Youth Voices on Experiences of (Dis)Advantage: A Case Study at a South African University

Authors : Oliver T. Gore

Abstract : Social inequalities and inequity of outcomes in higher education (HE) persist in South Africa despite the government introducing policy that seeks to address social injustices brought about by previous apartheid policies. In addressing these social injustices, HE policy conceptualises inequalities under the concept of historical 'disadvantage' which is understood to be primarily race-based. The study adds on to the existing knowledge on inequalities through developing the dimensions of (dis)advantage, which have the potential to inform the South African HE policy on providing equal opportunities amongst diverse students to participate and succeed in their studies. Drawing from the capabilities approach, this study argues that (dis)advantage can be richly understood in terms of students' capabilities, functionings and agency as opposed to a sole focus on race. The study argues that limited freedoms, lack of effective opportunities, and reduced agency for students to turn university resources into real achievements such as personal development, economic skills and social responsibility amounts to disadvantage, while the converse is also true. The study draws from qualitative interview data with honours students, university staff and Student Representative Council members from five different university departments at one South African university. This presentation uses results from 20 students and reveals what their university experiences tell us regarding students' unfreedoms in relation to: the inability to make decisions, poor schooling backgrounds, inadequate finances, emotional stress, lack of social support, inability to understand the language of instruction, lack of safe transport and accommodation issues. Despite these unfreedoms, the data shows that the students aspired and persevered with their studies. Using theory and empirical data in conversation, the paper shows that there is a need to nuance the definition of (dis)advantage, particularly by focusing on how different forms of disadvantage intersect with each other.

Keywords : capabilities approach, (dis)advantage, higher education, social justice

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