

Powell, Lesley and McGrath, Simon (2014) Exploring the value of the capability approach for vocational education and training evaluation: reflections from South Africa. *International Development Policy*, 5 (1). pp. 126-148. ISSN 1663-9391

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Exploring the value of the capability approach for Vocational Education and Training Evaluation: Reflections from South Africa

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Abstract

In the late 1990s, South Africa was faced with the triple challenge of reforming the Apartheid-divided institutional landscape of vocational education and training (VET) institutions; addressing equitable access to skills; and reorienting its skills development system to the nation's insertion into the global economy. A wave of institutional reforms was enacted and a large programme of evaluative research followed in its wake. Whilst this body of work was both valuable and necessary, as significant practitioners in this programme we can see several of its limitations. Thus, we counterpose an alternative approach to evaluation that draws on the insights of the capabilities approach. By putting the needs of people first – rather than the needs of the economy – the capability approach brings to the forefront of VET evaluation the importance of social justice, human rights, and poverty alleviation. Such an approach pays better attention to what individuals and institutions value and are seeking to do, whilst retaining the economic rationale as an important part of such analysis; and insisting on the continued salience of evaluation for the improvement of delivery and outcomes.

Keywords

Vocational Education and Training (VET), evaluation, capabilities approach, skills development, South Africa, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges

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1. Introduction

How we evaluate vocational education and training (VET) and the information sets that we elect to use is of considerable importance as VET has moved to the centre of political reform targeted at unemployment, poverty alleviation and economic growth (McGrath, 2012a). A direct result is that VET systems are under constant and persistent political pressure to transform and to do so in ways that expand participation and raise the parity of esteem of VET (Nieuwenhuis and Shapiro, 2004).

To advance the transformation of these systems, evaluation research is seen as central. It generates evidence on what does and does not work, maintains accountability and evaluates the effectiveness of interventions. A range of questions can be raised about evaluation, including its own effectiveness and efficiency. However, we will highlight two main issues regarding VET evaluation. First, the ‘information basis’ of evaluative research undertaken on the sector and the assumptions that are made as to the role and purpose of the sector in selecting these rather than other information sets. Second, the processes of inclusion and exclusion that takes place during evaluation research that lead to the inclusion and exclusion of certain voices.

In this paper we explore the potential of a capabilities approach to VET evaluation. We do so by situating our discussion in our experiences of carrying out more traditional evaluations in the context of the South African public Further Education and Training (FET) college sector. Between 1999 and 2002, Powell was research manager of the College Collaboration Fund (CCF), a business-funded project worth more than €10 million that aimed to support the Department of Education (DoE) transform the then technical colleges into a FET college sector. Between 2002 and 2004, McGrath was a research director at the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, with oversight of the research, monitoring and evaluation component of the Danish-funded Support to Education and Skills Development (SESD) Programme – the largest ever donor-funded project in the sector. However, and while recognising the benefit of these programmes, we are both now concerned to move beyond the core assumptions that underpinned evaluation in these programmes. In this, we are seeking to link to our wider attempts to develop alternate theoretical accounts regarding the purposes of VET and its role in development thinking (e.g., McGrath, 2012b; Powell, 2012). In so doing, we are engaging closely with UNESCO’s call for a transformative approach to vocational education and training (UNESCO, 2014) and for improved evaluation approaches to support such. The significance of this article lies in its attempt to point towards a new approach to the *practice* of evaluating VET research that is informed by the latest theoretical and policy developments in thinking about the field.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section we provide a brief history of research on the FET college sector in South Africa since 1994 before shifting to focus specifically on the approach to evaluation that dominated in this era. We then turn to a discussion of the central concepts of the capability approach as they apply to the challenge of evaluation and the contribution that it potentially brings to VET evaluation. Thereafter we discuss the operational implications of the capability approach. This is followed by a discussion of the potential challenges of such an approach, before concluding by summarising our main points.

2. A Brief History of Research on South African FET colleges¹

South Africa’s public FET colleges are relatively new institutions that exist at the crossroads between school, higher education and the world of work (Fisher et al., 2004). This position leads

to multiple remits, including the challenges of being a major source of intermediate skills and helping address mass youth unemployment and its highly racialised distribution.

The 50 new colleges were established between 1998 and 2002, largely through merging racially segregated-technical colleges. Although the primary drive was to deracialise, there was also a strong concern that the previous institutions had serious issues of quality, relevance, staffing and leadership. These concerns drove research studies undertaken on the FET colleges between 1994 and 2004. Given a very weak existing research base, a major focus was on developing indicators and the information set against which the size and shape of the sector could be built and as a baseline against which the transformation of the sector could be measured (Powell and Hall, 2000, 2002 and 2004).

The period from 2004 to 2009 saw the consolidation of the sector. The FET Colleges Act was passed; college principals appointed; common management systems developed; college councils trained; a c.€200 million Recapitalisation Fund implemented; and a new FET curriculum introduced. With much of the policy frameworks formulated and implementation in its early phases, research shifted to an increasingly critical engagement with the policies' coherence and initial outcomes (McGrath et al., 2004; Papier, 2006).

Much of the research undertaken between 1994 and 2009 was funded either directly by government, or by donors and businesses working in partnership with government (Wedekind, 2009). With few exceptions, this research privileged quantitative methodologies, and when qualitative methods were utilised these eschewed interpretivist approaches in favour of descriptive 'hard data' on which policy could be built and revised (see Fisher et al. 2003). At the institutional level, research pragmatically adopted a new public management view of the colleges and focused on aspects of institutional development such as governance and management systems (Geel, 2005), marketing strategies (Akoojee and McGrath, 2008) and the quality of teaching staff (Jaff et al., 2004). In contrast, theoretical work was seen as being of little value (McGrath, 2008).

The 2009 election of President Zuma, at least rhetorically, saw a shift away from neoliberalism and towards the language of a 'developmental state' with a strong commitment to South Africa's poor and marginalised. South Africa's new economic policy is committed to creating decent work and promoting a more inclusive economy. As part of the significant changes to government structures, a new Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was established which placed the responsibility for higher education, further education and work-based skills together, with the latter being repositioned from the Department of Labour. The establishment of the DHET is intended to build a "single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system" (DHET, 2011: 4), and reflects, in part, an apparent response to researcher critiques of the disarticulation of the previous system (e.g., McGrath et al., 2004; Kraak et al., 2006). The advent of DHET has prompted a renewed debate on South Africa's skills sector and on the FET colleges triggered by three areas of concern.

1. The size of youth unemployment. South Africa has imported the British NEET concept (Not in employment, education or training) and it is estimated that this accounts for an approximate 42 percent of youth aged 18-24, or nearly three million people (Cloete, 2009).
2. The pervasive and persistent patterns of inequality in race, gender and class, which is reflected in access and success in education and training.
3. The continued disjuncture between education and training and the skill needs of the economy and the failure of FET colleges to produce 'the productive citizens' hoped for in South Africa's 'skills revolution'.

In response to these concerns, the DHET has decided to expand access to education and training by increasing participation in FET colleges (and other proposed post-school institutions) to 4 million learners by 2030 (DHET, 2011: xi). The shift in policy discourse towards an integrated

and expanded post school system that focuses on ‘the needs of the poor’ emphasises dimensions that were previously largely absent. By highlighting the role that colleges are to play in poverty alleviation, the DHET seeks to shift the historic discourse regarding colleges away from meeting the needs of industry alone to a focus too on the needs of learners and communities. Equally, the conceptualisation of the colleges as part of an integrated and differentiated post school system reflects an awareness of the need to articulate institutions based on very different contexts rather than attempting to make ‘one size fit all’.

This ambitious new vision provides a unique opportunity to step beyond the productivist accounts that have dominated VET policy and research internationallyⁱⁱ. It was not surprising, therefore, that Minister Nzimande was a keynote speaker at the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Shanghai (May 2012), where UNESCO launched its new vision for a transformative approach. However, ambitious policy statements and new theoretical accounts are only a partial answer. It is clear that evaluation research is positioned as pivotal for the next stage of FET college transformation for “differentiat[ing] between stronger and weaker institutions in order to provide appropriate support and leadership to both” (DHET, 2011: 20) and marking progress in this new and expanded remit for FET colleges. But that this must be a new evaluation for a new transformation. Before turning to our vision for a new evaluative approach, however, it is necessary to reflect in some detail on the VET evaluation orthodoxy.

3. Evaluative research on South African FET colleges

Whilst there have been major developments in evaluation methodology internationally (discussed below), VET evaluation in developing countries has been slow to progress. Four standard measures form the information set of VET systemic and institutional evaluations internationally:

1. Measures of participation provided through Gross and Net Participation Rates which aim to determine student enrolment patterns and is analysed by student type, programme type and institutional type.
2. Measures of institutional efficiency and effectiveness determined through academic efficiency indicators such as pass rates and throughput rates, resource efficiency through indicators such as unit learner costs and lecturer to student ratios.
3. Measures of graduate employment determined through graduate destination studies, which aim to determine the employment destinations of graduates.
4. Measures of employer and student satisfaction determined, generally quantitatively, through student and employer surveys.

The first two of these have been applied to the South African FET college sector in some detail but the third is underdeveloped and the fourth almost entirely absent.

3.1 Measures of participation

Policy ambitions to expand VET enrolments in South Africa and in many other countries of the world have made measures of participation a high priority for governments. This data is, however, fraught with problems affected by the multimodal and programmatic complexities of VET systems (McGrath and Lugg, 2012). In South Africa, initial transformation focused on the changing the student and staff demographics in terms of race and gender and transforming the racially segregated institutional landscape through institutional merger (Powell, 2013). By 2000, the most significant change in the sector was the change in the racial and (to a lesser extent) gender composition of the student body, with black enrolment increasing from 32 percent in 1990 to 75 percent by 1998 and female students increasing from 38 to 41 percent (Cosser et al.,

2011). Policy ambitions established in the early 2000s to achieve equity in racial participation has been largely achieved in the student and staff body, although some concerns continue about the racial composition of senior management staff. The participation of females, however, continues to be skewed towards certain programme areas.

3.2 Measures of institutional efficiency and effectiveness

The new skills development system developed in the first post-apartheid decade outlined the key objectives of a transformed education and training framework which, in turn, shaped the institutional objectives of a transformed landscape. In each of the two main intervention programmes (CCF and SESD), these objectives were translated into performance dimensions against which the efficiency and effectiveness of FET colleges were to be determined, and a number of indicators were identified as relevant to each dimension. Although the exact details of the CCF and SESD approaches were different, they can be argued to have clustered into five key performance dimensions, as summarised in Table One:

Table One. Performance Dimensions and Related Indicators

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Leadership and management effectiveness	To manage and lead a transformed FET college in line with FET college legislation in order that the institution meets the needs of an efficient, high quality education and training institution that is responsive to the needs of the labour market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing vision and mission • Systems of governance in line with the FET legislation • Establishment of effective management teams • Functioning and updated information systems • Effective knowledge sharing and communication within the institution • The institutions is in good financial health • Adequate infrastructure for teaching and learning exists • Adequate infrastructure for management exists • Effective human resource capacity management
Marketing and communication	To effectively market the college to employers and to prospective students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a marketing strategy • Existence of a marketing office or personnel dedicated to the task of marketing
Learner support	To provide learners with the support required to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of academic support programmes

	effectively, make decisions on careers and manage personal crises through student counselling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of learner support programmes
Responsiveness	To achieve the employability of learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good partnerships with public/private sector exist • Good relationships with communities exist • Good relationships with other state bodies exist • The institution is able to undertake learnerships and develop skills programmes • Learner employment tracking exists • Learners are employable
Teaching and learning	To provide high quality teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functioning curriculum development process exist • Lecturers are suitably qualified • Well-functioning staff development processes are in place • A quality assurance system is in place

In the context of policy plans to expand the FET colleges, measures of institutional effectiveness and efficiency take on added importance as DHET is aware of the “danger that quality will be compromised” (DHET, 2011: 28) in the rapid expansion.

Together these studies painted a picture of a FET college sector beset with problems at the institutional level which included the capacity of governing councils, college management and lecturing staff, and unacceptably low throughput and pass rates.

3.3 Measures of employability

The third are measures of employability: the current discourse shapes the key global aims of further and higher education. This is determined through graduate destination studies, undertaken through tracer studies. Currently very few institutions have reliable data and the data that is available is either not regularly updated or it is updated through limited fields which do not allow reporting on the nature of the work, the extent to which work relates to the field of study or the nature of their employment contract. As a result only a limited number of employment tracer studies have been undertaken in South Africa, notably by Cosser et al. (2003) and Gewer (2009), who both argue that a low percentage of graduates are successful in the labour market and even less in an area of work related to the programme that they studied.

Employability is central to the move to expand participation. The hope being that expanding access to education and training will ensure that “those entering the labour market are qualified and competent to take up the employment and income generating opportunities that exist and that will exist as the economy grows and changes in the future” (DHET, 2011: viii). This, in turn, it is hoped will “contribute to fundamentally reducing unemployment and poverty” (DHET, 2011: viii). Within this context the demand and need for employment tracking studies able to monitor increased employment is likely to increase.

3.4 Measures of employer and student satisfaction

The fourth are measures of employer and student satisfaction. Employer and student satisfaction studies were never a serious part of the evaluation research undertaken in South Africa. Select interviews were undertaken by the NBI and HSRC as an aspect of larger projects but these were not systematic and were small and defined in nature. Employer satisfaction studies that were undertaken, however, highlight that employers find it difficult to determine their skill needs and are unsure about what the FET colleges can do to meet these needs (Mercorio and Powell, 1999). In many cases, unless a partnership exists between the employer and the college, employers were unsure as to what percentage of their employees were trained at an FET college.

3.5 The limitations of the orthodox approach to VET evaluation in South Africa (and beyond)

As key actors in delivering this first wave of South African VET evaluation research, we still believe that it made an important contribution to the establishment and reform of South Africa’s FET colleges and that much of what it attempted remains important for future approaches. However, on reflection, we believe that it was insufficient in six regards for what needs to be done in the next phase. First, it reflected a narrow VET understanding of evaluation that was poorly attuned to developments elsewhere in evaluation methodologies, a point we will return to below. Second, it drew on a new public management view of institutional development, which, though grounded in the wider assumptions of South African policy reform, is an inadequate account of institutional change and quality, both generally and in the South African context.ⁱⁱⁱ Third, it underplayed the wider economic and labour market contexts in which providers are operating, focusing on the “failings” of learners and colleges rather than those of employers or government. Fourth, it displayed a methodological deafness to the voices of learners, lecturers and communities, assuming that it was obvious that employability was the only goal of FET. Fifth, it is not fit for purpose for the new phase of transformation being envisaged in South African FET policy as it is not suited to evaluating some of the key policy imperatives around social justice, or the increased national development policy emphasis on human development. Sixth, it does not engage sufficiently with the emerging UNESCO account of VET and human development, which appears better attuned both to trends in development theory and South Africa's increasing official stress on human development. These weaknesses have led us to envision an alternative way of thinking about VET evaluation, drawing on the capabilities approach, which we outline next.

4. The capability approach

The capability approach provides a normative framework alternate to the output and efficiency measures usually applied to social evaluation by emphasising the quality of life and well-being of individuals. Informed by the principles of social justice, and more recently by what Sen (2009) has termed ‘comparative justice’, a central commitment is to the dignity of each person. At its core, the capability approach is about providing individuals with the opportunities to live the life that they have reason to value and enabling individuals to become agents in their own life

(Deneulin and Shahani, 2009). By putting the needs of people first, rather than the needs of the economy, the capability approach brings the importance of social justice, human rights, and poverty alleviation to the forefront of VET and skills development discourse.

Central to the capability approach are the concepts of capabilities, functionings and freedom, which, according to Sen, provide the best metric for interpersonal evaluations. Capabilities comprise “what a person is able to do or be” and represent “the opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings” (2005: 153) and the freedom to elect from these. Freedom in the capability approach has not only instrumental importance for providing a greater range of alternatives, but is also intrinsically important to a person’s well-being as “acting freely” and “being able to choose are ... directly conducive to well-being” (Sen, 1992: 50). Functionings, on the other hand, represent what a person actually does, the life that a person actually lives and represent a person’s well-being (or ill-being) achievements.

While it might appear that the distinction between ‘capabilities’ (opportunities) and ‘functionings’ (doings) is splitting hairs, the distinction is crucial for social justice and for identifying inequality of opportunity, both of which are hidden in conventional approaches to VET evaluation. In this regard, the distinction between capabilities and functionings brings three benefits to the evaluation of VET. First the distinction highlights the importance of human freedom by differentiating between what people *actually do* (*functionings*) but also what *they can do* (*capabilities*) as individuals might achieve the same functioning (for example an FET qualification) but have significantly different opportunities to select from. This is markedly different to resource conventional input-outputs approaches to VET evaluation which focus purely on functionings. The distinction highlights the choices that an individual has to achieve in a particular area and the array of opportunities that they have to choose from. The difference is between choosing to do and doing, i.e. between choosing to have a particular functioning (or achievement) and having a particular functioning (Sen, 1992).

Second, the distinction enables VET evaluations to identify differences in individuals’ abilities to convert the characteristics of an ability (such as commodities, skills or for that matter qualifications) into functionings (such as a qualification or employment). These interpersonal variations in conversion could be due to either individual or social factors (Robeyns, 2000). Hence, limiting analysis to functionings (be these resources, qualifications, or abilities) as conventional VET evaluations do does not give us enough information on individual well-being as individuals might achieve the same functioning (for example a FET qualification) but have significantly different abilities to convert these into a functioning (for example employment).

Third, the distinction has led to the conception in the capability approach of poverty as being capability deprivation across multiple dimensions. In the context of large numbers of FET students coming from what Gewer (2009) describes as “poverty-stricken family environments” (2009: 145) and the commitment of policymakers to position an expanded FET college sector as a central instrument for poverty alleviation, this understanding of poverty takes on special significance for the evaluation of FET colleges. In this context, measures of participation, while instrumental for monitoring increased opportunities for individuals to access education and training, apply what Qizilbash and Clark (2002) describe as a “vague” definition of poverty which fails to adequately consider the multiple dimensions of poverty. As a result, these approaches also fail to consider the minimal critical level that needs to be surpassed in each of these multiple levels for an individual to move beyond poverty and the ways in which FET colleges can contribute towards achieving these levels. The result is that measures of participation tell us little about the ways in which colleges contribute (and could potentially contribute) to poverty alleviation.

Fourth, the distinction allows differential risks and costs to individuals to be identified by VET evaluations. It also allows the contradictions in capabilities that individuals have to weigh up to be identified. This is critical for ensuring policy success as without an understanding of the

potential costs or risks of attending VET institutions, policies for expanded participation face a possible risk of failure. An example is between a student who risks his family's financial well-being by leaving employment to enroll for full-time study at a FET college and a student who attends college with no financial risk to his family at all. Both students are enrolled for study, but they have very different stresses during their study. Such nuanced differentials, crucial for locating FET colleges as institutions targeted at poverty, are made invisible and therefore discounted as unimportant and irrelevant by conventional VET evaluations which dominate the research landscape on South African FET colleges.

The capability approach stresses the analytical distinction between means and ends. The argument is that we should be clear when valuing something (or somebody) whether we value it (or s/he) for its own sake or because it exists as a means that makes something else that we truly value possible. For the capability approach the purpose (or 'ends') of interpersonal evaluation is the expansion of capabilities and the freedoms to elect from these capabilities. In terms of this, institutions and structures – including VET institutions – should be evaluated in terms of the “causal importance that they have for individuals' well-being” (Alkire, 2008: 33). In other words, “it is people's capabilities that must guide the evaluation rather than how much money, educational resources, or qualifications they are able to command” (Walker and Unterhalter, 2010: 4). As such, the focus is on capabilities that matter to individuals and the extent to which institutional and socio-economic arrangements expand or constrict individuals' capabilities rather than on the institutional structures that it is hoped will achieve such capability expansion.

Through its focus on human well-being, the application of the capability approach suggests a new set of questions for VET evaluation that asks, “Do they [the social policy] really improve [people's] prospects in terms of capabilities?” (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006: 3). Or, in the terms of the FET colleges, do these institutions serve to expand or to constrict the capabilities, functionings and the agency freedom of FET college students? South Africa's policy ambition is to create opportunities to participate in an expanded FET college sector, but what valuable opportunities will these larger colleges expand and how do we identify which opportunities matter to these students? The argument of this paper is that current approaches to evaluation, while useful for political and institutional accountability, prove silent on these important matters. In contrast, the capabilities approach raises a number of questions pertinent to the well-being of FET college students that are different to that asked by conventional approaches to VET evaluation and that cannot easily be answered by applying the information sets developed through conventional approaches. These questions include the following:

- Which dimensions of institutional functioning enable individuals to expand the capabilities that they have reason to value and which serve to limit and constrict the expansion of capabilities and functionings?
- Which capabilities and functionings matter to students and to what extent are these being met by institutional arrangements, institutional cultures and by the pedagogic approach of VET?
- How does expanding the capabilities and functionings of an individual VET student contribute to the development of their families and their communities?
- Do all students in the sector have the same opportunities through the institutional arrangements and pedagogic design of VET to participate in and to succeed in VET?

4.1 Operationalising the capabilities approach

The practical value of the capabilities approach is that it goes beyond providing a theoretical and abstract notion of social justice but provides a practical framework by which social justice can be enacted, monitored and evaluated through the lived lives of human beings (Walker, 2005). Reflecting on the contribution that the capability approach makes to higher education, Walker

notes that “these are attractive ideas for higher education” but, she asks, “how might they be applied for more practical evaluation purposes?” (2008: 477). The capability approach is similarly attractive for VET, if not more so than for higher education, as it challenges through its commitment to human well-being the neoliberal underpinnings of VET policy that emphasise human resource development above human well-being (McGrath, 2012b; Powell, 2012). But, we remain left with the tricky question of how to operationalise the capability approach for practical purposes. As Alkire writes: “The proof must be in the pudding” (2008: 1).

A first step in operationalising the capability approach is provided by Bonvin and Farvaque (2006), who argue that the capability approach affects evaluation on two levels: ‘*substantial*’ and ‘*procedural*’. The *substantial level* involves the actual information sets on which we base our evaluations, which are in turn driven by the kinds of questions that we have asked and the *procedural level* the processes involved in deciding on the information sets and gathering the information required. With respect to the *substantial level*, Bonvin and Farvaque (2005) argue that the information on which we base our evaluations “is not neutral” as decisions are made during evaluations as to what we are to measure and the information sets that are to be applied to these measures and, by virtue of this, as to what we are not going to measure and the information sets that are not to be included. Core to the ‘substantial level’ of evaluation, and as discussed above, is the importance of human flourishing evaluated through the notions of ‘capabilities’, ‘functionings’ and ‘freedom’. Tikly explains that “from a human capabilities perspective, this suggests that “evaluation of VET systems whilst important needs to be evaluated against a more holistic set of criteria” (2012:19).

But how are we to develop this more “holistic set of criteria” to which Tikly speaks refers? Bonvin and Farvaque (2006) suggest that this can only be achieved by paying attention to the *procedural levels* of evaluation which, according to Sen (1999), must involve democratic participation which provides opportunities for this ‘set of criteria’ to be put to public scrutiny and debate. The importance of this participation is central in evaluation for two distinct reasons. The first, “the evaluative reason”, lies in the importance of evaluating developmental (or institutional) interventions in terms of whether capabilities that matter have been enhanced (1999: 4). The second, relevant to Bonvin and Farvaque’s (2006) *procedural levels*, is ‘the effectiveness reason’ which locates in Sen’s argument that the “achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people” (1999: 4) with development constitutive of and freedom and the “expansion of freedom is viewed as both the primary end and the principal means of development” (Sen, 1999: 36). Here his core argument is that people are to be envisaged as agents, capable of and desiring to act in the world, rather than as “motionless patients” (1999:137) standing in a line waiting patiently (or impatiently) to be developed and, importantly, that failing to include people in the process of development might result in “targeting achievements [being] quite different from targeting-attempts” (1999: 137).

Contrary to the emphasis on participation in the capabilities approach, current approaches to FET college evaluation have largely ignored the voice and experience of students. Like conventional approaches to VET evaluation internationally, these evaluations tell us nothing about why these students elected to enrol, the costs to themselves and their family of them doing so or the extent to which the college has or has not met their expectations. The reason for this is that it is assumed that learner voices are not important as it is “obvious” what learners want – jobs now. As Wedekind argues,

much of the reform process [for FET colleges] cares little about understanding the people in the system ... as long as more staff and students are black and enrolments are increasing there is little more that needs to be considered. (2009:17)

Recent discussions on the operationalisation of the capability approach, developing from the importance of democratic participation and public debate, have centred on the importance of

developing capability lists that identify the capabilities that matter to individuals and that define the dimensions or indicators to measure these (Alkire, 2002).^{iv} Democratic participation and public debate is emphasised as essential to developing these capabilities lists as the selection of capabilities that are to be promoted through policy and institutional interventions and the information sets used for evaluation are not neutral but involve expediently trading off the benefits of one capability and therefore one information set against that of another. As Alkire argues, “the capability approach can be likened to a sophisticated balance upon which two states of affairs or alternative courses of action can be analysed and compared” (2008: 28). From the perspective of the capability approach, a first step to resolving these complex decisions and in the contradictions underpinning them lies in public deliberation and participation and another in expanding the ‘capability of voice’ by establishing procedures for social choice and by providing individuals with the abilities and spaces to express their opinions and to make them count (Bonvin and Thelon, 2003).

An important motive for the development of capability lists, other than the space it makes for the expansion of voice, is that it makes it possible to determine whether a particular social initiative (in this case VET institutions) has expanded or contracted capabilities that matter by developing a ‘set of criteria’ selected during the process of social evaluation against which progress can be determined. Another benefit lies in the role that capabilities lists play as “devices to focus attention” (Kamsler, 2006: 199). Highlighting Mark and Rock’s (1998) work on ‘inattention blindness’, Kamsler argues that what we pay attention to “profoundly affects both our personal evaluations of well-being and our formulation of focused goals, such as political agendas” (2006: 200). By focusing attention on human well-being, capability lists play the important role of correcting for ‘inattention blindness’ to human flourishing.

5. The contribution of the capabilities approach to VET evaluation

On the surface of it, the ‘procedural aspects’ might appear to be quite similar to newer and more participatory approaches to VET evaluation such as that put forward by Nieuwenhuis and Shapiro (2004), which have been developed in response to positivistic assumptions of the neutrality of evaluation. This literature argues for the importance in “*high-quality evaluations*” of “acceptance and credibility of evaluations amongst programme participants” (Beywl and Speer, 2004: 55). The difference, however, lies in the underlying paradigm that drives the evaluation, with much of these “new” approaches located in the importance of evaluation as a “steering mechanism” in the context of “deregulation and decentralization” (Beywl and Speer, 2004: 55) and/or the importance of systemic interaction within the skills development system (Nieuwenhuis and Shapiro, 2004). The distinction in the capabilities approach between means and ends and the emphasis on human well-being, contrasts with human capital and productivist approaches which underpin much of these evaluations where job readiness is privileged above all other educational values. This is particularly so in VET where the “singular emphasis on a narrow ‘initiative’ version of employability (Gazier and Houneman, 1999) [has left] little room for the role that education and training plays in preparing young people for the challenges and opportunities that they will face in their families, their communities and their workplaces.

In contrast to dominant approaches to VET evaluation, including these newer participatory approaches, the capabilities approach provides a revised normative framework for the evaluation of VET which differs significantly from productivist approaches, which Anderson (2003) argues have dominated VET research and policy. Contrary to ‘productivist’ approaches, which emphasise economic growth and income generation as key development objectives with employability and the creation of human capital conceived as a means to that end, the capability approach emphasises human flourishing, with economic growth seen as a necessary but not sufficient means to achieve development. Understood in these terms, the evaluation of employability takes on a revised perspective. From the viewpoint of the capability approach,

employability can be understood as more than the ability to access work: it is about “the real freedom to choose the job one has reason to value” (all quotations from Bonvin and Galster, 2010: 72). Understood in this sense, employability demands that valuable opportunities exist to access the skills and abilities required for work but also that valuable opportunities exist in the labour market that contribute to human flourishing.

Where the impact of VET on learners is evaluated conventionally the focus is on target achievement in key policy areas such as participation, institutional effectiveness and employability, rather than on the capabilities that matter to the lives of students. As with the evaluations of the South African FET colleges discussed above, many of these new and participatory approaches to VET evaluation are guilty of ‘inattention blindness’ to human well-being. They do not focus on the well-being of students or the extent to which VET systems are providing real opportunities for learners to expand the options and achievements of their lives. The weakness, as Grubb and Ryan (1999) argue, is that these “evaluations of VET programmes often fail to describe with any precision what particular programmes do; what a programme is, and why it should have any positive effects at all” (Grubb and Ryan, 1999: 8).

We agree with Grubb and Ryan when they insist that “the purpose of a particular programme should influence the kind of evaluation undertaken” (1999: 8). Moreover, as Sen argues, “if freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on the overarching objective, rather than on a particular means, or some chosen list of instruments” (1999: 3).

Conventional VET evaluation, while instrumental for maintaining the political and institutional accountability necessary for creating the conditions required for capability expansion, is paradigmatically limited as an approach for evaluating the contribution of VET to poverty and social inclusion; yet both are key goals of South Africa’s FET college policy. The orthodoxy is unable to identify the capabilities (or opportunities) that are of value to students; the extent to which VET institutions expand or contract these valued capabilities; and the future policies and institutional trajectories required to achieve such capability expansion. As such, the emphasis on human well-being in the capability approach marks a major departure from productivist conceptions of VET (McGrath, 2012b, Powell, 2012, López-Fogués, 2012). Its insistence on the centrality of agency is markedly different to the dominant paradigm applied to much of the VET evaluation research which is overwhelmingly focused on structure: the institution, the skills development system and the relationship with the economy being foremost, at the expense of the agency and experience of students (Powell, 2013).

6. Challenges with applying the capability approach

This paper is not designed to provide a survey of the critiques of the capability approach, which is well done by Robeyns (2005) and Alkire (2002). There are clear limitations to the approach. Here we will focus in on concerns regarding the operationalisation of the capabilities approach in social evaluations.

The use of the capability approach as a tool for the evaluation of social policy is still in its infancy (Alkire, 2008). Sen's highly philosophical approach does not lead easily to operationalisation. Indeed, Robeyns notes that “some critics frustration with Sen’s capability approach seem[ing] to stem in part from uncertainty as to whether or not they have ‘done it right’” (Robeyns, 2002: 122). The argument that conventional evaluation approaches are inadequate may be of little value if “after scrutiny, we must concede that the capability approach in practice can do no better” (Alkire, 2008: 26).

Evaluation is necessarily a pragmatic approach. It must be timely and cost-effective. This leads to justifiable concerns that a capabilities approach may be poor value for money. These are unanswerable at this point. However, what we do know is that the comparators here are past

programmes of VET evaluation. A recent one of these cost nearly €400 000, which leads us to think that there is some hope for better value for money from a capabilities approach. Equally, having experienced week-long conventional evaluation visits to institutions, our expectation is that the time required for a capabilities-based evaluation is unlikely to be excessive in comparison.

However, an important point of this paper is that we do not know whether a capabilities approach to VET evaluation is viable. More important than cost and time considerations, we do know that the current approach is too limited to serve the social inclusion goals of South Africa's new FET college policy framework. In this context, the capability approach provides a promising alternative that will need to be tested in practice. Our argument is that even if it is limited in practice, it can be invaluable in highlighting the well-being of students, and this justifies the need for experimentation in this regard.

7. Conclusion

We will end with five key propositions.

First, whilst past evaluation research has made an important contribution to the establishment and reform of South Africa's FET colleges, the approach is inadequate to address the new challenges faced by the sector.

Second, at the heart of the current approach to determining VET's success is a deep-held belief regarding the central importance to the sector's mission of employability. Yet, this is a narrow Anglophone model of employability that neglects the roles played by policies, labour markets and employers' decisions and which tends to a deficit account of individual learners. Moreover, we argue that these learners are not simply empty slates enrolling at colleges in the hope of being filled up with employability skills.

Third, these arguments are linked to a wider insistence in contemporary development theory, driven by the human development and capabilities approach, that development is multifaceted and that a narrow economic view of development is too narrow to generate an adequate understanding of the role that FET colleges can play in poverty alleviation, unemployment reduction and well-being enhancement.

Fourth, we believe that sweeping assumptions about what learners, staff and communities value from VET are fundamentally flawed. Rather, we agree with Cook-Sather, that there is "something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve" (2002: 3).

Fifth, and in the light of the previous four propositions, we suggest that there is a strong case for exploring the suitability of a new approach to VET evaluation that draws on the human development and capabilities approach.

This paper is an initial step into complex territory. It suggests there are merits in a shift in VET evaluation from the narrow focal areas of concentration outlined above to a broader and more humanistic vision which is targeted in its orientation to the well-being of VET students. But, as Alkire (2008) notes, "to operationalise an alternative approach ... which is what the capability approach is – is not a modest task, nor is it very nearly accomplished" (2008:130). Our next task is to offer some proposals for beginning to operationalise this approach. But that must be the task of another paper.

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ⁱ This section draws substantially from Powell's (2013) critical review of South African FET college literature.

ⁱⁱ See McGrath (2012b) and McGrath and Lugg (2012) for further discussion on productivist accounts on VET and the implications for VET research.

ⁱⁱⁱ See McGrath (2010) for an exploration of the use of new public management logic in the South African FET college sector.

^{iv} It is important to note that the capabilities approach is not a homogeneous approach. While all who work within its framework share a common commitment to social justice and to the distinction between capabilities and functionings, there are many different perspectives and developments. An important distinction must be made in the interpretations of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum who have very different approaches to the definition of capabilities and freedom and to the development of capabilities lists with Sen deliberately leaving capability lists unspecified in favour of public deliberation and Nussbaum arguing for the development of basic capabilities which governments should constitutionally guarantee their citizens.