

# Curriculum Development: An Enriched Approach for Twenty-First Century Open Distance Learning

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse and explore the progress of curriculum development, which remains a contentious issue, particularly in the context of higher education expansion, massification, commodification and the so-called 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'. This paper examines how the curriculum is developed within the complexities of a shifting job market and changing student aspirations. Existing literature in curriculum development focuses on the instrumental value of education and graduate attributes for economic development, with a lesser focus on the intrinsic value of education. There is a paucity of evidence, particularly regarding Open Distance Learning (ODL), that researchers have explored the issue of curriculum development and capabilities formation. These two aspects are important in that they potentially offer students an effective way to change their lives, improve their communities and direct their own destinies. The research was undertaken by means of a desktop literature review; to examine curriculum development in South Africa after 1994 and includes the function of education while exploring the theoretical frameworks underpinning curriculum development. In so doing, the paper locates curricula in a broader capabilities framework, challenging existing practices. It then examines the challenges of curriculum development in ODL and how we might start rethinking curriculum development and capabilities formation and initiate a dialogue of capabilities formation in ODL in South Africa. It further suggests numerous innovative ways of curriculum conceptualisation, interpretation and implementation.

**Keywords:** Curriculum development, capabilities formation, ODL, pedagogy, sustainable living

## **Introduction**

The context and nature of South Africa's democracy, to a large extent, requires an understanding of how the discourse of transformation has influenced curricula and pedagogy (Costandius & Bitzer 2015) and the South African higher education has been sensitive to the injustices that were created by apartheid. In the early post-1994 years, the focus on education was on transformation, with emphasis on providing previously marginalised and disadvantaged groups, access to education, with reference to the black (African) population and women (CHE 2013). Since 1994, higher education enrolments for the said marginalised and disadvantaged groups have increased exponentially, that is, by 80%, to constitute 59% of total enrolments in higher education (DHET 2011). Recent statistics indicate that there are a million students in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which represents a dramatic increase from the half million enrolled in 1994 (CHE 2016). Black African people have more access to higher education and their enrolment has doubled to 67%, with the headcount of black students now at 80% of the total enrolments in higher education (DHET 2011). This demonstrates that there has been a notable increase in the enrolment of previously marginalised and disadvantaged groups in higher education as previously noted. Nevertheless, there are poor graduation rates, 30% graduate in 3 years with 56% in 5 years and, if UNISA is included, it drops well below 50% (Cloete *et al.* 2016). The participation rates for black and white students still differ significantly: 55% for whites and 16% for African students in 2013 (CHE 2016: 6). The growth rate for new entrants over the period 2006-2013 was 1.7% while the average annual growth for returning undergraduates was 4% over the same period (Cloete *et al.* 2016). Most students stay in the undergraduate system for far too long, which is unnecessary.

In addition to participation, the South African context (in terms of poverty, unemployment and inequality) puts pressure on students who come to university with the desire acquire qualifications and skills to render them employable (Walker & Fongwa 2017) so that they can earn an income as opposed to them only being 'good' people in the society. In comparison with Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), the university is still regarded as the better option for acquiring a qualification that will enable one to get a job. These nuanced tensions between acquiring knowledge for the benefit of the society and for economic reasons relate to students' freedom to

be and do things that they value and what the university is doing in terms of advancing the Human Capital Theory (HCT)<sup>1</sup> in higher education. This is important, particularly in South Africa where university first-generation students are under pressure to graduate and get jobs to support their families (Rogan & Reynolds 2015). As Walker (2007) points out, the economic dimension should not be underestimated amongst students.

More recently, there has been interest in the decolonisation of the curriculum and its relevance after twenty years of democracy. This follows student protests calling for the removal of colonial memorabilia, for example, the #Rhodes Must Fall and the #Fees Must Fall movements that triggered debate about decolonisation of education and structural change in South African universities (Pillay 2016; Shay 2016). The decolonisation debates have comprised issues of undergraduate curriculum change and how it is no longer fit for purpose. In South Africa, questions continue to be asked whether the curriculum is relevant and if it responds to the diverse needs of the wide spectrum of students that make up the current student body (Shay 2016). It is further argued that professional curricula have shifted to problem-based or problem-centred ones, which raises concerns of the balance and sequence of theory and practice, amongst other issues. Further issues raised under the banner of decolonisation, include the arguments that the curriculum preserves values of white supremacy, racial hegemony and raise the point that student voices are not valued in curriculum design, all of which contribute to the reinforcement of this society's broader inequalities (Shay 2016).

More recently, the buzz phrase, the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' (4IR) has emerged. The 4IR refers to a stage of technological change, which is set to bring radical changes to the workplace, including the re-configuration of jobs through automation and artificial intelligence. It is argued, however, that industry will still need universities to provide the right kind of people. The implications of this revolution are not yet clear but the anxiety about the interaction between these technological developments and humans has been raised by academics and the general populace. There is great uncertainty about the overall impact of digital transformation on job skills<sup>2</sup>, and its implications

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<sup>1</sup> Within HCT, the main goal of higher education is directed towards preparing students for jobs that the global economy requires.

<sup>2</sup> In the form of data science and analysis, data equipment automation, industrial intelligence systems and systems integration skills.

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for old university curricula (which is at risk of becoming obsolete).

Currently, however, as alluded to above, a very significant question being raised concerns what the 4IR means for university education, particularly in terms of curriculum conceptualisation and delivery. Moreover, what does the 4IR mean for the curriculum of Humanities and social sciences, which deal with abstract issues? Sociology, as an example, is a discipline that traditionally helps people to understand their social circumstances, thereby providing them with better options for controlling their circumstances. The discipline does not intentionally focus on directly influencing skills for economic development, although it could be argued that skills developed in humanities and social sciences, such as critical thinking and creativity, are important in the workplace. The humanities and social science remain vital as they reinvigorate the real public value of education as discussed by Brewer (2013). Contributing to a discussion about the role of universities in the digital era at the 'EnlightED: Reinventing education in a digital world' Conference in Madrid, Spain, Rector at Universidad Carlos de Madrid, Juan Romo, emphasised that students need 'soft skills' and a solid moral compass. He explained that at the above-mentioned university, humanities are core subjects for everyone, including engineers, because, for example, in the future, everyone, will need to understand the importance of ethics (Romo 2018). The question we may ask ourselves, is how our education system (in both contact and ODL universities) and the curriculum prepare students for the opportunities that the 4IR presents. In response to this, the paper examines curricula and the function of education and challenges the philosophical assumptions of curriculum development. The paper ends by arguing how an expansive capability informed curriculum can break the 'curriculum borders'. Before dwelling on the expansive nature of the capability approach, the paper interrogates curriculum development and the function of education.

## **The Curriculum and the Function of Education**

The concept of curriculum is broad, complex, dynamic and highly contested. A curriculum is not neutral and may or may not contribute to social justice because of political, cultural and economic forces, which influence it (Apple 2003). Curriculum development is characterised by two elements, 'curriculum development technique' and 'curriculum conscience' (Grier 2005). Curriculum development techniques are the theoretical models and frameworks that

describe procedures to develop curricula, whereas curriculum conscience is about thinking critically about implications and consequences of curricular decision (Posner 1998). In the case of ODL, curriculum development would have to be context-specific and take cognisance of the learning needs of diverse students. To achieve a context-relevant curriculum, one must conduct a careful needs analysis of the students and the lecturers, the support staff and the institution. Stakeholder contribution ensures that students receive holistic values that enhance their chances of living sustainable lives (Kouwenhoven 2003). The future of sustainable education in the twenty-first century requires a responsive, boundless curriculum, in contact education as well as in distance learning environments, which challenges the existing conceptualisation, practices and implementation of curricula. In this vein, a responsive curriculum ought to cover three areas: content (the ‘what’ of a curriculum), pedagogy (the methods of teaching and learning) and lastly, assessment and outcomes (Kelly 2004). This understanding allows the interrogation of three concepts of the curriculum: how knowledge is legitimised, how it is transmitted and its acquisition by students. What is still lacking in this definition are the contextualisation factors, curriculum outcomes and the absence of relevant stakeholder participation, such as the students, in designing the curriculum. The curriculum should offer much more than a statement about the knowledge-content or merely the subjects which schooling is to ‘teach’, but it should demonstrate justification of the purposes of such transmission and an exploration of the effects that exposure to knowledge and subjects is likely to have, or is intended to have, on its recipients (Kelly 2004).

There are several debates relating to education, curricula and pedagogy in literature. For the purpose of rethinking the purposes of education and the development of curriculum, we focused on the contestation around higher education as a public or private good. The debate about the public versus private good of education provides insights on why students pursue education. As a public good, students are educated to become productive citizens whereas as a private good, education primarily benefits individuals who can earn more money and enjoy other benefits (Bloom, Canning & Chan 2006). The debate is that if education is a private good then students who benefit from it should fund their studies but if education is a public good, then society has a responsibility to provide financial support (Altbach *et al.* 2009). The recent rate of return analysis shows that African graduates have the highest rate of return in tertiary education, with South Africa having the highest in the world

(Cloete 2016). Due to the ideology of education as a private good, many countries have shifted the financial responsibility to students and their families. In such a setting, students become consumers and universities become producers (Walker 2010). This suggests that education is regarded as a marketable commodity. For example, fee-pegging is determined by market forces, where tuition fees for disciplines deemed less important in the knowledge-based economy, are lower (Taylor 2008). A performativity culture has led to an increasing emphasis on private goods yielded by higher education at the expense of the broader social purposes of higher education (Singh 2002). Universities are being called upon to become more responsive to the needs of a knowledge-based economy (CHE 2002; Ensor 2004; Griesel 2004; Shay 2014). Under these circumstances, the broad role of the university is being narrowed and redefined. Universities compete for students, they aim to make profit and there is an increase in accountability structures which also monitor the performance of the many aspects of the academic field (Altbach 2008). In the global North, massification is associated *inter alia*, with an increased pressure of efficiency and quality and a commensurate loss of exclusiveness, (Teferra & Altbach 2004). Whilst this is also true for the global South, privatisation and expansion of education has occurred without an accompanying increase in financial, physical and human resources and which, accordingly, has had a direct impact on the physical infrastructure, the quality of teaching and learning experience, research and the quality of life of the students (Mohamedbhai 2008; Hornby & Osman 2014). Most public universities world over now receive a smaller proportion of their budgets from government (Altbach 2008). For example, between 2000 and 2012, the total state contribution to higher education funding in South Africa declined from 49% to 40%, while the contribution from student fees rose from 24% to 31% (DHET 2011). This has far reaching consequences in terms of quality, particularly in a context where under-prepared students require additional support to cater for foundational conceptual gaps (Shay 2017).

The debate about education being a public good or a private good can be positioned within the larger debate about the function of higher education. Primarily, education can have an instrumental personal economic role. Within this approach, the main goal of higher education is directed towards preparing students for the jobs that the economy offers and most higher education curricula and pedagogy appear to respond to employability and market demands at the expense of expansive human development (Walker 2012).

Human Capital Theory (HCT) is a financial investment which views education yielding economic returns (Unterhalter 2010). It presumes that education develops certain qualities in people and these qualities enhance economic development in the same manner that increase in physical capital or investment does (Unterhalter 2010). Within this theory, people are perceived as the means to an end for economic productivity so that students are educated to be economic producers, consumer-citizens and entrepreneurial selves (Unterhalter 2010; Walker 2010). Thus, according to the tenets of this theory, education is important because it creates skills and helps with acquisition of knowledge, which allows workers to be more productive, thereby being able to earn higher wages (Robeyns 2006). This is important, especially in South Africa, where the levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality are high. Therefore, HCT is central to economic development efforts for individuals and nations as well as the global economy. The instrumental roles of education are not limited to economic roles alone, but there are also non-economic instrumental roles. At the personal level, when considering the skill of reading for instance, one could think of having access to information by being able to read the newspaper or a medical instruction leaflet, being knowledgeable about issues of health, reproduction and contraception and so on (Robeyns 2006). At the collective level, the non-instrumental roles of education include the fact that children have to learn to live in a society where people have different views of the good life, which is likely to contribute to a more tolerant society.

While the benefits of the HCT are evident, notable problems remain. Firstly, HCT theorists refer to the economic well-being of people and societies, which is an important factor, but inadequate on its own. They place emphasis on the role of higher education in the transformation of human beings into human capital and being instruments of production and economic growth as a way of achieving economic well-being (Schultz 1972; Becker 1975). The HCT has been critiqued as being too economic; furthermore, it does not adequately address certain non-instrumental issues such as culture, gender, identity, emotions, history and so forth (Davis 2003; Fine 2002). Thus, in essence, HCT considers social returns and the intrinsic value of education as being of less importance than its instrumental and private value (Psacharopolous 1996).

Secondly, education can be intrinsically important. A person may value knowing something simply for the sake of acquiring that knowledge. This means that education and knowledge can be treated as ends in themselves.

There is consensus among scholars subscribing to the capabilities approach that putting emphasis on utilitarian purposes of higher education misses the point of providing curricula that can shape individuals to live enriched and productive lives. This includes, but is not limited to, the instrumental value of education (Boni & Gasper 2012; McLean 2006; Nussbaum 2006; Sen 1999; Walker 2008; 2013). As Sen (2009) contends, economic development is a means to an end, which is human development. There is evidence to suggest that education builds healthier, wealthier and more equitable societies (Percy & Svenson 2016). However, the HCT approach has become more aggressive, developing policies that pose a challenge to (higher) education. Talik (2003) argues that new values, policies and practices are replacing the old ones and market-driven policies are replacing social democratic values and government subsidies (Ibid). As a result, reductive discourses of employability and well paid global citizens in a global workforce are given priority in the curriculum over other aspects that are important for human development and thriving lives (Walker 2012). Therefore, these researchers argue that higher education institutions cannot afford to sell pre-packaged skills and formal knowledge to student ‘consumers’ without considering the socio-historical context of student lives in combination with the socio-economic realities which await them outside of higher education spaces. This discussion has become vital in an era where the universities face the challenges of transforming education and decolonising the curriculum, particularly after the ‘decolonisation of the curriculum’ movement.

## **Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Curriculum Development**

To provide a context for the use of the expansive capabilities approach, at the end of the paper we offer a synopsis and analysis of a body of literature on philosophy and curriculum paradigms. The intent is to outline and challenge some of the philosophical assumptions foregrounding designs and discuss what informs curriculum development; the process of developing, implementing and assessing; and why it would need to change, as well as methods to develop relevant responsive curricula.

Curriculum development is a careful and conscious exercise made by curriculum designers and lecturers in higher education. As a practical matter, curriculum decisions need to be made skilfully, based on an accumulated



situational understanding on the part of the lecturer concerning learning outcomes. As such, it is a personal, social, political and theoretical exercise as MacDonald suggests:

I suspect that in many ways all curriculum design is political in nature; that is, it is an attempt to facilitate someone else's idea of the good life. By creating social processes and structuring the environment for learning, curriculum design is thus a form of 'utopianism', a form of political and social philosophizing and theorizing. If we recognise this, it may help us sort out our own thinking and perhaps increase our ability to communicate with each other (McDonald-Ross 1975: 293).

Due to the lack of consensus on curriculum philosophy, the term 'philosophy' is used interchangeably with the hierarchical paradigm and theory to refer to approaches that inform curriculum development. Philosophy, which, for the purpose of this paper, is hereafter referred to as 'hierarchical paradigm/s', is important as it shapes key curriculum trends and informs educational decisions on how the concept of curriculum is understood and designed. A hierarchical paradigm is the starting point in any curriculum decision making and is the basis for all subsequent decisions regarding a particular curriculum. These paradigms establish criteria for determining the aims, selection, organisation and implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. Hierarchical paradigms help us answer general questions such as: (i) What are universities for? (ii) What knowledge is valued? and (iii) How should students learn the content? Hierarchical paradigms for curriculum development may generally be categorised as one of three paradigms: traditionalists, reconceptualists, and critical theorists. Although broad and general distinctions can be made among these three perspectives, they do not exist separately from one another. Before we discuss the three broad perspectives, it is necessary that we briefly summarise four sources for curriculum development.

As referred to above, four sources for curriculum development have been identified: (i) epistemological; (ii) learner based; (iii) objectives-based (technical-scientific); and (iv) society and problem-centred (McKernan 2008). The epistemological curriculum refers to its epistemology and its knowledge or subject base (Ibid). This has generally come from two basic forms: the traditional disciplines, or forms of knowledge approach and 'fields of

knowledge' as defined by their subject knowledge, rather than their distinctive 'form'. For example, sociology and psychology. The advocates of the epistemological approach argue that these disciplines and subjects will develop appropriate character and qualities of mind (Kelly 1989). The learner-based approach argues that the curriculum development is based on the needs, interest and human development of the student. According to (Dewey 1922) curriculum development should centre on the experiences, interests, and abilities of students. The students are exposed to a more democratic curriculum that recognises the accomplishments of all citizens, regardless of race, cultural background or gender. The problem-centred curriculum, as it relates to society, is based on the difficulties of living; the problem-centred development attempts a form of life-adjustment education using personal, group and institutional issues and problems. Curricula addressing social problems such as racism, inequality, terrorism and so on, would fall within this design (McKernan 2008).

Firstly, the traditional paradigm, which has dominated curriculum design for decades, assumes that curricula contribute to maintaining society by socialising young people into values of achievement, competition and equality of opportunity (McKenna 2004; Wolf, 2006). Thus, functional knowledge is deliberately created and transmitted to reinforce societal norms and values. It is also argued that behaviour is regulated to accept the general moral values by means of the curriculum and through a hidden curriculum agenda, in higher education (Durkheim 1977). Within this paradigm, the power structure that perpetuates societal stratification is subtle compared to that of critical theory (McKernan 2008). Curriculum knowledge is narrowed towards producing graduates with skills to contribute to economic development (Parsons 1961).

Secondly, the re-conceptualistic paradigm views the curriculum as a social construct in which there is no single reality or truth. A reconceptualist views curriculum as an inescapably political as well as intellectual act (Beakley 1991). This view takes socio-cultural and historical circumstances into consideration in the validation of knowledge or truth. The curriculum is not merely a collection of materials that students work through; rather, it could be thought of as a cultural product that develops through social interactions (Grundy 1987). This implies that the curriculum reflects a cultural dialogue in a given context and it is not neutral (McKenna 2004). The paradigm analysis of curriculum and pedagogy questions perceived pedagogical truths as part of a strategy of challenging injustices produced through the institutions, practices, and knowledge structures of education (Beakley 1991). Rather than trying to

expose the curriculum as representing the interest of the elite, reconceptualists focus on the processes, procedures and apparatus wherein truth, knowledge and beliefs are produced. Theories such as positivist and structural functionalist belong to the traditional paradigm. Post-structuralism, post-modernism and phenomenological, which all fall under the reconceptualist paradigm, differ from critical theory in that they suggest that power does not emanate from a single source, but exists in multiple sites and is always subject to negotiation (Gewirtz & Cribb 2009). In critical theory, the aim of the curriculum is to provide knowledge that leads to the emancipation of individuals from the powerful and false accounts of reality, whereas reconceptualists aim to deconstruct how the accounts of reality are created in a given context. Reconceptualism is useful in exploring power relations, but it has been argued that it cannot investigate issues of distribution, justice and equality (Unterhalter, Vaughan & Walker 2007).

The third approach is that of critical theory, which views educational knowledge as a theory of social reproduction (Apple 1996; Bowles 1988; Bruner 1996; Freire 2000), which seems to be working in the interests of the elite groups and appears to be reinforcing prevailing power relationships and inequalities (Bowles *et al.* 1988). Critical theory is influenced by Gramsci's analysis, which illuminates the ways in which social control can be achieved without the majority being deprived by dominant groups (Gramsci 1971). Prominent scholars within the critical theory paradigm (Adorno 1973; Herbamas 2001; Horkheimer 1993) emphasised that there is a direct relationship between the requirements of capital accumulation and the curriculum. Critical researchers argue that education should interrupt social class hierarchy that reinforces inequality, but that is difficult to achieve hence, it becomes important to understand contesting forces that shape curricula (Apple 2003; McLean 2006; Freire 1970). Curricula are further influenced by various factors that include, but are not limited to, the values of the teacher, tradition, available resources, related knowledge, the students' interests and abilities as well as school policy (Wood & Deprez 2013). Thus, rather than ask whether students have mastered certain subject matter and have done well on common tests, we as educational practitioners ought to ask a different set of questions to determine the motive and justification of curriculum construction: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become 'official'? What is the relationship between this knowledge and those who have cultural, social and economic capital in a society? Who benefits from these definitions of

legitimate knowledge and who does not? What are educators doing to change existing educational and social inequalities to make curricula and teaching more socially acceptable?

While generally paying attention to power and conditions in schools other than those associated with HCT, the approaches (except for the learner-based approach) to curriculum development outlined above fail to consider people's well-being, individual experiences, values and differences within groups and how one might suggest for instance a complex, capability-inspired curriculum for sociology undergraduates. Although the different theories raise various important aspects of the curriculum, it remains necessary to investigate the curriculum development from a capabilities formation perspective, because it is concerned with human diversity within unjust structures and it addresses individuals and social arrangements within a framework of justice and equality (Unterhalter, Vaughan & Walker 2007). For example, unlike the capabilities approach, which advocates for social justice in different forms, the weakness of the traditional paradigm's ideology is that it assumes that education is fair and that it rewards the best. The traditional paradigm tends to reproduce inequalities within societies that may restrict students from realising their potential. In addition, there is limited student participation in class. In contrast to Sen's concepts of public deliberation and collective reasoning, the paradigm excludes students' participation in curriculum and pedagogy design. In considering various theories, the next section unpacks a paradigm that has dominated ODL provision.

## **Curriculum Development in ODL**

ODL has several defining characteristics that include the spatial and temporal separation of lecturer and learners; industrialised processes; scalability and cost efficiency and the use of technology for learning as well as flexibility and reach (Lentell 2004). Thus, it requires input from different stakeholders such as subject experts, educational consultants, professionals, practitioners and the diverse student population (Louw 2015). It is further argued that curriculum design should be done with the aim of making learning accessible to the said student populations, facilitate collaborative learning, foster student-centred engagement, allow for authentic and transformative learning, and critical engagement (Ngubane-Mokiwa 2017). There are several characteristics of Competence-Based Education (CBE) that could lead to sustainable human

capacity through curriculum development (Kouwenhoven 2003). CBE is focused on developing professional practice, being student-centred and learning process-centred, using constructivist approaches, the teacher as a ‘cognitive guide’, having a learning environment that aims at developing competencies, development of generic competencies, using assessment-based competencies and developing curricula that focus on knowledge creation of competencies (Kouwenhoven 2003).

A study undertaken in Mozambique illustrates how competence-based education could offer a contribution to the education of students who are well prepared to answer the needs and demands of society. The model below (see Figure 1) shows the relation between competence, key competencies and constituting (domain specific and generic) competencies for competence-based curriculum development.

As this paper is focused on designing curricula in an ODL context, we propose Holmberg’s theory of didactic and learning conversation as the guiding frame (Holmberg 1999). Holmberg argues that for learning to occur there has to be a conversation which takes place through student assignments and feedback to these assignments, telephonic conversations, electronic mail, and other forms of support. The theory further postulates that for learning to take place there must be three forms of support: affective, cognitive and systemic. These differing forms of support all contribute towards enhancing the didactic conversation between the student, the lecturer, the learning material and the institution. To design a meaningful curriculum, one needs to analyse the learning conversations with the aim of analysing them and generating meaning for curriculum interventions. As one of the mantras of ODL is responsiveness, the results from conversational analysis allows the university to be responsive to students’ learning needs and professional/corporate authentic needs. In line with Harri-Augstein’s empathy approach, learning conversation makes learning student-centred rather than teacher-centred (Candy, Harri-Augstein & Thomas 1985).

One difficulty experienced by most ODL curriculum developers, is making a shift from objectivism-based design (Tenenbaum *et al.* 2001). Scholars argue that there is a need for curriculum design to be based on ‘non-conventional’ behaviourism dominated paradigms. To help us close this gap, ten competencies of a distance education professional have been suggested and these include interpersonal communication, planning skills, collaboration/teamwork skills, English proficiency, writing skills, organisational skills,

feedback skills, knowledge of the distance education field, basic technology knowledge and technology access knowledge (Thach & Murphy 1995).

### Competence-based Curriculum Development

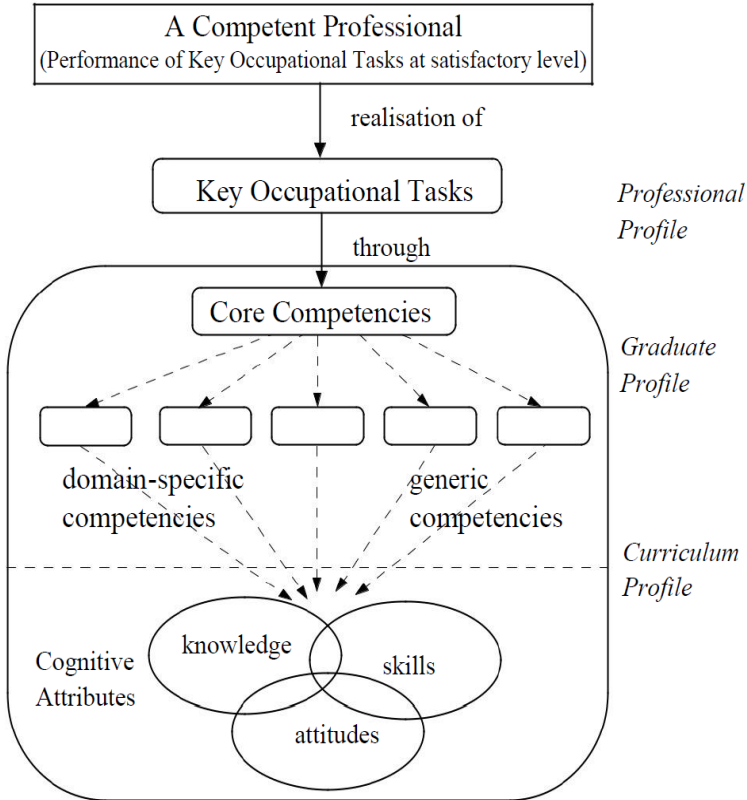


Figure 1: Competence-based curriculum development (Kouwenhoven 2003).

It is important to identify competencies because they inform one of the kinds of knowledge and skills required to be productive in one's key performance areas (Thach & Murphy 1995). The above summarised competencies do not include curriculum development and delivery skills,

which leads to a negative learning experience for the students. He further argues that the omission causes academics to revert to their traditional teaching practices, which are not distance education friendly (Holmberg 1989). This is attributed to lecturers' resistance whenever they are expected to change the way they have always been designing and facilitating teaching and learning (Ncube *et al.* 2014).

A further challenge arising in ODL is the misunderstanding that technology is in and of itself a solution to bridging the distance between the students and the lecturers and the institution (Anderson & Dron 2011). Other proponents of this approach argue that ICT integration forms an essential part of curriculum development as it is meant to be a learning facilitation tool, which is informed by pedagogy (Tella & Adu 2009). ODL [is meant to] advance social justice with an emphasis on redress, equity and empowerment of the previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa such a black African woman, people with disabilities, the rural and urban poor and adults generally who have missed out on opportunities to access higher education (Tella & Adu 2009). Nonetheless, it is still essential to be critical in appraising how ICT is integrated into curriculum development, delivery and assessment (Wood & Deprez 2012). Suggestions have been made that ICT should be used effectively to facilitate the achievement of curriculum outcomes (Tella & Adu 2009). In addition, the utilisation of technology allows for more discourse and more personalised learning, but this requires a change in the way teachers teach and a move away from the industrial model of ODL towards an individualised capabilities approach, since this can assist in developing flexible 4IR capabilities.

## **Towards an Expansive Capabilities-Inspired Curriculum in ODL**

As previously stated, the development of curriculums in ODL must be based on the reality that there is a separation in time and space between lecturer and learners; and that the use of technology for learning is key. Its defining characters include openness to students, places, teaching methods and to criticism as the course materials are in the public domain. The instructional design ought to encourage and support self-study and the curriculum is developed around learning outcomes. Without focussing on the infrastructure and logistical support that is required, we now turn, technically and practically,

to what we are able to learn from the capabilities approach in the development of curriculum in ODL. Broadly, the capabilities approach allows us to reconfigure curriculum boundaries with the focus on developing functioning (the beings and doings) thus fostering capabilities for every student to achieve the life they value or may have reason to value.

In reference to the contrasting positions of HCT and HD that have been presented, the design of a curriculum based exclusively based on economic benefits is inadequate as universities run the risk of prioritising private achievement over a collective good (Unterhalter *et al.* 2007). While economic responsibility and stability are important, they should be among the many facets that ought to be directed towards people's well-being (Wood & Deprez 2012; Dreze & Sen 2013). It is therefore, proposed that the curriculum be examined from a human capabilities-based perspective that is not merely concerned with increasing people's skills, but rather takes a broader view of human and economic well-being. This paper argues that education and hence curricula need to be developed from a public good perspective, which encompasses the limited neo-liberal fundamentals of education. The strength of the capabilities approach is that it is multidimensional, meaning that it does not prescribe to set rules, but encourages the development of context specific curricula that enhances the development of capabilities formation. The capability approach values human well-being and it subsumes the values of the human capital approach to education (Walker 2012). What ought to be clear is that the capabilities approach does not reinforce the notion of curriculum borders, but encourages conceptualisation of the curriculum through input from relevant stakeholders<sup>3</sup>. The assumption is that the stakeholders will influence curriculum designers, in this case lecturers, to purposefully select curriculum knowledge that meets the student's aspirations and the expectations of all.

In addition to Holmberg's theory of didactic/learning conversation as the guiding framework in ODL, it is necessary to start thinking about the intentional development of capabilities in ODL. The capabilities approach is a normative framework that proposes that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom that people have to promote or achieve the functioning that they value, their well-being and agency

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<sup>3</sup> Relevant stakeholders such as students, academics, employers, government policy makers, etc.



freedoms. In higher education, the capabilities approach considers each student's functioning, that is, the valued beings and doings and making use of opportunities and/or realising their underlying capabilities; a set of real opportunities students must do and to be what they have reason to value (Sen 1999; 2009). According to Nussbaum (2011) the capabilities approach asks what people can do and to be in shaping their lives in higher education. The aforementioned implies that students should have some freedom or opportunities to be able to be and to do what they have reason to value in their lives. Both capability (potential and opportunity) and functioning (being able to exercise valued capabilities) are important in higher education. For example, it would not be enough for students to value a capability for voice but be prevented from exercising their voice in learning contexts through educational and social arrangements, which value some identities more than others. If we cannot observe the functioning of voice, we may wish to ask questions both about the underlying capability and teaching and learning conditions (Boni & Walker 2013). The capabilities approach emphasises the flourishing of individuals, thus it shifts the unit of analysis from large diverse social units such as race, ethnicity, gender that perpetuate inequality in higher education to individuals. It suggests ways of evaluating higher education at an individual level (Unterhalter *et al.* 2007). When, for example, we want to analyse class performance in a subject, the capabilities approach allows us to examine not only what a student achieves, for example, passing a course, but also the opportunities and freedoms that were available whilst studying for the course.

The capabilities approach provides rich resources for thinking about social justice in higher education (Unterhalter *et al.* 2007). The question, 'equality of what?' (Sen 2009) raises questions about social justice and equality in higher education in terms of, *inter alia*, access, inputs and treatment, requiring us to examine whether the curriculum and pedagogy provides for the different needs of diverse students (Nussbaum 2011). The capabilities approach also enables us to put focus on equality in the capability to convert resources into functionings. Although Sen is not an education theorist, his notion of public deliberation and collective reasoning are vital in advancing democratic processes in curriculum design and university policy in universities.

The capabilities approach offers insights on how curricula can be conceptualised. It offers a richer perspective on what it means to be human and thus, on the different types of graduates universities should educate (Walker

2012). The approach argues that advancement of justice depends on inclusive democracy that allows public reasoning and discussion that injects different perspectives, and plural voices on educational matters (Sen 1999; 2009). Sen's (1999; 2009) notion of public deliberation and collective reasoning is vital in advancing democratic processes and educational policy in universities. It offers insights on how curriculum can be conceptualised. He argues that advancement of justice depends on inclusive democracy that allows public reasoning and discussion, which injects different perspectives and a plurality of voices on educational matters (Sen 2009). In such a scenario, individuals are regarded as agents who voice and act on things that they may value. Walker (2012) pursues the same argument, noting that public deliberation and collective reasoning provide space for continued scrutiny about how universities and relevant stakeholders, including students, and employers could deliberate about values of the curriculum through debating and discussing issues in public gatherings. Nussbaum expands the approach by providing a partial theory of justice through her list of central human capabilities for human dignity and a life that is worthwhile and fulfilling (Nussbaum 2000). Through the list, she specifies the minimum requirements of justice for all societies, including higher education (Nussbaum 2000). The list of 10 central capabilities recognises that students ought to value friendship, have respect for others, experience emotions towards others and reason about their own good lives (Nussbaum 2000)

The capabilities approach has certain limitations. Of these, two issues that stand out are its abstract nature and the overly individualistic character of this approach (Baxen *et al.* 2013). Concerns have been raised that the approach does not set out clear tenets on how it can be implemented. The idea of developing capabilities lists, is debated on whether they should be developed as an effort to achieve a minimum threshold in different fields. Nussbaum's list of 10 central capabilities has been criticised by several scholars. The contestations include the fact that the list is too prescriptive, undemocratic, and fails to recognise cultural differences (Feldman & Gellert 2005; Robeyns 2005). Some argue that it is limited and biased towards political frameworks and legal constitutions (Clard 2005). The most cited critique is raised by Sen (2004) who insists that the task of weighing different capabilities should be left to the ethical and political considerations of each society based on public reasoning and deliberation. While he does not specify which capabilities he regards as more important than others, Sen (2009) notes that a list based solely

on theory is problematic as it might fail to recognise the different socio-cultural contexts and which denies the chance of public reasoning.

Sen's notion of public reasoning referred to earlier has been criticised for not providing greater specification on the practicality of carrying out such an exercise and the necessary conditions required, particularly in ODL. Other scholars think that Sen's advocacy of deliberative democracy is necessary, but not sufficiently developed to satisfy the notion of a theory of justice (Corbridge, 2002; Feldman & Gellert 2006). Despite these arguments, the notion of public deliberation and collective reasoning creates space for academics, students and relevant stakeholders to examine the curriculum values and provides a platform to inform the future on the democratic construction of curricula. Coming back to ODL contexts, insights from capability approach requires nuanced thinking on developing curriculum given the fact that students are physically separated from the teacher. It is necessary to train and support staff on ways to reach students, for example, through creation of messaging tools.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this discussion, we reiterate that the curriculum and pedagogic style are at the centre of students' learning in higher education. Conceptually, we argue that an approach which designs curriculum and pedagogy based on, for instance, vocational and academic aptitude, is limiting as it treats all students uniformly. Accordingly, we suggest that what is required is an approach that clarifies that curriculum and education ought to foster real opportunities for students to be and do what they have reason to value. With the development of capabilities at the centre, students should be able to thrive. In terms of social justice, on the one hand the capabilities approach views higher education as an ethical project concerned with the instrumental, intrinsic and social value of education, while on the other it focuses on the transformative potential of equal opportunities through the beneficial design of the curriculum and pedagogical arrangements to allow students to become and be what they value (Boni & Walker 2013). The capability approach challenges the narrowness of approaches such as the HCT and it raises the importance of a participatory and deliberative development of curriculum development and pedagogy (Walker 2006). The capabilities approach allows us to break theory boundaries and revitalise higher education curricula through its focus on the

formation of capabilities through the provision of education by means of a curriculum that is ethically sound (Walker 2006), rich and thick, with its multi-dimensional instrumental and intrinsically based values and transformative potential (Dreze & Sen 1995).

As scholars, what we need to start thinking about is the development of a capabilities-inspired curriculum model for human well-being. We should create grounds for rethinking curriculum development in ODL, particularly focusing on how Holmberg's theory of didactic and learning conversation and other relevant ODL theories and approaches as well as the said capabilities approach can complement each other. We cannot assume that all students are able to afford or have access to digital technologies and information on the internet. Issues of poverty, lack of infrastructure in rural and remote areas and inadequate government support and intervention need attention. In our African context, we need to consider and continue addressing issues to do with the digital divide, the cost associated with connectivity and theft of IT equipment from learning institutions.

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