

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

A Framing Paper

Critical reference group
consultation

Reference list

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Critical Reference Group Consultation

Upon completion of the first draft of the persistence framework, five experts in the field of capabilities and capital theory were asked to critically appraise this draft and provide feedback in relation to analysis and theoretical applications. The expert reference group met in November 2019 and the invited members included:

Dr Dina Bowman: Principal Fellow, Work and Economic Security in BSL's Research and Policy Centre and Honorary Principal Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences, at the University of Melbourne. Dina's research focuses on work, employment, economic security and inequality. As an economic sociologist, she is interested in how gender, class, age, 'race' and disability intersect with paid and unpaid work to shape economic advantage or disadvantage across the life course. She is particularly interested in the lived experience of economic insecurity, low paid work and income support, how social policy impacts on people's lives and policy responses to economic insecurity. She leads research on work and economic security at the Research and Policy Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. She leads the longitudinal study Life Chances, which is now in its 29th year.

Professor Penny Jane Burke: Global Innovation Chair of Equity and Director of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE). Since completing her ESRC-funded PhD in 2001, she has been actively involved in shaping the field of equity in higher education (HE) through research, institutional leadership and the development of research networks and programs. Pushing the boundaries of the field, she developed praxis-based approaches that work towards transforming educational spaces and imaginaries and bringing research, theory and practice together. Her personal experience of returning to study via an Access to Higher Education program has fuelled her ongoing commitment to generating research with impact; firmly located in social justice methodologies. Penny Jane has published extensively in the field, including the authored books, *Changing Pedagogical Spaces in HE* (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2018, Routledge), *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning* (Burke and Jackson, 2007, Routledge), *The Right to HE* (Burke, 2012) and *Accessing Education effectively widening participation* (Burke, 2002). Since relocating full-time to Australia in 2016, Professor Burke has engaged and informed the Australian HE sector in both research, policy and practice including through her role as an inaugural member of the Federal Department of Education and Training's Equity Research and Innovation Expert Panel.

Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith: Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Sussex in the UK. Her background is as a sociologist of gender and education, and she is a former Co-Director of the Sussex Centre for Gender Studies and current Deputy Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning Research. Tamsin's central research interests include around higher education participation by 'non-traditional' students, and experiences of (un)belonging and marginalisations. Tamsin's work has included around university students who are lone and teenage parents; care leavers; from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller (GRT) backgrounds; and young people living in areas where higher education participation is low. Tamsin commenced university as a single teenage parent herself. Recent sole and co-authored articles include [Higher education outreach: examining key challenges for academics](#). (2019), [Roma women's higher education participation: whose](#)

[responsibility?](#) (2018), [The 'success' of looked after children in Higher Education in England: near peer coaching, 'small steps' and future thinking.](#) (2018), and [Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: the experience of lone parent students.](#) (2016).

Dr Tebeje Molla is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow in Deakin University's Strategic Research Centre in Education, *Research for Educational Impact (REDI)*. His research focuses on educational inequality and policy responses, transnational educational policy processes, graduate research training policy, and teacher professional learning. Theoretically, his work is informed by critical sociology and a capability approach to social justice and human development.

Dr Lien Pham : Senior Lecturer in Higher Degree Research Education at the Graduate Research School, University of Technology Sydney. Her research and publications are in international education and development, sociology of education, civil society, social justice, and diaspora combining critical theory and political philosophy. She has consulted for NSW government agencies in policy-focused research and evaluations, and for UNESCO on educational policy reforms in South East Asia. Her PhD research is recently published as a monograph entitled "[International Graduates Returning to Vietnam: Experiences of the Local Economies, Universities and Communities](#)". She is currently writing a book on social activism and democratic capability under conditions of (democratic) duress.

Based on feedback from the group the following changes were implemented to the framing document and the framework:

Recommended Changes:

- Inclusion of sections that clearly detail my positioning as a researcher and also clearly articulates the ways in which this framework should be perceived / regarded by others. Specifically, these sections articulate how the enactment of 'persistence' is not in itself necessarily a positive thing for those currently situated within the HE sector, recognising that some of the capabilities and 'ways of being' come at a personal and emotional cost to participants. The intent of this framing paper is also outlined as the objective is not to condone this system but rather to highlight how learners themselves articulated the ways in which they managed HE. Such detailed recognition is necessary as without detailed understanding of how learners themselves managed this persistence behaviour, our ability (as HE actors and equity providers) to provide necessary support and appropriate pedagogies to our diverse HE populations will remain limited.
- The term 'persistence' is also defined in relation to this particular study, recognising that this research does not subscribe to a meritocratic, neo-liberal approach to persistence (as detailed in publications: O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019) but rather sought to explore how students themselves perceived the act of persisting in a sometimes alien and confronting environment.
- The framework has been more clearly located within the current policy context and how this context informed the approach taken is considered in a more reflexive manner.

- The term ‘conversion factors’ has been more clearly articulated recognising that there is a level of ambiguity around this term, Robeyn’s (2005) typology of conversion factors have been detailed within the document and the conversion factors mapped back to these types.
- Increased reference to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and field (as well as more explicit reference to capitals) in order to more explicitly ground the findings but recognising that the focus in this document is on ‘what works’ in a practical setting. Further publications will focus on the ways in which learners are required to act in order to make the system work for them as well as exploring what the personal and hidden ‘costs’ of this action are for those involved.
- Inclusion of more detailed diagrammatic overviews of how the framework (specifically the capabilities and capitals) emerged from the data.

After providing detailed feedback, the expert committee also participated in a two-day symposium that foregrounded their work in capitals and capabilities approaches. This two-day symposium received over 70 registrations with representation from across Australia and also, New Zealand and Canada. Participants included researchers, equity practitioners, policy makers and also, community representatives who attended a series of presentations and panel discussions on the broad theme of student retention and persistence. Details of the Symposium: *Capabilites and Capitals: Student Persistence and Success at university* can be found at the following link: <https://capabiliesandcapitalssymposium.eventbrite.com.au>

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