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## A response to Simpson and Hope's 'From policy to practice: Measuring success in widening participation'

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# A response to Simpson and Hope's 'From policy to practice: Measuring success in widening participation'

Dear editor,

In their recent commentary, Simpson and Hope highlight the importance of measuring the success of widening participation policies but also recognise the challenge that is inherent in the choice of appropriate indicators.<sup>1</sup> The major challenge is that each student has their own unique range of different needs and that there is an imperative for policymakers and medical schools to consider how future measures of success can encompass these needs.<sup>1</sup>

We have also grappled with similar concerns, and our current research is being informed by Sen's capability approach. The capability approach was first proposed by Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences and Harvard professor, in response to the dilemma of how to design and evaluate international community development projects.<sup>2</sup> The predominant approach had been to provide a 'one size fits all' intervention for the development of a community, but Sen recognised the moral and practical importance of the individual, and their agency, to make choices about what they considered to be the important and valued outcomes in their lives. He considered that this individual capability of having the opportunity to make valued choices was essential for ensuring social justice. Importantly, Sen also highlighted the importance of measuring the extent to which an individual's chosen valued outcomes could be achieved and also the identification of the conversion factors that enabled and constrained the individual in making their choice and achieving their choice.

The potential for adapting Sen's capability approach as a useful lens to view the design and evaluation of medical education interventions has been discussed, with the incorporation of insights from the wider field of education.<sup>3</sup> Our experience suggests that Sen's capability approach can offer a useful lens for measuring the success of widening participation policies by measuring the extent to which an individual student can have both the opportunity to choose and achieve their valued outcomes, such as having a sense of belonging and respect for their previous life-experiences. In addition, there can be identification of the various systemic conversion factors that influence this process.

We consider that Sen's capability approach can provide the necessary small-level of granularity for measuring the success of widening participation policies and can complement other indicators, such as retention rates or academic scores. This personalised evaluation perspective also provides the essential social justice focus to the

measurement process,<sup>4</sup> which is aligned to the social justice endeavour of widening participation.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**John Sandars:** Conceptualization; writing - original draft. **Pirashanthie Vivekananda-Schmidt:** Writing - original draft. **Lopa Husain:** Writing - original draft. **Peter Leadbetter:** Writing - original draft.


## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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