RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ubuntu as a valued capability for university students in South Africa

Ubuntu en tant que compétence valorisée pour les étudiants universitaires en Afrique du Sud

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ABSTRACT

Universities in South Africa have the potential to advance various dimensions of human development, including well-being. However, this potential can be constrained by historical processes of oppression and the negation of indigenous ways of being and doing. Applying the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999) as a normative framework for the outcomes of university education in the South African context, we argue for a focus on the centrality of capabilities (real freedoms) in assessing how well universities are doing in supporting student well-being. We pay special attention to one capability which we see as architectonic for other freedoms, which is ubuntu. Although ubuntu is generally understood as a moral philosophy, in this article we articulate it as a valued capability in the space of higher education. Our argument is based on data collected through qualitative and participatory approaches in two longitudinal research projects that were carried out between 2016 and 2021 with undergraduate students in different South African universities. In the discussion of the findings, we explain how ubuntu underpins the ways students tend to relate to each other – as interdependent partners of a learning community, rather than as independent individuals who happen to be in the same learning environment. Building on these descriptions of deeply relational ways of being at university, ways that embrace an African indigenous worldview, we argue that creating the conditions for students to achieve the capability of ubuntu has decolonial potential.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities, higher education, student experience, ubuntu, well-being

RÉSUMÉ

En Afrique du Sud, les universités ont le potentiel de promouvoir divers aspects du développement humain, notamment le bien-être. Cependant, ce potentiel peut être entravé par des facteurs d'oppression historiques et la négation des modes de vie et du savoir-faire autochtones. En appliquant l'approche des compétences (Sen, 1999) en tant que cadre normatif pour les résultats de l'enseignement universitaire dans le contexte sud-africain, nous plaidons en faveur d'une focalisation sur la centralité des compétences (libertés réelles) dans l'évaluation de la manière dont les universités contribuent au bien-être des étudiants. Nous accordons une attention particulière à une compétence que nous considérons comme architectonique d'autres libertés, à savoir l'***Ubuntu***. Bien que l'Ubuntu

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soit généralement compris comme une philosophie morale, dans cet article, nous le présentons en tant que compétence valorisée dans l'espace de l'enseignement supérieur. Notre argumentation s'appuie sur des données recueillies au moyen d'approches qualitatives et participatives dans le cadre de deux projets de recherche longitudinaux menés entre 2016 et 2021 avec des étudiants de premier cycle dans différentes universités d'Afrique du Sud. Dans la discussion des résultats, nous expliquons comment l'*Ubuntu* sous-tend la manière dont les étudiants interagissent les uns avec les autres, en tant que partenaires interdépendants d'une même communauté d'apprentissage, plutôt qu'en tant qu'individus autonomes qui se retrouvent dans un même environnement d'apprentissage. En nous appuyant sur ces descriptions d'un mode de vie universitaire profondément relationnel qui embrasse une vision du monde autochtone africaine, nous soutenons que la création des conditions pour que les étudiants atteignent la compétence d'Ubuntu a un potentiel décolonial.

MOTS-CLÉS
Compétences, enseignement supérieur, expérience étudiante, ubuntu, bien-être

Introduction

Although universities can promote human development (Boni & Walker, 2016) and they can be transformative (Ashwin, 2020) they can also establish new and renovated oppression systems (Nyamnjoh & Jua, 2002) or maintain structures of oppression towards historically marginalised groups (Grosfoguel et al., 2016). This is evident in South African higher education, which has a long way to go to achieve fundamental transformation and epistemic decolonisation (Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Heleta, 2016). For this reason, the exploration of what it means to decolonise universities in South Africa continues to gain traction (Jansen, 2019; Muswede, 2017; Le Grange, 2016). This body of work includes research that addresses what needs to change in South African universities to redress past injustices that influence inequality of access, participation and outcomes in higher education, particularly for black students from low-income households (see Walker et al., 2022). But scholars have also shown that despite their limitations, universities offer possibilities for young people to develop valued capabilities and the freedom to flourish (Calitz, 2019). This is evident in literature that is based on empirical research that examines the relationship between higher education and human development through a capabilities lens, including research by Calitz (2019); Dejaeghere (2020); Mkwananzi (2018); Mutanga (2020); Walker (2006); Wilson-Strydom (2015); Wilson-Strydom and Walker (2015). This literature has produced open-ended ideal theoretical lists of capabilities that are considered important to be developed and enhanced by universities in South Africa. To build on this literature, this article draws from empirical data gathered through two separate research projects that were carried out between 2016 and 2021 to discuss ubuntu as a valued capability for university students.

The article is divided into seven sections. In the next section we define ubuntu and explain how it differs from conceptions of humanity based on Western moral philosophy. In section three we review selected literature by capability scholars who have conducted research in the South African higher education space to point out the strengths and limitations of this work but also to justify the articulation of ubuntu as a capability that suffuses, and at the same time is separate from, but architectonic to capabilities such as 'social relations and networks' or 'respect, dignity and recognition' and 'values for the

public good'. In section four, we contextualise the data from which we draw to support our argument. We present reflections on our interpretation of the data in section five, where we highlight how ubuntu is being practised by students and why it matters for them to do so. In section six, we explain why practising ubuntu or achieving the capability of ubuntu has decolonial potential. We also suggest what universities can do to support this capability before summarizing our argument and drawing conclusions in the last section.

A brief explanation of ubuntu

Ubuntu is a southern African Nguni word that can roughly be translated as humanness. The word has become synonymous with the southern African-rooted worldview and moral philosophy premised on the idea that '*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*' which means 'a person is a person through other people' or 'I am because we are' (Shutte, 1993, p. 46). Ubuntu thus implies that each person exists because others do, and that interaction between people necessarily involves mutuality and cooperation, to the extent that others' lives and well-being are inextricably linked to the individual's life and well-being (Migheli, 2017). That is, it entails necessarily reciprocal interactions between individuals, which render us human (Tutu, 1999). This suggests that an individual's humanity is, under ideal circumstances, expressed in relationship with other people (Battle, 2000) and as such, ubuntu can serve as a social ethic (Molefe, 2016; Rapatsa, 2016) because it carries normative implications for how people should relate to each other or what our moral obligation is towards others (Le Grange, 2012; Rapatsa, 2016).

As Metz and Gaie (2010) point out, there are two ways that morality as embodied in ubuntu is distinct from Western approaches to morality. The first distinction is that with ubuntu, morality is relational in the sense that the only way to develop one's humanness is to relate to others in a constructive way. This implies that the only path to becoming a dignified person is through developing other persons; which means one cannot connect with their moral self or achieve moral goodness in isolation from others (Metz & Gaie, 2010). According to ubuntu, our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human, and achieving this necessitates relationship and entering more sincerely into community with others (Metz & Gaie, 2010).

The second way that African morality differs from Western moral philosophy is that it defines positive relationship with others in communal terms (Metz & Gaie, 2010). Common themes in Western moral philosophy include respecting individual human rights grounded on consent, political participation or maximising general welfare, whereas the ideal way to relate to others, based on ubuntu, is to seek out community with them (Metz & Gaie, 2010). Therefore, the humanness referred to in ubuntu finds expression in communal contexts (while not eschewing the person, see Molefe, 2016) rather than in contexts where individualism is most valued. The kind of individualism valued in institutions like universities leans towards Western and neoliberal values that are at odds with the idea(l)s of ubuntu (Le Grange 2012; Venter 2004). That is, the emphasis on individual excellence commonly praised and rewarded in academia encourages a competitive stance that pushes students to see each other as

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opponents in the process of learning and acquiring a degree, rather than viewing each other as learning partners who belong to the same community. This in turn can erode students' sense of ubuntu, which has implications for learning outcomes and well-being achievement (Walker et al., 2022).

Our review of studies conducted by capability scholars shows that black students from low socio-economic backgrounds in South Africa value and practise ubuntu, and that they benefit from doing so in terms of learning, and for developing a sense of belonging in university. However, this valuing of ubuntu is often subsumed within discussions on the capability for 'social relations and networks' or 'respect, dignity and recognition'. As we point out in the next section, it is important to articulate ubuntu as a separate but overarching capability.

Articulating ubuntu as a capability

The capabilities approach as a theoretical framework to assess human development became influential during the 1990s. It expanded the evaluative space for understanding well-being – not as a static set of criteria that dictate what renders a life worth living, but as a dynamic process where individual valued freedoms are central in the assessment of what constitutes a good life (Sen, 1999). The approach focuses on capabilities, or the real freedoms that are available for individuals; and then functionings or achieved freedoms that have been operationalised by the individual (Sen, 1999). Sen (1999) makes a distinction between capabilities and functionings to highlight that there are circumstances (conversion factors) that can limit or enable individuals to exercise their freedom; such that when we make a judgement about someone's achievements, we should look not only at the outcomes (functionings) but also what effective opportunities (capabilities) they were presented with. This distinction has implications for educational research, as it encourages a nuanced interpretation of data on student well-being, and how well-being can be jeopardised by various social, environmental or personal conversion factors (Robeyns, 2018).

When applied as a normative and evaluative framework for the purposes and outcomes of universities, the capability approach suggests that we query how universities contribute to the expansion of the freedoms that individuals have reason to value. For instance, the capability approach encourages us to ask questions such as: Are students' valued capabilities and functionings being enhanced by universities? Do university teaching and learning conditions widen students' capability sets? How can universities reduce institutional constraints that leave their staff and students with few opportunities to do and to be what they have reason to value? To answer these and other related questions, scholars of the capability approach have used its core concepts and tenets to assess the conditions under which educational institutions are or are not promoting student well-being. In particular, a growing body of literature on higher education research has yielded a range of capabilities lists (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Selected higher education capabilities lists

Walker, 2006	Wilson-Strydom, 2016	Calitz, 2019	Mutanga, 2020
A general capability list for higher education participation	A capability list for school to university transition	A capability list for equality and participation in university	A capability list for university participation for students with disabilities
Knowledge and imagination	Knowledge and imagination	Student research	Knowledge and imagination
Social relations and social networks	*Social relations and networks*	*Critical affiliation*	*Social relations and social networks*
Respect, dignity and recognition	*Respect, dignity and recognition*	*Values for the public good*	*Respect, dignity and recognition*
Practical reason	Practical reason	Practical reason	
Educational resilience	Educational resilience		Educational resilience
Learning disposition	Learning disposition	Critical literacies	
Emotional integrity	Emotional integrity		
Bodily integrity	Bodily integrity		
	Language competence and confidence		Language
			Identity
		Deliberative participation	Self-Advocacy
			Aspirations
			Independence
			Faith/Religion
			Mobility

Capabilities lists are intended to provoke dialogue amongst practitioners, managers, leaders and students about what we take to be 'quality' in standards of teaching and learning in universities, and genuinely educative (good) experiences of higher education (Walker, 2006). And as Walker (2006) argues, capabilities lists are necessary because they: (a) help to focus the capability approach on the specificities of higher education; (b) provide a basis to advocate for higher education pedagogy and practice that explicitly aim to promote valued opportunities and equality; and (c) test the usefulness and possible applications of the capabilities approach in higher education contexts. Walker's (2006) list comprises of capabilities that are arguably central to any higher education process that seeks to enhance humanity, effective agency and well-being. Her reasoning has influenced particular applications of the capability approach, and her logic has been usefully applied to a range of topics. For example, scholars have developed capabilities lists for school to university transitions (Wilson-Strydom, 2016); higher education

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equality and participation (Calitz, 2019); and university participation and outcomes for students with disabilities (Mutanga, 2020). There are some similarities across these lists and they all reference Walker's (2006) work and corroborate the importance of certain freedoms for student well-being in the South African context. In Table 1 above we have mapped the most commonly occurring capabilities in descending order. This helps to clarify that, in these studies, freedoms associated with learning (knowledge and imagination; student research) are stressed just as much as freedoms associated with the values of ubuntu (social relations and networks, critical affiliation, respect, dignity and recognition, values for the public good), which we have italicised for emphasis.

What we see in this literature is that 'social relations and social networks' and 'respect, dignity and recognition' (in Walker, Wilson-Strydom and Mutanga's work) and 'values for the public good' and 'critical affiliation' (in Calitz's work) all strongly speak to principles of the moral philosophy of ubuntu, such as mutual cooperation, reciprocal support and community affiliation. For example, drawing from Walker's (2006) list, both Mutanga (2020) and Wilson-Strydom (2016, p. 151) describe the key elements of the capability for social relations and networks as: "Being able to participate in a *group* for learning, *working with others* to solve problems or tasks, *collaborative* and *participatory* learning". This entails "Being able to form good *networks of friendships and belonging* for learning support and leisure. *Mutual trust"* [own emphasis]. While for Calitz (2019, p. 158) the capability for critical affiliation is defined as "a form of *social support* with staff and other mentors" [own emphasis] which entails students *being recognised and treated as valued members of their university communities*, whilst having opportunities to be critical of the oppressive structures within which these support systems operate.

From this literature, we see that scholars have conducted deeply contextual enquiry on what university students in South Africa value in their educational experiences and for their well-being. The capabilities lists that have been developed from this literature reveal the importance of social relations and mutual support in improving the university experiences of students in general, but marginalised students especially. There is clearly an emphasis on values that are synonymous to expressions of ubuntu. But rather than have ubuntu subsumed and implied in the above mentioned capabilities, we foreground its centrality and argue that it suffuses other capabilities and is therefore architectonic (Le Grange, 2012). Articulating ubuntu as an architectonic capability adds ontological specificity to what student well-being entails in the South African context. Finally, we see articulating capabilities in ways that reflect indigenous philosophy and worldviews as part of the work needed to rethink and decolonise our understanding of what student well-being means in specific contexts. The research projects that inspire this view and the articulation of ubuntu as a capability are described next, and then we move onto a discussion of the data from these projects which inform our theorisation.

The Miratho and Democratic Capabilities Research projects

The argument we present in this article is inspired by data from and reflections on two different research projects. The first project is the Miratho project which employed qualitative methods (life-history interviews), participatory research (photovoice), and

quantitative methods (a survey) to research the university journeys of 66 low-income rural and township students across five universities in South Africa from 2016 to 2021. During the life-history interviews conducted each year, students were asked about university teaching and learning conditions, assessment arrangements, academic progress, overall university experience etc. but also about their aspirations for the future and what they valued from the university experience and for their lives. All interview recordings were transcribed and coded using Nvivo software and deductive-inductive coding to categorise the data into themes and subthemes. For example, 'teaching, learning and assessment' as a thematic category included subthemes such as: 'teaching'; 'lecturers' expectations of students'; 'assessment practices'; 'relationship between lecturers and students'; 'students' descriptions of their approaches to learning'; and 'student self-assessment of academic progress'.

The coded data were interpreted using conceptual tools from the capability approach and a human development framing, which led to the identification of eight capability domains (including ubuntu) that support student well-being and are foundational to inclusive learning outcomes (see Walker et al., 2022).

The second project is the Democratic Capabilities Research (DCR) project. This enquiry was a case study exploration with a group of 12 undergraduate students at one South African university. This study aimed to investigate a participatory research project focusing on students' valued capabilities, as conceptualised by students themselves. It explored ways of being and doing that students have reason to value and how, if at all, the participatory project was able to expand these capabilities. Interviews, participant observation, participant diaries and workshops were used as methods for data collection in 2017 and 2018. All the datasets followed an iterative process, in which they were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo, to later be discussed and revised by the undergraduate participants. Therefore, in this project, the students were actively involved in scrutinising a capabilities list that was closely related to the lives they have reason to value. Four central capabilities arose from this study: (1) epistemic, (2) ubuntu, (3) human recognition and (4) self-development (see Martinez-Vargas, 2022). These capabilities were central for the 12 participant students. Furthermore, due to the importance and centrality of the identified ubuntu capability, after research concluded in 2018, a follow up interview was carried out in 2019 regarding this capability. Each student reiterated their initial conceptualisation of this ubuntu capability, corroborating and expanding the data gathered during the participatory project.

Working separately on our respective projects, we learned through informal discussions over time that we were drawing similar conclusions about the importance of ubuntu as a valued freedom. The methodology of this article is therefore unorthodox, as we base the article on data collected for two separate research projects – whose parallels in terms of analysis and findings only became apparent in hindsight. However, in writing, we analysed the coded data across both projects together. This joint interpretation of how students across both projects valued and practised ubuntu is discussed as part of the findings in the next section. It is important to note that we focus only on the interview data across both projects. Although conducted separately, the interview

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schedules of both projects similarly covered questions on childhood, upbringing, schooling, family, and relationships as well as university experiences. Our discussion of findings contains excerpts of passages from the interview transcripts that we coded as references to ubuntu. In some cases, the word 'ubuntu' was used specifically by the students, but in other cases we extrapolated for meaning based on descriptions of what students said they value doing and being at university, or how they described getting through certain challenges they faced.

Whilst our interpretation of this coded data uses the vocabulary of the capability approach as an analytical framework, we draw from Hoffman and Metz (2017); Metz and Gaie (2010); and Le Grange (2012) to think of capabilities in more relational terms. That is, we apply the capability approach from an African and relational ontological perspective, which means we see individual freedoms as inextricably linked to the freedoms of others, and as constituted through relationships. This allows us to address some shortcomings of the approach, like the critique that it pays insufficient attention to the role of relationships in shaping capabilities (Robeyns, 2018). A relational approach also questions the ontological individualism that is assumed by some scholars using the capability approach (Dejaeghere, 2020). For these reasons, in this article we address a specific capability that individual students hold, but we pay particular attention to the dynamic relationalities (Dejaeghere, 2020) students experience in educational environments.

Although some might argue that the African philosophy of ubuntu cannot be applied alongside the capability approach which is an evaluative framework for well-being that is seen as representing Western thought. We support the argument that Sen's notion of capabilities and freedoms implies an ontology of a relational society (Smith & Seward, 2009; Ibrahim, 2006) where interconnectedness is an irreducible feature of reality (Martins, 2007). Whilst ubuntu offers a moral compass and normative descriptions for developing our humanness, the capability approach offers a normative and evaluative framework for well-being. When brought together a more nuanced interpretive schema is created – one that merges African and Western thought, instead of dichotomising the two. As such, our interpretation of the data is informed by an ubuntu-based capability approach (Chipango, 2023). This is built on the ideas of Hoffman and Metz (2017) who argue that the capability approach is enriched by an ubuntu theoretical grounding on relational capabilities. This helps us to acknowledge how deeply relational all intuitively important capabilities are; and it reminds us to account for capabilities that result from social interaction and are unachievable by single individuals (Ibrahim, 2020).

Ubuntu as a valued capability for university students

The Miratho project foregrounded how ubuntu suffused students' approaches to their relationships with each other and with others. Ubuntu was evident in the students' heartfelt concerns to improve the lives of their families and communities; they aspired to use their university education to this end. As Menzi explained: "I'm not only studying for myself, I'm studying for the community". This sentiment is apparent in Rito's reflections on the importance of uplifting others in the process of achieving upward

social mobility: “as you go up you have to be pulling another brother up, who is going to pull another one up”. Ubuntu was evident in students’ emphasis on respect for and responsibility towards others, and in the importance of the extended family, but also in the importance of sharing what one has with other students (e.g. food, books, a laptop, money or accommodation). As Sabelo said, “people help you when you have nothing, so when you have something you must give back”. Students talked about “picking each other up” during their struggles so that they might all achieve their academic goals. But they also alluded to the difficulty of practising ubuntu at university because as Rito explained: “everyone is just minding their own business … you might find a person stays for five years without even knowing who their neighbour is. So the connection we have in rural communities allows us to be interdependent, compared to when you are this [city] side”. Similarly, Rimisa hinted at the erosion of what he understands as traditional African cultural norms: “in African cultures, they used to share their things, their knowledge. It was not individualistic. Everything was done communally”. There was a keen awareness amongst the students that interdependence is important because a person needs other people “to unlock your potential”, Rito said. Or “when you isolate yourself you die slowly”, as Bonani put it. Or as another student said: “you need other people to survive socially and academically”. Importantly, these students do not see success only as an individual achievement that is linked to acquiring a degree for their own advancement in life. As Bongeka explained: “if you do not plan on helping other people in some way or another, you’re not yet successful”. The aspiration to make a positive contribution to their community was expressed often, and it is clear that the values of ubuntu influenced this aspiration. As Rimisa said: “Archbishop Desmond Tutu said you are what you are because of other people … so that’s what I’m going to do. I am going to help the community”.

Similarly, in the DCR project ubuntu was evidenced throughout the qualitative data in statements like Themba’s, explaining that ubuntu is a “collective consciousness” that promotes the idea that “as humanity, we are all interconnected” or, as Amahle put it: “My existence is … linked to your existence” and as Kungawo explained: “It is a human thing. We need other people. That’s just reality”. The students thus highlight that in their view, human beings are connected in a way that reflects “a very strong sense of co-dependence” said Themba. That is, co-dependence in the sense that taking on the moral responsibility for improving the well-being of others is part of developing one’s own well-being. As Themba explained, it is about a “sense of trust and responsibility between you and the next person” and a “sense of responsibility for someone when you have the opportunity to give them or be there for them when they could not be there for themselves”. As Khayone asserts, a person who practises ubuntu is one “who helps others to be successful. It is not about me, it is all about the community, or it’s all about the well-being of other people. I want to see people being successful”.

Based on these descriptions, it is clear that the students perceived their well-being as connected to the well-being of others, where this connection is mediated by a sense of responsibility, a set of values (recognition, reciprocity, mutuality, community, dignity)

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and practices (beings and doings in capabilities language) that inform the life students want to lead at university, and how they want to relate to each other.

Also evident in the data across both projects, is that there are two main phases that expand as a spiral in the process of practising ubuntu. First, is the phase of empathy to the other (being empathetic); this is understanding the need in someone else, empathising with them and having a sense of solidarity with their needs and pain (or joy); like "really, being able to understand what a person is going through" (Kungawo). Kungawo recognises the need of others and the humanity of that need, empathising with difficult situations that fellow students are facing, to the point of developing a sense of responsibility. However, it is important to note that having such a sense of responsibility is often not considered as a burden to these students, but as a way of living or leading their lives, which they have reason to value: "It's just because I feel responsible for you that I do that …Ubuntu is not about pity. It is not about feeling sorry about someone else […] there is not that feeling of shame or burden" (Themba). What Themba is referring to goes beyond cognitive empathy, which is an intellectual understanding of the perceived ill-being of another (Goetz et al., 2010). Themba refers instead to compassionate empathy which is a feeling that inspires action (Goetz et al., 2010). Compassionate empathy moves us past simply understanding the emotional experiences of others and compels us to take substantive action to create change (Goetz et al., 2010).

The second phase of practising ubuntu relates to the action step ('doing' empathy). Compassionate empathy and the mediation of the feeling of responsibility for the well-being of others, guides one towards action that can mitigate the discomfort, pain or needs experienced by another human being. Therefore, as Minenhle put it, "if someone is in need, I can help them" or "Ubuntu is saying come in, you need this, so this is how I can help" (Minenhle). Moreover, as the process is not framed as a closed circle, it is repeated expansively. As the students explain it, giving is not necessarily done as a favour or in expectation of a reward or return of the favour in the future: "If I help you, it does not mean you have to help me in return […] It is a generational cycle of giving" Khayone explained, or as Themba said: "the whole point of the giving is not because you are expecting [that] someone else gives you back".

Themba, like all the students in the DCR and Miratho projects, holds a collective view of success. This is not unusual for students who experience obstacles and adversities during their higher education journeys. In most cases, they will need significant support from someone (not always a family member) to help them succeed. They therefore have a keen awareness of the importance of reciprocity, and they find it important to acknowledge the support (financial, moral, and emotional) without which many black students are at a high risk of dropping out of university (Masutha & Naidoo, 2021). This makes the students view their obtaining a university degree not as an individual triumph, but as a collective achievement which has communal and public-good value (Fongwa, 2019). And as reflected in the interview data, students' lived experiences encourage reciprocity and moral responsibility towards the well-being of others, suggesting that for them ubuntu is not only moral philosophy – a perspective of how the world should be and how people should relate to each other. It is also valuable to them as a capability –

the freedom and effective opportunity to be a university student and to 'do' university according to the values and principles of ubuntu.

As a capability in the higher education space, ubuntu can be described as the freedom to express compassionate empathy, and to develop one's humanity by building mutually beneficial and reciprocal communities of learning. In other words, ubuntu as a capability in higher education encompasses forming relationships that capacitate others to achieve valued learning outcomes in a fully-fledged way. We therefore support Le Grange's (2012) view that the capability of ubuntu can be seen as architectonic; pervading all other educational capabilities highlighted in the literature review – in its implication that our well-being, and anything that we are able to do or to be, is interconnected with and dependent on the existence of other people.

All students in the Miratho and DCR projects valued ubuntu, but not all of them could practise it. So they were able to achieve the first phase, but not the second, which is fundamental for a complete expression of personhood. For both phases to be achievable, the effective opportunity to practise ubuntu in universities must be present, and as we explain in the following section – achieving this capability has decolonial potential.

The decolonial potential of achieving the capability of ubuntu

Le Grange (2012) argues that many problems or challenges facing southern Africa have arisen largely because ubuntu values have become eroded through decades of apartheid-capitalism and centuries of colonialism. In many ways, the legacies of colonialism live on in institutions like universities, through the Western ontologies, values and ideals that typically underlie and inform how people see the world, see themselves in it, and understand how they should relate to each other. The legacies of colonialism also live on in universities through the dominance of Western epistemologies that underpin research and knowledge production processes (Escobar, 2007). As a result, universities in South Africa operate according to value hierarchies that push African and indigenous worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies to the margins (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and keep the teaching of African thought, African philosophy and African ways of relating to others minimal (Sesanti, 2015; Okeja, 2012). This is despite the proliferation of African scholars whose work could be integrated into existing curricula: Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Appiah, Achille Mbembe, Henry Odera Oruka, and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze are examples (Goldhill, 2018). These scholars/philosophers might not necessarily focus on totally different topics covered in Western philosophy, but as Goldhill (2018) reminds us, the Western canon does not hold the only ways to explore our understanding of the world and our existence. For example, the edited volume by Mutanga (2023) demonstrates how ubuntu philosophy can be applied as a conceptual, analytical and interpretive lens on research about disability. The volume thus shows that ideas about living a good life, living ethically, or the nature of free will can be found elsewhere, informed by a range of African cultures and customs and communal outlooks (Goldhill, 2018). These communal outlooks can also influence the study of knowledge. For example, an ubuntu-based epistemology (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018) might suggest that

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objects be studied and understood primarily according to their relationship with context and surroundings rather than according to their intrinsic properties (Goldhill, 2018). And whereas much of Western philosophy focuses on self-realization and achieving morality as an individual undertaking, ubuntu, which permeates much of African thought, insists that self-realization is a communal process (Goldhill, 2018).

Drawing from these ideas, and from the data presented in the previous section, we see various ways through which universities can create opportunities for students to practise ubuntu. For example they can acknowledge African indigenous worldviews that affect how students see the world and their positions in it; encourage cooperative learning and collective success instead of overemphasising competitiveness and individual excellence; and facilitate the use of participatory pedagogies and participatory research that support reciprocal, mutual and communal learning.

When students achieve the capability of ubuntu or practise ubuntu in university spaces an act of defiance is constituted against colonial legacies and neoliberal values that maintain or exacerbate epistemic injustices in higher education institutions by overlooking indigenous worldviews, values, norms and ideals. This is where the decolonial potential of ubuntu lies. Rather than encourage self-centred notions of academic success and excellence, ubuntu stands in contrast to individualism and insensitive competitiveness (Anofuechi, 2022). Instead, it celebrates the relational dimension of knowledge-making and interdependence in processes of learning such that the value of learning is not centred on serving the individual but on serving the community. This foregrounds the moral dimension of education for meaningful inclusion (Mutanga, 2022) and the development of personhood (van Norren, 2022). However, as Khoza (1994) points out, practising ubuntu should not be equated with a collectivism that emphasises the role of community to the point that it dehumanizes the individual. Rather, the emphasis on community should be seen as the acknowledgement of the limited range of possibilities for individual self-sufficiency (Gyekye, 1995).

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that practising ubuntu in universities has proved difficult, and operationalising it in contexts of struggle and unequal power relations requires constant negotiation, criticality and careful application. As Marovah (2021) states, the philosophy of ubuntu may not apply perfectly where there is limited democratic space or where neoliberal and capitalist ideas are deeply entrenched. An example of imperfect application of ubuntu is given in Mtawa's (2019) work on service-learning and its contribution to human development in South Africa – where he warns against paternalistic forms of ubuntu, which can suppress instead of enhancing diverse valued freedoms. Despite this challenge, ubuntu is worth consideration in debates on decolonisation, where its intellectual and philosophical richness and theoretical grounding in valued practices emanating from southern Africa can be demonstrated and critically explored (see Mutanga & Marovah, 2023; Müller et al., 2019; Sartorius, 2022; and van Norren, 2022).

Conclusion

In this article we have described what ubuntu means to groups of university students and how this understanding of ubuntu can stimulate debates on capabilities that higher education institutions ought to protect and enhance in South Africa. We discussed literature that highlights which freedoms matter in making university experiences more inclusive and outcomes more equitable for students in South Africa. This literature review showed that capabilities identified by African scholars indicate a culturally sensitive understanding of the reasons why some capabilities matter more than others, or why certain ways of being and doing are valued more than others for the goal of achieving well-being in higher education contexts.

Reflecting on empirical qualitative data from two research projects, we presented ubuntu as a capability. We argued that ubuntu can be seen as an architectonic capability for participant students, who clearly had good reasons to value mutually reciprocal ways of being and doing as a way of becoming respected and dignified human beings even under conditions that are not ideal, or within institutions that do not fully support this way of being. We provided examples of how students promoted ubuntu freedoms for fellow students on a daily basis; by seeking out ways to support each other through mutually beneficial cycles of help, with the aim of obtaining university degrees not only as means to improve their individual well-being, but for the benefit of their families and the communities from which they come.

One of the strengths of applying the capability approach as an analytical lens in both projects is that it allowed us to situate students' valued ways of being at the centre of discussions about what higher education should achieve in South Africa. In this way, the capability approach provided a linguistic and conceptual framework to understand what kind of lives these students have reason to pursue, whilst at the same time prompting us to consider the changing realities and structural constrains that get in the way of students' aspirations and well-being attainment. On the other hand, bringing African philosophy and Western thought into conversation allowed us to consider what relational approaches to well-being can offer the capabilities approach. We have argued that articulating ubuntu as a capability not only allows us to see how it speaks to the importance of social relations and networks identified as valued capabilities in the literature we discussed earlier. It also allows us to acknowledge ubuntu as a valued freedom in the South African higher education context; one that arguably supersedes all other capabilities and has decolonial power when achieved. We conclude that African worldviews and philosophies like ubuntu are not observed by universities. It is lacking in their ethos, curricula, pedagogy and research practices. However, as our data show, many students practise ubuntu in small ways. It is up to universities to support this important capability by creating the conditions for practising it more widely.

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Ethics statement

All ethics protocols were observed by the authors. Ethical clearance was provided by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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