i>I’m far more passionate about the things that I’m doing and I think it means... I do get up day-to-day and I can get up at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and not complain about the time because I’m excited to come and do the day so that’s probably the biggest shift. (Bradley)</i></p>
Resilient Lived Experience	Social and environmental	<i>A resilience that has been developed through actual ‘lived experience’ such biographical moments acting as motivators for persistence. These are often</i>	Contrary to a culture of poverty stereotypes, some students characterize themselves as determined individuals who value education and want to make something of themselves, despite the	<i>...you just keep on going because that’s what you want; you don’t give up – it’s what you do and it almost comes naturally. It’s very organic within our family. I know that other families or other people it doesn’t come as naturally but when you’ve been</i>

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		<i>related to extremes of poverty, illness or family breakdown requiring an ability to ‘pick yourself up’ and keep going despite significant life events or experiences</i>	societal constraints placed upon them. (Samuels, Beach and Palmer, 2011)	<p><i>surrounded by your whole life in the face of sadness, grief, you know, the unknown – after seeing all those things play out, you just keep on going’. (Erin)</i></p> <p><i>I’ve got my resilience because I’ve spent pretty much most of my life people telling me that I won’t amount to much, I won’t get to university, I’m not smart enough... (Hayley)</i></p> <p><i>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)</i></p>
Well-developed self-concept or efficacy	Personal	<i>Manifested through an innate confidence in abilities perhaps as a result of high IQ or due to a recognition of being a role model and the responsibilities this position holds</i>	<p>Lehmann’s (2012) study of working-class, FiF students demonstrates that those who show ‘commitment’ to academic and social involvement in university are highly motivated and excited about learning as well as being realistic, ambitious with clearly stated career goals (p. 531). As they become well integrated into the life of a university student and gain skills and experiences which enable them to understand the benefits of participating as fully as possible and taking advantage of opportunities that arise, they are not like to need the same support as they already have a good understanding and acceptance of the means and ends of a university education (p. 543).</p> <p>First generation students often believe they are responsible for “setting a good example for younger family members and friends back home” (Wang, p. 281). This</p>	<p><i>I remember in high school I never did a lot of prep and organisation and things like that for classes and my friends went and did their homework all the time and I was lucky to get through – we were graded in classes in my high schools and I was always in the top ones so I guess I would call myself, you know, fairly intelligent (Bronnie)</i></p> <p><i>I just want to do it. I have this desire. I think being... I’m the eldest out of my... I have two younger siblings and I have four cousins on one side and two on the other and out of all of them, I’m the eldest again and I think I wanted to be a good role model. I was always the oldest so they were always copying me... I want to be the person that they look up to and even though I’m older and they’ve grown and it’s a little different, I still want to be the older cousin, the older sister that achieves what she sets out to achieve. (Jennifer)</i></p>

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			<p>perception of responsibility comes with the need to make ‘smart choices’ (Wang, 2014)</p> <p>For adults, attending university is often a strong motivating factor to provide alternative positive role models who instill the value and benefits of becoming educated (Samuels, Beach and Palmer, 2011). Concerns about leaving a legacy for future generations may also be a catalyst and motivator for change (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008).</p>	
Access to productive relational networks	Social	<i>Access to emotional supporters and/or strategic influencers that (in combination) provide emotional and instrumental support</i>	<p>Students place value on meaningful connections with people and on feeling a sense of belonging both academically and socially (Seifert, Henry & Peregrina-Kretz, 2014)</p> <p>When institutional focus is placed on programs to support students, relational networks can be fostered with faculty and peers, enhancing academic persistence (Pizzolato, Olson & Monje-Paulson 2017).</p> <p>Perceptions of social support are crucial for developing positive relationships between students and their teachers/supervisors, enhancing engagement in academic pursuits (Dupont, Galand & Nils, 2015).</p>	<p><i>The first that I would say is friends. I think I’m incredibly lucky in that I have a friendship group who not only support everything that I do and receive the same from me in return, but are very open about that support and sometimes it amazes me looking at older generations who sometimes struggle sharing that emotive support, particularly among men; there’s this need for stoicism that I think my friends don’t necessarily have which is really good because it means we can support each other very openly and warmly. They’ve kind of been the bedrock of my experience. (Bradley)</i></p> <p><i>I’ve always been supported by really good bosses; they’ve helped me in any way, shape and form. Even though they’re previous bosses now, I still see them when I’m in Sydney and catch up and they’re very supportive so I guess that. (Bronnie)</i></p>

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			When students have access to teaching staff who engage in and encourage meaningful interactions, students’ interest and motivation are fostered (Siegle, Rubenstein & Mitchell, 2014)	
Access to contextual applications of learning that are immediate and authentic.	Environmental	<i>Opportunities to apply learning within practical situations perhaps in a volunteer or employment capacity</i>	<p>Timing of unpaid work experience is critical to gaining employment post-graduation and can lead to different employment outcomes (Purcell et al., 2013). Students who undertook work placements integral to the course, vacation internships and paid work for career experience during their studies had a higher proportion of respondents who felt that their post-graduation job was very appropriate for them (Purcell et al., 2013).</p> <p>Learning to apply knowledge and skills which benefits others has a number of advantages including deeper disciplinary understanding, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, but also growth in personal and social aspects through ‘enhanced personal efficacy, moral reasoning, interpersonal skills, intercultural competencies, commitments to social service, and ... career development’ (Bandy, 2016)</p>	<p><i>having access to a classroom that I can use and try things out – that’s helped enormously. (Aaron)</i></p> <p><i>I think knowing what I want, where I want to be, seeing that in the future has helped a lot. I don't know what it is but I know there's something there and it's become clearer with each year doing voluntary work. Step-by-step it becomes a bit clear. The haze is slowly going away. (Christina)</i></p> <p><i>Yeah, I was working at the refuge from when I first started my study through to third year and that was a great experience because I was able to apply the knowledge and the skills and the understanding... I feel it is tools in my toolbox and that's one of the greatest things I've gotten out of study. (Michelle)</i></p>

Table 1: Mapping the conversion factors against the literature