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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Educational Development

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Tumuheki, P., Zeelen, J., & Openjuru, G. L. (2016). Towards a conceptual framework for developing capabilities of 'new' types of students participating in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 47, 54-62.

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# Towards a conceptual framework for developing capabilities of 'new' types of students participating in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 December 2014

Received in revised form 15 October 2015

Accepted 27 December 2015

### Keywords:

Higher education  
Non-traditional students  
Lifelong learning  
Sub-Saharan Africa  
Capability approach

## ABSTRACT

Building on the participation model of Schuetze and Slowey, this study contributes to the public discourse on theoretical considerations for guidance of empirical research on participation of non-traditional students (NTS) in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Drawing from empirical work at Makerere University Uganda, we found that improving only the institution environment cannot suffice as there are also other factors affecting participation outside the institutional structures. These include family and work environments and context specific factors like perceptions and socio-cultural environment of the Ugandan society. A conceptual model specific to SSA is thus proposed, and the capability approach presented as the most insightful in elucidating the participation realities of NTS in SSA.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary higher education systems are characterised by a historic growth in student numbers associated with the shift from elite to mass higher education systems (Mohamedbhai, 2008; Schuetze and Slowey, 2000). This expansion is transforming the structure and organisation of higher education including the diversification of higher education systems, programmes and courses of study and the nature of its student body (Hussey and Smith, 2010; Schuetze and Slowey, 2000). As part of this process, 'new' types of students, who for various reasons had been excluded and underrepresented in higher education, are joining in increasing numbers.

In this paper, we term these, non-traditional students (NTS) and define them as undergraduate degree students who:

(a) either did not obtain the standard high school certificate or obtained it but did not have continuous transition from upper secondary (high school) education to university education; and

(b) gained access to university education through either diploma or mature age entry schemes.

In consideration of (a) and (b) above, some of these students have in addition to study, other major life obligations such as work, family and social life commitments, which constrain the time they have at their disposal for study. Simply put, NTS have differing needs from those of the conventional students, for whom the existing policies and practices in higher education were designed (Kasworm, 2003).

Whereas a number of studies have been carried out in the developed countries, e.g. the OECD country case studies done in 1987 and 2000 (Schuetze and Slowey, 2000) to understand what these changes mean for higher education systems and institutions in terms of development at policy and practice levels, little research has been done about these changes and their implications in the developing context of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Yet, changes in funding and access policies to higher education in SSA have equally created new developments in terms of service providers, enrolments, programmes, and composition of the student body (Mohamedbhai, 2008; Sawyerr, 2004) that merit investigation. This study aims to contribute to the public discourse on theoretical considerations for guidance of empirical research on participation of non-traditional students in higher education in SSA. Drawing

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from the participation model developed by Schuetze and Slowey (SSM) for the developed countries (Section 2) and taking into account the specific context of Uganda (Section 3), the paper uses empirical data illustrations from this context (Section 4) to propose a conceptual model specific to participation realities of NTS in SSA (Section 5), and presents the capability approach as most appropriate for elucidating these realities in relation to the human development needs in the region (Section 6). Finally, Section 7 provides the conclusion.

## 2. The participation model by Schuetze and Slowey (SSM)

In their book *Higher Education and Lifelong Learners: International Perspectives on Change* the two leading authors in the subject, Schuetze and Slowey (2000), articulate a model (SSM) on participation of non-traditional students (learners) in higher education. Their model explains the changes taking place in higher education of the developed countries and the measures that can be taken to provide the traditionally excluded and underrepresented groups in the student body a levelled playing ground with the 'traditional' students. First of all, they do not agree with those who believe that increased participation rates of the school-leaving age group in higher education necessarily solves the equity and access concerns of all those who have the ability and desire to pursue higher education. Second, they do not believe that higher levels of participation in higher education mean that the functions of higher education in social selection and reproduction of inequalities are outdated.

In their model, Schuetze and Slowey (2000) argue that whereas there is an increase in the student enrolments in higher education, there are still limitations to the access of learners from the traditionally excluded and underrepresented groups, especially into the traditional elitist institutions, in which the traditional academic values, institutional structures and processes have continued to be preserved. They argue that the failure of such institutions to recognise for instance part-time study in the face of increasing number of students who combine work and study, exacerbates the gap between higher education policy and practice on the one hand and the reality of students' experiences on the other hand. To overcome this problem, they argue for instituting of distinct measures in form of public policies and institutional practice.

We highly credit Schuetze and Slowey and honour their important work; first for making a good contribution in the area of lifelong learning and the need to leverage access to education opportunities for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups; and second, for pointing out the role of education in reproduction of power relations. It is indeed evident in their model that they have a critical awareness of what Bourdieu (1973) calls the reproduction of existing power relations through education. However, the pertinent question we ask is, can we use this model to understand the specific participation problems of NTS in developing countries such as those in SSA? What lessons can be learnt from it; what works, what doesn't work for the developing context and why? Answering such questions requires gaining insight into the context.

## 3. Background on access to higher education in Uganda

This paper is part of a larger study being conducted at Makerere University, aiming at understanding the participation experiences and lived realities of NTS in university education in Uganda, and finding ways to address their educational exclusion through recommending appropriate interventions. Since its inception in 1922, Makerere University was the only (public) university in Uganda until 1988, when the first private university was established. The second public university was established in

1989 (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2014). At that time, funding of higher education was solely an obligation of the state and largely depended on government subvention. Higher education was highly elitist and exclusively accessed through state scholarships awarded on merit of academic performance (Mamdani, 2007). More so, access to university education was almost exclusively through the direct entry scheme which admits only high school leavers. A very small number however could also be admitted through mature age entry, but by default, these had to suit into policy and practice arrangements meant for the majority mainstream students (Makerere University, 1970). Consequently, the student population at universities was largely composed of students who were young, dependants, joined immediately after high school and studied fulltime.

Under this highly elite system, beneficiaries had all the costs of their education and personal needs covered by the state (Mamdani, 2007). However, with time these privileges had to be altered due to challenges of inadequate funding resulting from a policy shift on expenditure of public resources both at global and national levels. The policy shift at global level in funding priorities of developing countries in turn necessitated cutting down of state expenditure and changing of state funding priorities (Samoff and Carrol, 2004). In Uganda, two changes took effect in the education sector: (1) minimisation of the role of the state in higher education; and (2) shifting education funding focus from higher education to primary and secondary education. This policy shift opened doors to such reforms as liberalisation of higher education to the private sector; and cost sharing and privatisation at public universities (Mamdani, 2007; Musisi and Muwanga, 2003). As the higher education system became open to all those who could afford own costs of education, the demand and subsequently the student numbers of those joining universities increased (Mamdani, 2007). For instance, at Makerere University the student enrolments grew from 5,597 in 1990/91 to 30,208 in 2002/2003 academic year (Makerere University, n.d.). This massive demand, combined with the university's desire to improve its financial situation led to creation of non-traditional flexible study programmes in form of evening and external offerings, and expansion of existing access routes, bringing on board the diploma entry scheme (Makerere University, 1991). These developments in turn resulted into a dramatic change in the demographic profile of students, featuring an increasing number from non-traditional backgrounds—older and working students (Openjuru, 2011; Kasozi, 2002).

Currently, the higher education sector in Uganda is largely controlled by the market in terms of both ownership and funding (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2014). At 73%, the private sector takes the largest share of ownership of higher education institutions leaving out only 27% for the public sector. Although universities take only 18% of the higher education share, they take the lead in student enrolments because they are the most popular institutions of higher learning. In terms of funding, tuition from privately sponsored students is the major source of income especially at universities. Yet, the majority of Ugandan households live in poverty (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2012). This means that among those who qualify, some remain excluded due to their financial disadvantage. Consequently, the expansion of higher education in Uganda has not led to a broader access for all groups. It is still the privileged part of the population that has greater access.

A number of studies have established that access to higher education in Uganda is determined by a range of factors such as class (Kasozi, 2009a), income and regional location (Mayanja, 1998) and gender (Kwesiga, 1993, 2002). Children from well-to do families continue to dominate access to university education and state scholarships because of the structural inequalities inherent in the way education is organised and services delivered (Kasozi, 2009a, 2009b; Mayanja, 1998). University admissions remain

based on merit of academic performance (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2012), yet meritocracy is highly linked to other factors such as the student's gender, socio-economic background of family, parents' education and attitudes, societal norms, type of schools attended, and regional location (Kwesiga, 1993, 2002; Kasozi, 2009a; Mayanja, 1998). Moreover, the direct entry scheme remains the dominant avenue of admission at universities. For instance at Makerere University the intake capacities are such that 90% of the students admitted on government are through direct entry (A level); 5% through mature age and 5% through diploma. For private sponsorship 70% of the slots are for students admitted through direct entry, 20% through diploma and 10% through mature age (Makerere University, 2011).

Compared to other students, non-traditional students come from less privileged backgrounds since they get admitted through alternative access routes of diploma and mature age. This is because they are neither able to score the desirable grades for straight admission to university on state scholarships after high school, nor at the time, able (including their families) to meet the costs of university education. Others do not—in the first place, make it through the structured system and drop out before high school. In 1992, Morrow introduced the discussion on issues of *formal access* (institutional access) and *epistemological access* in the literature on widening participation in higher education, in a developing context (Morrow, 2007). Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014: 189) cite other scholars who have used these terms differently: e.g. Gamede (2005) used physical access to mean formal access; Samoff (2001) used expanded access, and Jansen (2008/2009) meaningful access, to mean epistemological access. Regardless of the terms used, the point of emphasis is that educational access is not only about increasing access opportunities for disadvantaged groups, but also caring to know what happens beyond that access.

#### 4. Some empirical illustrations of participation realities of NTS in Uganda

This paper draws from 15 unstructured in-depth interviews administered between March and July 2013 to three cohorts of NTS in the School of Computing and Informatics Technology (CIT) at Makerere University: five finalists, seven graduates, and three dropouts. These interviews were conducted in English and supplemented by data from two stakeholders workshops held in March 2013. All the interviewees were purposively recruited (Hennink et al., 2011) so they are rich information participants (Creswell, 2012).

Most interviewees were from poor socio-economic backgrounds and at the time of enrolment, most of them were involved in low income jobs such as petty trader, taxi-conductor, intern, driver, data entrant, and secretary among host others. Of the 15 interviewees, six were from single parent headed families (four female headed and two male headed), one was an orphan raised by his extended family, and the remaining eight had both parents living, but many of them did not have sufficient incomes to cater for their children's needs, forcing them to seek for support from relatives, friends and charity organisations. Most of the interviewees had had to endure hardships in their previous education levels such as attending low grade schools and having to repeat classes several times due to lack of fees. This explains why even after joining university, they (including those who were already married) remained linked to their extended (parents') families for support in one way or another. The concept of family in this study takes the extended family definition which is different from how family is understood in the western countries (Mbiti, 1989). Since this paper largely aims at the conceptual contribution, we do not consider full methodological details here.

However, before presenting the voices of NTS, we first explain our understanding and usage of the concept of participation within the lifelong learning discourse in (Sub-Saharan) Africa. Participation in this study is used in a broader sense i.e. goes beyond physical access and enrolment dimensions to also include the processes leading to that access and the realities of the environments in which the learner is located both within and outside the institution (epistemological access). Our emphasis is that participation is more than just NTS being part of the student population but also includes what happens to them after enrolment as well as the meaning of the educational outcomes and the university's contribution to the process. In Sections 4.1–4.4 we use a chronological approach (Hennink et al., 2011) to share a few of the NTS' lived realities and participation experiences, presented, respectively, through the lenses of; before joining, at entry to, during their stay, and after university.

##### 4.1. Prior to joining university

In Uganda, the socio-cultural environment from which learners come prior to joining university was found an important element in understanding the choices they make, how and why they make them. Society perceptions of university education were found to be one of the major factors that shape the motivations of NTS to upgrade. Drawing from colonial days, the education system in Uganda is structured in the form of a linear progression with university education at the topmost. As such, a university degree is highly valued and regarded prestigious in society (Openjuru, 2010; Tukundane et al., 2014). Not achieving this degree renders one to feel and be seen as a failure. So, in a bid to improve the perceptions of the society about them, NTS seek for upgrading opportunities.

Consequently, the motivation of NTS to go back to education is highly linked to goals of social mobility and obtaining status in society (Minnis, 2006). When asked about his motivations to upgrade, a 3rd year NTS on Bachelor of Information Technology said 'I also wanted to take that status of having a degree, at least reaching a degree level'; and a NTS dropout of Information Systems said '... for the degree, I wanted to be someone whereby ... I can also come out of the public and stand ... somebody who could be valuable as others who could have what, gone to university'.

NTS tend to place or weigh themselves against others like their siblings or other relatives and friends with whom society compares them. Sometimes socio-cultural beliefs such as beliefs about gender also play a role as illustrated by an NTS dropout of Information Systems programme who said 'I didn't want to just sit down at home since my elders were educated and my guardians were educated and I was the only boy at home'. This desire to fit and belong propels NTS to upgrade their education so as to be like their contemporaries within their families and or the larger society as further illustrated:

... the families we come from, I mean none of us wants to be looked at as a failure ... I had a big brother, he was through, he had just finished Economics, I was like it cannot be me to lag behind ... the family I come from, most people are studied I should say, even my age mates, my cousins; they are progressing. It's a great thing to note that X is now done with degree and is performed well and is now trying to pursue further studies. (Graduate–Information Technology)

Another aspect of the socio-cultural environment that was reported about is the role of (extended) family especially that of parents in influencing NTS' decisions to go back to school. The NTS' desire to fulfil their parents' wishes for them to obtain education is

perceived as an obligation of obedience and service towards them amidst other possible alternatives to education, such as marriage:

My father wanted me to study when I got married ... he would say my child I have nothing to give you, but you study, so when I got married I saw I had made a problem, I didn't satisfy my dad, I kept it at heart, it was bothering me a lot, actually that thing is the one that drove me to go back to school. (Graduate—Information Technology)

Still as part of socio-cultural influence, providing good care and setting a good example for own children and others in society was found to be part of the NTS motivation experiences for university. One of the IT graduates narrated his motivational desire of creating a better life for his future children '... even at that age I would think of my future, what my kids would think of me, what can I put before my kids ...' Another participant mentioned the obligations she felt to her siblings and others in society as the reason she went to university:

I wanted to motivate others; the public, my relatives, my sisters, I would become an example to them that since our sister is doing this and this, let's also at least struggle hard; because now, my young sister—she is in second year. (3<sup>rd</sup> year NTS—Information Technology)

#### 4.2. At entry to university

NTS lacked sufficient information about the courses they applied for at the time of entry to university, as illustrated below:

... at least I needed before maybe I applied for this course, before I start doing, maybe before a student starts a course, I would expect to have some kind of guidance about what someone is going to do, the expectations. (3<sup>rd</sup> year NTS—Information Systems)

Career guidance was generally perceived as ad hoc, haphazard and largely accessed through social network sources such as siblings already at university, short course instructors, friends, and parents and less from the formal university structures. As a result some NTS had their study choices taken based not on interest or societal needs per se but more on society pressure and convenience in the form of fees to be paid, sponsorship, study time, cut-off points, among others. Some of the consequences included dropping out because of losing interest along the way and failing to connect the chosen study choices with their dreams and aspirations. In the excerpts below we narrate in part the story of an NTS who, due to poor guidance received after high school, ended up enrolling on a degree programme that was never part of his dream:

After high school

I was advised by my sisters that it is better you join Makerere, but if you know that the courses you wanted are not worth your points, what you should [do] at least apply for five courses, then the last chance they give you—the 6th choice, put there a diploma for purposes of getting into what, Makerere—into the university ... it's better they admit you on a diploma programme, you do a diploma and after you apply to do a degree, to upgrade. So the diploma I put there, it was, okay I didn't like the diploma although they admitted me to Makerere ...

At entry to degree

I chose IS [Information Systems], it was due to the guideline of our instructor, first of all since when we are applying we are many and we have to choose only one course on our form ... He

told us that "since IS is a new programme don't go in for IT because it will have more applicants" ...

In the end

... the course I was doing, okay, I was not expecting it to be as hard as I found it, but since it was not part of my future as in future aspirations, dreams, I had this in mind that however much I do it, I will cross to business ... (2<sup>nd</sup> year dropout—Information Systems)

#### 4.3. During their stay at university

Time was one of the main challenges of NTS during their study at the university. This was mainly evident in the narratives of NTS who combine their studies with other major life obligations such as work. Being aware of their circumstances, they, for example, intentionally chose to apply and study on the evening programme. However, they indicated that scheduling of lectures did not take this planning into consideration:

We experience a lot of problems when it comes to that area because our work mainly ends at five o'clock, so from five we have to get into the transport means to the university. According to the timetable for the university the lectures begin at five [o'clock] so by the time you leave work and reach here, we always find lectures have already started. (Workshop Proceedings, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2013)

One other challenge related to time was the difficulty NTS face in accessing administrative services especially for students who study on the evening programme, since official working time for university administrative staff is between eight and five o'clock. This was found to affect access to many of the administrative offices such as the registry and finance, and facilities such as libraries and computer laboratories. This they said caused them lots of inconveniences; at times forcing them to craft unhealthy survival strategies, and inhibiting their desire for personal study and research, which in turn constrained their knowledge and practical skills in learning.

For the working non-traditional students, their other main challenge, in addition to time constraint, had to do with the way their employers perceive their return to university. Participants reported that they preferred to study 'under cover' because of fear of the likely repercussions ranging from increased working hours and workloads, transfers to upcountry work stations and in some worst scenarios expulsion from the job as was the case with the participant who said:

When I went to 3rd year actually they [employers] came to know that I had applied at Makerere [University] ... because by then we had uniforms and whenever it was time for me to go to class, I would put it off and then put on a T-shirt ... so after realising it, I was discontinued from work ... at first I was given half pay for four or three months and then they fired me. (Graduate—Information Technology)

One other aspect that came out of the participants' narratives was that their (extended) family provides them great support in different aspects related to their schooling project e.g. career guidance, transport, tuition and other fees, accommodation, settling family disputes, child care, job market access, moral support, etcetera. However, in some situations the opposite was true e.g. some of the married and single parents faced resistance and lacked support from their spouses, which gave them emotional stress and in some cases resulted into domestic violence and loss of marriages, e.g.

I got some challenges when I was studying, my husband had now pulled out, he didn't want me to study again, so he disturbed me a lot, so domestic violence came ... seriously he would beat me, I even have a scar ... (Graduate—Information Technology)

#### 4.4. After university

The graduate interviewees reported both positive and negative experiences where, for some, university education had added value and brought them joy not only as individuals but even their families and society at large, as one of them shared:

I can't imagine, like when I go back to the village—the whole hill from down to top, it's only me with a degree even if I didn't consider my family alone, but that village ... they have named me their lawyer and yet I didn't study law. (Graduate—Information Technology).

In as far as career opportunities are concerned, some participants had positive job experiences to tell back home. The success factors included luck, voluntarism, and social networks drawn from their families and friends, but also created at their former internship organisations. Yet for others, it was because of their past diploma experiences, e.g.

... well there is no doubt luck was there yes, but then the diploma I had, the experience I had gotten from the diploma really gave me an edge, remember during bachelors, yes, I was working but it was due to the entry of the diploma. (Graduate—Information Technology)

But for others, their labour market experience had not been as good as anticipated. They have neither had promotions nor obtained better jobs, and have had to turn to self-employment as the next best alternative:

I am still the same ... yes the money might have changed because of the years of experience ... [but] same entry scale ... I have done several interviews, I think I have done more than ten interviews with X (name of employer organisation) after the degree, ... [and] outside X, I think I am about to cease to apply because I have applied several times; imagine I am 33, no work experience in computers other than what I know, so it's also tormenting me ... right now much as it's not related to IT, I deal in preservatives of hides and skins ... For my future, sometimes anyway I still dream of coming back for more computer courses (Graduate—Computer Science).

Self-employment and going back for further studies were two important future plan themes that ran through all the participants' narratives including those who were still studying and who had failed to get tangible economic benefits from their bachelor's degree as is the narrative above. One of the participants concluded 'it was no longer safe to have only a bachelor's degree'.

## 5. Conceptual model for guidance of empirical research on participation of NTS in SSA

In our effort of contributing to the conceptual debates on widening participation in higher education, we draw from the participation realities of NTS at Makerere University in Section 4 above, to elaborate in detail some important social factors that require attention when researching the participation realities and challenges of NTS in SSA, and Africa as a whole.

### 5.1. Collectivism

From the experiences and lived realities of NTS discussed in Section 4, it is evident that the socio-cultural context is very crucial as it tends to play a big role in the decisions they make. It is therefore important to understand that within the SSA context, choices of individuals are strongly related to choices of the collective (Preece, 2013). 'There is nothing like learning by and for self' (Lekoko and Modise, 2011: 15). This means that a life project in the African context is not an individual's but a community's. That is why the success or failure of an individual is often expressed as a collective pride or shame by the community from which that individual comes.

Consequently the impact of socio-cultural factors such as kinship, (extended) family, gender and age on an individual's life in Africa ought not to be underestimated (Mbiti, 1975, 1989). This is because in Africa a person never existed as an individual entity but as part of a whole (Lekoko and Modise, 2011), as illustrated by such African beliefs as 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, 1975: 108). And because an individual does not exist alone, he is expected to play a role in the interdependence of existence where both individuals and communities have obligations to one another, including the dead and the yet-to-be-born (Mbiti, 1989). The parent, spouse, sibling, (unborn) child, dead or living relatives and the larger society can directly or indirectly be part of an individual's life, and play a role in it. The learner's success may thus be attributed to the entire situation within which she/he learns and lives (Lekoko and Modise, 2011) and may be shared communally in such eulogies as 'our degree' 'our child', 'our own'. This also extends and manifests throughout the individual's life, who then becomes a de-facto representative of his community or 'his people', 'my people' in all forums. This strand of thought is so strong that some African scholars like Lekoko and Modise (2011) have come to distinguish the usage of the notions We and I when referring to the self, with emphasis that the 'We' concept is best suited for the African context and the 'I' concept to the Western context where an individual is viewed as a separate entity (Preece, 2013).

However, it's important to note that the new demands unleashed by the forces of globalisation have had mixed outcomes for the collectivistic nature of the African society (Giddens, 2009). Globalisation is penetrating the collective cultures in contemporary society through the power of consumerism and global capitalism (Jarvis, 2007; Zeelen, 2015). The opportunities to exercise individualism that were previously denied are coming out more easily, individual obligations to (extended) family are diminishing and new patterns of identity are developing (Giddens, 2009). As a result, things are getting intertwined in an emerging hybrid system.

### 5.2. Large informal labour markets

Most countries in SSA are characterised by a large non-formal economy with limited opportunities for white-collar jobs that most graduates envisage to get upon completing higher education (Minnis, 2006). As a matter of fact youth unemployment rates in Africa are alarming (Nafukho, 1998; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2012; Zeelen, 2012). For instance in 2013, Uganda had an estimated 83% rate of youth unemployment (African Development Bank [AFDB], 2013) and some of these are university graduates (Nuwagaba, 2012). Yet at the same time, a good number of students still [struggle to] join university, because they are motivated more with the goals of social mobility and obtaining status rather than with the intrinsic motivation and capabilities for academic knowledge (Minnis, 2006). They are more motivated with what Bourdieu would term

as *symbolic capital* rather than *cultural capital* (Zeelen, 2012, p. 163—italics in original). This is because, although higher education qualifications promise higher economic benefits across the world, in SSA the higher education craze is greater due to the importance it gained in the post-colonial period over other forms of education (Openjuru, 2010). Replacing of the colonial expertise with the local elite gave higher education higher prestige and price. This idea still persists in the memory of the people to date (Tukundane, 2014).

The point of interest for discussion here therefore would be to look into the position of higher education within the education system as a whole, vis-à-vis the wider spectrum of talents of learners and societal needs and opportunities. Such ventures as entrepreneurship (Nafukho, 1998) and social enterprise/entrepreneurship (Spear, 2006; Thompson and Doherty, 2006) would be viable possibilities to consider in the developing context. There is also need to tap into opportunities such as technical and agricultural streams of education which go beyond academic capabilities but are closer to the realities in SSA economies and practical in improving the living conditions there in (Zeelen, 2012, 2015). This would mitigate the stigmatisation accorded to those who follow other tracks of education, whether by choice or otherwise.

### 5.3. Socio-cultural norms such as gender and age

It is an established fact that SSA has the lowest enrolment rates and strongest gender disparities and inequalities among all regions of the world (UNESCO, 2003). These gender disparities are in form of both access to school and participation in the learning process, and increase with the level of education such that access to secondary and tertiary education is still limited to a minority. Participation is more often a privilege for boys and young men than for girls and young women. However, if the socio-economic status is higher, it increases chances for both males and females to enrol and study up to higher education levels (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). More so, due to high poverty levels, SSA has the highest repetition rates, and girls repeat classes more often than boys (UNESCO, 2003). This is because poor families heavily depend on labour for girls and yet the predetermined roles and responsibilities assigned to them tend to be more time consuming (Virgi, 2012), but also entrenched in the African patriarchal system where girls are believed to be secondary to boys (Namusisi, 2010).

The backbone of the African patriarchy was the power of elders in society where age groups and rites of passage as the bases of authority, rights and solidarity were very important (Therborn, 2006). In such a setup children had obligations of respect and obedience to their parents and other older people (Mbiti, 1975). Defiance to elders was a pervasive norm (Therborn, 2006). As such, institutions need to be aware of these power relations and dynamics in the worlds of NTS because power plays a role in the way NTS perceive themselves within the institution. Especially in the African context NTS may have inferior feelings in relation to other students, lecturers, professors, and administrators, for being in institutions originally designed to serve the young traditional students (Kasworm, 2010). Or they may distance themselves from the formalised status of the learner such as that of student (Crossan et al., 2003) and expect to be treated with respect (Openjuru, 2011), in consideration of the power they enjoy at work and at home or as generally determined culturally in the wider society.

## 6. Possible contributions of the capability approach

From the core elements of our conceptual model developed in Section 5, we discuss Sen Amartya's capability approach as the most insightful in providing a framework within which to understand the participation realities of NTS in SSA. But first,

we analyse the lessons developing countries can draw from SSM and critique the way SSM conceptualises participation, using a developing context lens.

### 6.1. SSM—What works/does not work in SSA and why?

From the participants' narratives in Section 4, we noted that some of the issues raised rhyme well with SSM since they require intervention at institutional level, both in terms of policy and practice; e.g. lack of institutionalised channels for career guidance at entry, scheduling of classes at times that collide with working hours, and early closure of offices which makes access to administrative services difficult for the evening students. However, we equally noted that quite many of the other issues raised are entrenched within the outside environment of the institution from which NTS come such as the family and work environments, and the perceptions, opportunities and socio-cultural aspects of the Ugandan society. Examples include the influence of gender and (extended) family in participation decisions of NTS, lack of support for the working students by employers, the social status and prestige motivation goals for joining university, and the society perceptions of university education. The implication here is that in addition to improving the inside environment of the institution as emphasised in SSM, it is equally important to deeply look into the *outside* environment of the institution from which NTS come, and *how* it impacts on their positioning and functioning within institutions of learning.

From the lifelong learning perspective however, we argue that widening participation and access in higher education should not only be about improving the conditions within and outside the institution's environment, but should also look at the functions of higher education in a broader sense (Van der Veen and Preece, 2005; Zeelen, 2012), especially in relation to the labour market terrain. This would mean going beyond the functionalist perspective of higher education, so as to give space for the challenges and opportunities people have in their environments, and opening up structures and creating opportunities for (lifelong) learners. For instance, taking into consideration the high unemployment rates for graduates in developing economies (Nuwagaba, 2012; Ponge, 2013), we argue that the functionalist perspective of higher education that is embedded in the human capital approach and implied in SSM is limited in this context. Our call is to promote approaches that go beyond the economic purposes of education that is core to the human capital approach.

The conceptualisation of education from a human capital approach was pioneered in the 1960s by a group of economists led by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz (Schultz, 1963). The theory starts from the main idea that people can invest in educational activities with the aim of increasing their productivity and skills thereby leading to higher wage earnings. Through knowledge and skills acquisition there are individual gains like being able to find a job; and collective gains, such as achieving economic growth due to existence of an educated labour force in the economy. In this approach, education fulfils both the personal and the collective instrumental economic roles of education, with human beings as the important production factor in the economic development efforts (Robeyns, 2006).

This approach however has been criticised for being overly economic—blocking out intrinsic motivations and other dimensions of life such as cultural and social norms; and being entirely instrumental thereby leaving out the non-instrumental values of education. It cannot account for such choices as studying to obtain knowledge for its own sake or choosing to go to university just to meet society's expectations or for social purposes such as that of having a well-educated population and active citizenry (Walker, 2010), unless there are economic prospects to this (Robeyns, 2006).

Moreover it has also failed to account for the growing gap between people's increasing learning efforts and knowledge base and the diminishing number of commensurate jobs, especially in developing nations (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008). Its long-held assumption of a fit-in between formal education credentials and the labour market needs (Walters, 2004) is being challenged. The unpredictability and dynamic nature of the labour market needs (Jarvis, 2007) manifested in a weak connection between formal educational credentials and skills required on the job cannot be overemphasised (Ponge, 2013; Nuwagaba, 2012). As such, we cannot afford to ignore the inclusion of intrinsic and non-instrumental purposes of education in the human development efforts of developing countries.

## 6.2. Why the capability approach for SSA?

The capability approach is 'a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society' (Robeyns, 2006: 78). This approach was advanced by Amartya Sen in the 1980s as an additional and cumulative approach to the human capital theory (Sen, 1997). In the next paragraphs we present our justifications for the capability approach.

### 6.2.1. Recognises different roles of education

Through recognising that there is more to education than human capital, Sen broadened the conceptualisation of the purpose of education as going beyond economic values of life to also include social norms and values of human beings such as their social capital. Walker resonates that in the capability approach, 'human development focuses on what people are actually able to be and do, personally and in comparison to others; on their reflective, informed choices of ways of living that they deem important and valuable; and, the self-determination of their ends and values in life' (Walker, 2010, p. 898). Whereas education in the human capital approach is important as a means to developing human resources and agency for economic ends, in the capability approach, emphasis is extended to the value of intrinsic ends, such that 'the benefits of education thus exceed its role as human capital in commodity production' (Sen, 2001: 294). From the capability approach perspective therefore the purpose of education is for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons (Drèze and Sen, 2002; Unterhalter, 2003). To say that education has an intrinsic value in life means that attention is being paid to what people are able to do (Du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014) with that education. In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa where graduate unemployment is a lived reality, it would be important for graduates to be able, and enabled to venture into alternatives for formal employment such as entrepreneurship (Nafukho, 1998) and social enterprise/entrepreneurship (Thompson and Doherty, 2006; Spear, 2006). Besides the expanded roles of education that the capability approach offers over the human capital approach, there are other advantages associated with it concerning its suitability as a framework to explain participation realities of NTS in university education in SSA.

### 6.2.2. Recognises human diversity and freedom of choice

The capability approach acknowledges the barriers that disadvantaged populations have in accessing the resources and opportunities at their disposal. This is because it acknowledges human diversity by focusing on plurality of functionings and capabilities as important evaluative spaces, and stressing personal and socio-environmental conversion factors that make possible the conversion of commodities into functionings (Robeyns, 2005). This perspective is very important in the case of NTS given both the

formal access and (especially) the epistemological access (Morrow, 2007) constraints in higher education for this group of students, and the institutions embedded within the socio-cultural context of the African society. We use some key notions of the capability approach; means and ends, functionings and capabilities; and conversion factors to elaborate further on these issues.

Means such as goods and services (commodities) are not ends in themselves unless they possess characteristics that can enable a functioning (Robeyns, 2005). Functionings are 'beings and doings' of a person (Sen, 2000: 75). Capabilities on the other hand are the real opportunities people have to achieve those functionings (Robeyns, 2006). Sen's understanding of capabilities is also in form of agency freedom. In this sense, the capability approach promotes human beings as beings with freedom to be and do what they value (Sen, 2001), which further implies that individuals have the freedom and opportunity to convert whatever resources at their disposal into achievements or outcomes of different kinds (Tikly and Barrett, 2011), which they value. However, the ability to convert commodities or their characteristics into functionings is dependent on conversion factors. There are three conversion factors which can encourage or inhibit the transformation of characteristics into functionings. These factors are: (a) personal; (b) social; and (c) environmental (Sen, 2000; Robeyns, 2005).

Personal conversion factors are those factors internal to the person which influence how he or she can convert the characteristics of a commodity into a functioning e.g. one's physical condition, metabolism, sex, reading skills or intelligence. A person owning a car or a bicycle may not convert it into the functioning of mobility if he or she has never learned to drive or cycle. Social conversion factors derive from the society in which one lives. Examples include government policies, social norms and practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies or power relations such as gender, class, race or caste. In a society where gendered cultural norms prohibit participation of women in higher education, an open access system may not be converted into the functioning of enrolling at university for women in such a society. Or in a society where higher education is perceived to be a privilege for full-time students, participation and integration of working students is more likely to be constrained even when they have been given formal access to university. Environmental factors are factors which emerge from the physical or built environment in which one lives like climate, geographical location and infrastructural facilities. Inaccessible roads for example may hinder the functioning of schooling for children of farmers in rural areas who despite having the commodities to trade cannot convert them into school fees due to failure to access markets.

### 6.2.3. Recognises the social context and role of institutions

Clearly it is very possible that opportunities may be available, but cannot be accessed or responded to because of the prevailing circumstances in which the person seeking to gain those opportunities is situated. For instance, an NTS may have the opportunity of joining university but fails to, or joins and gets constrained participation because of family and work obligations/environments and societal perceptions, norms and practices. The inability to access or benefit from the available opportunities is also dependent on the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning. If this NTS had supportive policies at the workplace/university or could get a supportive environment to manage (extended) family care responsibilities, the degree of converting the resource of formal access into a functioning of active participation would be higher. The most important point we derive from these illustrations therefore is that the commodities are only a means and not ends in achievement of functionings. Yet ends are what have intrinsic importance in achieving the goals of increased well-being, justice and development (Robeyns, 2005).

Consequently, Robeyns emphasises the need to know more details about the person and the circumstances in which he or she is living because it is these that influence the choices people make from the capability set.

Sen (2000) further acknowledges that a person's freedom to convert resources into functionings is dependent upon the social, political and economic opportunities that are available and the manner in which people respond to those opportunities. Achievement of capabilities therefore can be understood against the constraints that exist in society. These constraints occur in a social context and are often of institutional nature (Nambiar, 2013). This means the extent of an individual's participation in his or her society can be limited or facilitated by the prevailing institutions. We use institutions here to mean 'rules of the game in a society or ... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction' (North, 1990: 3). According to North, these institutions provide structure to everyday life. Sen concurs with North acknowledging that an individual lives and operates within a social setting. Sen enunciates the importance of institutions when he notes 'Individuals live and operate in a world of institutions. Our opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function' (Sen, 2000: 142). These institutions make it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves and which would sometimes lead to what that individual values to be and to do. Nambiar (2013) argues that institutions play a blatant role in constraining achievement of capabilities. Rather than claiming that the freedom of agency in individuals is constrained by the available opportunities, it would be more prudent to lay that claim on institutions which shape societies. Our proposed conceptual model in this paper gives examples of institutions that shape everyday life operations in the Ugandan society. These include: collectivism that is served by social-cultural factors such as kinship and (extended) family; the large informal labour markets which constrain the employment prospects of university graduates and the socio-cultural norms and traditions based on age and gender.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to use the participation model developed by Schuetze and Slowey (SSM) for developed countries where a lot of research has already been done on the subject of this study, to give directions on what kind of conceptual model and theoretical approach would suit the participation needs of NTS from a developing context. The article has shown that SSM is an important model, but with limitations in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa because the realities therein as drawn from the empirical illustrations of lived realities of NTS in Uganda show that participation involves some features excluded by SSM. From these extended features we have suggested a conceptual model involving ingredients of collectivism, large informal labour markets, and socio-cultural norms as a guide for empirical research on participation of NTS in higher education in SSA.

In terms of the theoretical considerations, we have made a case for the capability approach as one that can adequately take care of the elements raised in the model. Its ability to go beyond the economic values of education to include the intrinsic values and locating an individual into a social context with rules and norms, brings to the fore a better understanding of the participation realities of NTS in SSA. Its acknowledgement of the barriers for disadvantaged populations cannot be understated. It is not only concerned with widening access for different groups and creating opportunities for achieving development, but also questions how educational outcomes are meaningful to the learner, and to his or her society. In this context, we call upon universities, governments and societies to make reflections on how best they can enable

learners to gain knowledge and skills for maximising their freedoms as job-seekers and creators, and for their development as individuals and social beings in their communities.

## Disclosure statement

We are submitting this manuscript exclusively for academic purposes. The corresponding author is a PhD student at the University of Groningen and the two co-authors are her supervisors. The publication is a partial requirement for a PhD study programme at the University of Groningen. We hereby declare no conflict of interest whatsoever.

## Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Netherlands organization for international cooperation in higher education—NUFFIC under Grant NFP-PhD. 12/250. We would like to thank anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and feedback on this article.

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