

"I feel like I have a disadvantage": How Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Students Make the Decision to Study at a Prestigious University. *Studies in Higher Education*
O'Sullivan, K., Robson, J., Winters, N. (2018)

Abstract

This paper presents findings from an interpretative phenomenological analysis with 20 students from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds who were accepted onto a Foundation Year in Oxford University in the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years. We suggest that access and university decision-making be framed in terms of student agency, based on our findings of four key factors that influence student decision-making when applying to a prestigious university:

1. The complex relationship students had with their schools and the wider education system;
2. The strong sense of agency they showed in overcoming a range of systemic and structural barriers.
3. Social relationships with family members, peers, and the wider community;
4. The importance of the Foundation Year model in supporting transitions to the university

Through discussion of the nuanced and complex relationship between these factors, the study highlights the importance of reconceptualising widening participation in terms of structure and agency as well as aspiration and attainment. This places an imperative upon prestigious institutions to gain a deeper understanding of the wider education system and its structural limitations and shape their widening participation strategies accordingly: providing access programmes that offer students bridging capital in a way that empowers them to fully engage with the institution; adapt admissions policies more radically to take structural limitations into account more fully; and work more closely in partnership with stakeholders in the wider education system to ensure all schools have the cultural capital to support students' aspirations and applications.

Introduction

While the percentage of students entering Higher Education (HE) institutions has steadily increased over the last 20 years, students from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds are still less likely to enter HE than those from more advantaged backgrounds (UCAS, 2015). There are specific communities where educational disadvantage remains significantly higher than national averages, despite targeted initiatives and provisions (HEA, 2016). Furthermore, those from SED groups are less likely to apply to and attend more prestigious institutions (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Perna & Titus, 2004). These socio-economic inequalities are a serious concern as they impact upon individual well-being and economic prospects (Office for Fair Access (OFFA), 2016a; National Access Plan, 2017).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that "the educational norms of those social classes capable of imposing the criteria of evaluation which are the most favorable to their children" (p495) are the ones that prevail and work to exclude the minority classes from attending certain universities (Baker and Brown, 2007). SED students lack access to such forms of cultural capital and so their educational opportunities and outcomes are severely limited (Reay et al. 2005; 2008; 2009; HEFCE, 2015). Furthermore, parents with no family history of HE living in SED areas are more likely to send their children to poorer performing schools (Lupton, 2004; Burgess et al., 2008; Department for Education (DfE), 2014), compared to parents with a history of HE. These schools then act to reinforce cultural capital and social stratification by emphasizing vocational options over university progression, and through the expectations placed on students. It is no surprise then that SED students frequently favour universities that reflect their own experiences and neither consider nor apply to more prestigious institutions (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

Explanations of university choice: a missing link?

However, wider discussion and explanations of university choice by SED students, particularly in terms of decision making in relation to prestigious institutions, are varied. One strand of research asserts that academic achievement and academic confidence explain disparities in university choice between SED students and their more affluent counterparts (Jones & Thomas, 2003; Chowdry, 2014; Coley, 2002; Feinstein, 2003; Burgess et al., 2008; McKnight, 2015). This strand of research contends that university choice is based on students' post-primary educational experiences and attainment (St John et al., 2018), specifically their academic performance and the confidence gained in school. A second strand highlights the impact that state schools have on students deciding whether to apply to prestigious universities. Research in this strand has found that state school teachers are less likely to push their students to apply to Russell group universities (Perez-Adamson and Mercer, 2015). A significant proportion of

teachers report that they do not encourage students to apply to Oxbridge due to a belief that students would not succeed in a prestigious environment and/or that they would be unhappy there because of the cultural differences (Sutton Trust, 2016). Similarly, Perez-Adamson & Mercer (2015) examined how state and private schools prepare students for Cambridge University. They found that private schools generate a sense of entitlement to a Cambridge education and the cultural practices of these private schools were in line with those of Cambridge academic and social practices. The case for state school students was different: they did not see themselves as having the necessary cultural capital to enter the social and educational practices of Oxbridge, stating that this was due to the differences between the practices at Oxbridge and those of their schooling.

What is absent from the above debates is an investigation of the processes that underpin SED students' decisions *to* apply to a prestigious university, including the factors which support admission and the intersectional nature of student decision-making. This paper is a contribution to this gap, building on foundational research on 'bridging capital' (Health, 2009) as a means to facilitate progression to prestigious universities for SED groups. By exploring how SED students' cultural, academic and social experiences impact upon their decision to apply to a prestigious university, we consider how student agency becomes core to the decision making process for SED students on a Foundation Year at Oxford University¹. More specifically, our analysis of the ways in which these factors intersected in complex ways for students, allows for a reconceptualization of access and university decision-making in terms of *student agency*. This moves beyond the traditional dichotomous discourses of widening participation in terms of either aspiration or attainment.

Methodology

The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), a qualitative approach which explores in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds. In this context, rather than attempting to produce an objective statement, IPA techniques were used to examine the participants' lifeworlds and explore their personal experiences and perceptions of the decision making process involved in their HE choices.

Data were collected in two phases and involved twenty students who had been accepted onto a Foundation Year for SED students in a college at Oxford University. The Foundation Year is a pilot scheme which aims to provide teaching and support that will increase the academic confidence and capacity of SED students, enabling them to progress onto degree courses in Oxford University, or other prestigious institutions. In phase 1, we obtained data from four focus groups with the twenty students, five students in each. Ten students participated in September 2016 (cohort 1), and ten participated in September of 2017 (cohort 2). In both years focus groups happened at the beginning of the foundation year.

¹ The Foundation Year provides an extra year of study for students who do not meet the direct entry requirements for a degree and was designed to attract SED students who would not 'normally' apply to Oxbridge.

Phase 2 involved following the first cohort up in the next phase of their education. In November of 2017, nine students from cohort 1, who were at the beginning of their undergraduate degrees, were asked *additional* questions in order to examine their transition from the Foundation Year and to provide the opportunity to reflect back on their HE decision making. These data were gathered through a brief online questionnaire, follow up telephone interviews, and one focus group.

Phase 1

At the start of each year, the students in cohort 1 and cohort 2 were included in four focus groups. Each focus group consisted of five students, was semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The focus groups were conducted in Oxford University. In line with IPA purposive sampling was employed. Students were asked to participate because they had been accepted onto the foundation year in the university and had met the criteria set by the college for SED. As such they represented a group of SED students who both had a desire to attend a prestigious institution and had made the choice to engage with an opportunity that would support them in the application process. Students were initially invited to participate in the research project by email.

All focus groups were led by two facilitators (the authors). Facilitators started the focus group with a vignette which depicted the educational path of two students, one affluent and one from a SED community. Initial questions were posed around the students' observations of the vignettes. Questions were then structured around the supports and barriers students experienced in their education, giving all students the opportunity to provide individual answers to each question and encouraging discussion of any issues.

Phase 2

In November of 2017 the ten students in cohort 1 were sent a short online questionnaire which provided them with an opportunity to reflect back on their decision making processes, the kind of support they felt would have helped them apply to Oxford directly, and the ways in which they experienced transitioning from school to the foundation year and university. These questions emerged from analysis of the 2016 and 2017 focus group data.

Nine students replied. These nine students were then invited to participate in follow up interviews or a focus group. Four students chose to be interviewed individually (interviews were conducted by telephone); four students chose to participate in a focus group. These individual and group interviews examined issues brought up in the questionnaires in more depth, focusing particularly on and students' perceptions of what could support state school students transition to the prestigious university and the impact of the Foundation Year on transition.

Data analysis

In accordance with IPA, the focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed (Smith et al., 2009) and the questionnaire data was collated and added to the transcriptions. Transcriptions were analysed independently by the authors for content and emergent themes, using the NVIVO computer package. Themes and subthemes were coded independently by two researchers, and the results

discussed to reach consensus on the meaning of individual statements, ensuring researcher triangulation. General themes relating to all data were identified, including factors influencing university choice, such as the education system, social influences, intrapersonal factors and transition supports. Within each broad theme, sub-themes emerged and are discussed in the following sections.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with BERA ethical guidelines and ethical approval was given before the start of data collection by the human research ethics committee of the University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University's Central University Research Ethics Committee. Potential participants were given a detailed information sheet on the project and signed a consent form before participating. Data were de-identified before analysis to protect confidentiality and participant privacy.

Findings

Analysis was completed in two parts, the first part highlighted three key interrelated aspects of students' lives that impacted on their decisions to apply to a prestigious university:

- The complex relationship the students had with their schools and the wider education system;
- The strong sense of agency they showed in fighting to overcome a range of systemic and structural barriers;
- Social relationships with family members, peers, and the wider community.

The second part of the analysis, which incorporated the follow up date, highlighted the supports the students perceived would have made their transition to the university easier:

- Structural and institutional support and Knowledge of process and people

Education System and Structure

Within the context of this study, the importance of the secondary school *Education System* and educational structures in which students engaged emerged as a key factor in students' decision making processes. Students described their educational experiences in relation to a set of limiting social and administrative structures that negatively influenced: 1) their aspiration to apply to prestigious institutions; 2) the help and guidance that was available to support their applications; 3) their potential to excel academically and attain top grades; and 4) their confidence to compete in an unequal system.

It was clear from the narrative that students believed their aspiration to apply to prestigious institutions was limited by a lack of educational encouragement in their schools. They expressed views such as not being "challenged enough" and even in some cases completely discouraged from aiming high in terms of university options.

Well, my school, we did have an Oxford-like event, where we had a couple of sessions after school... they (the teachers) were just, like, I think it's a waste of your time if you apply to Oxford you will probably get a rejection...

In many instances this lack of support appeared to be rooted in the structural assumptions of the schools that none of their students would aspire to prestigious universities or be capable of getting in: "It's [applying to prestigious universities] not even asked or pushed for; it's just assumed that no one is applying."

When students did apply to prestigious institutions the majority described a lack of guidance available to them from their schools. For example, several described both peers and themselves having trouble understanding how to write or structure their personal statements for their applications to prestigious universities and reported receiving "no help of any sort" with this. ; "I know a friend of mine, had the grades but because she didn't get that guidance in her personal statement she did not get into them, and I felt she would have if she had that guidance". Other students talked about the supports being offered but not being adequate for the Oxbridge admissions process, or being very late in the process:

My teacher just told me about the foundation year on the day that the application was due in, an hour before it was due in. And it was like "Yeah just do it" and I was like "Okay".

Such institutional habitus may reflect an absence of key cultural capital within schools to support applications to prestigious universities. Without institutional experience and critical knowledge about the application process of prestigious institutions, teachers at the students' schools were unable to support applications appropriately. For example, one student described how she received guidance on writing her personal statement outside school, discovering that for her subject "you need to include a lot of science... not a lot of your extra curricular activities". She described how her school simply did not have this specific knowledge and so couldn't support her: "this kind of guidance, like, I don't think people in my college still know, it's only having talked to other people".

However, even where potentially helpful support was given, the students described feeling unable to take advantage of what was offered because the kinds of support on offer emphasised an institutional attitude that they were not 'Oxbridge ready'. This negatively impacted their confidence and willingness to participate.

"I applied to Oxford for Biomed and my teachers helped me with my BMAT practice cause I had to do an admissions test... they sent me on like a day course, like a crash course... That wasn't helpful... because I wasn't doing the work before that anyway... so I just didn't really bother"

Students felt let down and annoyed by the structural shortcomings of their schools and the lack of guidance and support related to applications to prestigious universities. However, they believed in themselves despite the lack of belief demonstrated by their schools/teachers, but they perceived the lack of guidance

and support as having the potential to affect their chances of success in applying to such institutions and negatively shaping their motivations to do so. Where they did receive useful guidance, it was from sources external to their schools. The Social Ability Foundation was particularly highlighted as having a positive influence. Students said they would not have had an adequate view of their options and would have felt far less encouraged to aim high without this organization and the guidance it provided.

Alongside limitations to aspiration and a lack of support, students also described frustration at structural limitations within their educational experiences that jeopardized their ability to excel academically and attain top grades needed to access prestigious institutions. Teachers were seen as focusing on maximizing the number of students achieving passing grades in exams and offering borderline students the most support. Those students with the potential to excel were seen as not being given adequate support: the teachers “forget about the students who can get to the top”. Some students were so suspicious of their educational systems that they believed that their attainment was unfairly limited in course work in order to meet the grade distribution requirements of exam boards. This mistrust was particularly manifested in a sense of feeling “cheated” even when students were successful in exams or HE applications. Students described feeling that they had succeeded despite their education and that teachers “take credit” for the accomplishments of more academic students despite not having given them attention or support.

Embedded in this mistrust was a perceived sense of inequality in the education system, particularly manifested in the differences between the state and private sectors. All the students viewed themselves as being disadvantaged by their educational experiences and highlighted a range of educational and cultural advantages students from private schools (and more advantaged state schools) had over them. Exam attainment was particularly highlighted, with students emphasizing that the system neglects the inequality of conditions in preparation for exams. At the same time, a perceived lack of structural support in gaining cultural capital made students doubt their academic ability and lose confidence in their ability to successfully navigate the admissions procedures of prestigious institutions.

....I was at a disadvantage (compared to affluent students). I don't have the same skill set because I haven't been groomed the same way... to talk in a proper way, make conversation in a certain way um... just like, in my secondary school, I was never encouraged to read loads of books so I never got into that but um... I feel like I have a disadvantage

Student Agency

While participants described their experiences in the education system in negative terms, embedded within these descriptions was a more complex narrative which highlighted the intersectional nature of their decisions to apply to a prestigious institution. Although students perceived the education system as structurally limiting, the individuals in this study who had applied to a prestigious university had engaged with this system *in a strongly agentic manner*. They had a

perceived need to fight against embedded structures and forge a relationship with structural barriers that ultimately successfully supported their HE decision making process.

Students consistently expressed a sense of having to “go against” their teachers and their schools, having to ‘fight’ the system, and needing ‘determination’ to succeed. For example, one student described how her school was satisfied with a C grade but she had to take the initiative herself to achieve a higher grade: ‘if you’re trying to get a B or an A, that’s up to you’. Another elaborated that he needed to “gather guidance I needed to achieve a higher grade that I needed. [That] was just me... taking the initiative to do that.” Another described forcing his school to provide advanced maths by arguing with the school and ultimately putting together the class himself:

By literally year 12 I asked them and they told me “No”.. because there’s not enough... they said, “If you find more people that are willing to do it, then we will”. So, I found three more people to do it.

The students’ perceived need to fight against the education system and their schools was also rooted in their HE decision making, the application process, and ultimately their HE successes. As described by one student:

“So I strong-armed my way there... I initially applied for Cambridge and my head rejected it and sent it back to me and wrote an email to me saying that “You should lower your standards”... I still said “It’s my choice. I am going to apply anyway. I just want to... I’ll somehow be able to manage myself so I sent it back. It went through. I got an interview in Cambridge and my application was rejected but I had an interview in other universities and my application was accepted there.”

As such, the structural limitations within the students’ education systems highlight the individual agency, autonomy, and ownership of their own learning and academic futures that these students showed to aspire to and apply to a prestigious university. This highlights the complex relationship students have with their education systems and the necessity for a strong sense of agency to defy educational structural norms and expectations in order to support HE-related decision-making. While such agency clearly came from within the students, a number of other factors, as described below, helped support students’ aspirations and determination, shaping this internal agency.

This strong sense of agency was clear even where students described feelings of self-doubt relating to academic ability, cultural capital and whether, on entering higher education, they might feel disadvantaged and lack the skills other students have. As one student stated: “I feel like I have a disadvantage as I don’t have the same skills as them [other students] and that makes me doubt myself even more... I’m still going to go regardless even if it’s unfair”

This agentic pugnacious attitude to adversity, perceptions of systemic inequality, and feelings of self-doubt appeared to underlie all the students’ sense of aspiration and motivation to apply to prestigious HE institutions. For some students having

to battle with their schools and with their teachers helped them become more focused, and strengthened their goals.

“It actually drove me [the teachers negative view]. I just wanted to show that I can. I can make a difference like. I’m not just a nobody. Even if my grades are not good, even if I’m not good academically I can make it. You are no one to judge, I mean you don’t have the right to pre-judge me or be prejudiced against me.”

This agency was often seen as rooted in peer and familial role models and support. The students particularly emphasised the way in which a sense of collective aspiration with peers in the same situation as they were contributed to their individual aspiration in accessing HE. As such they often lamented the low numbers of peers applying to prestigious institutions, particularly in the ‘tough courses’ like medicine. Consequently, such aspiration, motivation and agency were frequently manifested in direct opposition to structural limitations inherent in the students’ educational experiences. They were in a constant tension with the structures of disadvantage in which the students found themselves and can be seen as expressions of determined autonomy to disrupt the assumptions about their potential embedded in the education system.

Social Influences

Analysis highlighted a range of social factors that shaped the students’ decision making process and their capacity for agency and autonomy. These included specific individuals and groups of people, encompassing peers and community role models, and family members. However, these social influences also include the students’ perceptions of how socially inclusive the prestigious institutions are, dominant discourses in the media and society about the institutions and how these might impacts their access.

Peers and Community

Throughout the discussion, students outlined that the presence of community and peer role models was a catalyst for their sense of agency and their capacity to see themselves as part of the prestigious university. Students conveyed that when they witnessed someone in similar circumstances as them achieve a place in a prestigious university, their dreams about HE began to seem like real possibilities. They also mentioned that seeing someone from their school go on to higher education, counteracts the discouraging effect of their educational experience.

“I have a close friend ... she got into Oxford to study and she’s in her second year now and it’s like, with me, I am bit of a dreamer, so I tend to like imagine where I want to be later on in life and I realise like how far I have to go to get there and that kind of motivates me being able to actually see someone that has gone through that”

Another student described the way in which having someone successfully complete the Foundation Year not only impacted on her self-belief and potential

but also shaped the school's view of what might be possible for its students at an institutional level.

One of the previous years, a girl... she applied for the LMH foundation year... So when I heard about the foundation year and found out I was eligible they [the school] gave me a lot of support and interviews and stuff to get in."

For the students having a role model they could relate to was therefore vitally important in shaping their aspirations and empowering them to go against their experiences in schools, providing support for agency and self belief. However, several students described ways in which peers and their wider communities also actively supported them in their choices to apply to prestigious universities. They particularly emphasised that pride from the community in which they lived, communities where very few or no people go on to universities such as Oxford, was and can be very encouraging.

Where I am from like the town that I'm from this is like the first time that they have probably had the contact with Oxford, through me so my church is like really happy.

On the other hand, students described feeling an absence of peer support in their schools especially when applying to difficult to attain courses such as medicine as very few people could relate to their experience and share guidance and tips on the process with them. As described above, the presence of social and cultural capital around admissions to prestigious institutions which rooted in a lack of experience can either foster or facilitate the students sense of agency when it comes to deciding to apply to a prestigious university. In some instances, having a peer who had gone before them had supported their sense of agency and autonomy, whereas when there was no role model there was a stronger sense of fear. In these cases, though, there was often a strong familial support for making the decision to apply.

The Family

Students emphasised the importance of having a role model within the family who is attending or has been through HE. It was clear that students found these family role models encouraging in their pursuit of HE. One student reported feeling inclined towards higher education because both of her parents had attended university. In some cases, there was evidence of a transfer of agentic decision making with a family history of 'going against the grain' and going to HE in spite of circumstances:

"... mum did go to university... despite the fact my granddad didn't really want her to, my grandma said that education is something that nobody can take off of you... it's something that like, when you have it, you have it"

At the same time some students highlighted that their desire to be a role model for younger members of their family was a driving force behind their educational

attainment and their choice to apply to Oxford; “There is a lot of like, younger siblings in my house and I have to set that example for them like If I can do it so can you”.

All the students placed great significance on family support as a key facilitator in helping them aspire to a prestigious university and to feel they had the power to act and be effective within the prestigious university. Students outlined that support, and even sometimes pressure, from parents that “push you” was essential in fostering a sense of perseverance to achieve academic goals.

“The pressure, like, some people will think it’s too much or they’ll say “oh, your parents shouldn’t be doing that” but I personally am quite thankful to them for doing that otherwise I just would have like given up ages ago”

“It’s like a lot of pressure but that’s what has helped me get to this point”

Students believed that their parents and family members really wanted them to succeed as they themselves could not or did not access HE and this drove them to keep trying. This was particularly powerful in difficult times: when faced with rejection, support from parents or family members helped students to overcome the obstacles and continue trying.

Exclusivity in Higher Education

It was clear that students within this study perceived HE institutions such as Oxford or Cambridge as institutions inherently for the upper-middle class and viewed this as obstructive in access. One student referred to Oxford and Cambridge as being “*on another level, like an echelon*”. Another student pointed to the sky when describing Oxbridge, saying it was beyond someone like him:

“Yeah they’re just like the best Uni’s in the world. So, I just didn’t think that I’d get in... well I think, especially for Oxford, It’s like, stereotypically like, I dunno, like an all-boys club. Like it’s just a bit like, you know. It’s like the white middle class people. I just didn’t think I’d get in cause I’m not in that criteria.”

Nonetheless, it was posited by some that perception of class exclusion was a mental barrier rather than an actual barrier in accessing HE and something they had to overcome personally

“... that was kind of its reputation.... that’s how it was put over to me so you know, I am just trying to get past that... I mean even if it is a barrier that’s not there, ... it’s part of the mind set”

Supporting Student Transition

As described above, students emphasised the inadequacy of support they received for the admissions and interview process. Having experienced the full process, with support and guidance from the tutors during their time on the Foundation Year, the students who had completed the Foundation Year saw first-hand how

the guidance from their schools lacked the content to support a successful application.

I was under the impression that Oxford interviews just consist of abstract questions which is not the case...it should be made clear that one should do their A level (subject) revision before the interview so they have something to start the answering of the question with

Students reiterated their points from the first stage of data collection stating that the advice for the interview process was inadequate. They suggested that their state schools should be supported to provide proper guidance in terms of written work and the interview process.

Using the knowledge gained from the Foundation Year, students reflected that their schools provided the university with very generic references, which did not help their case and did not make clear the impact their educational backgrounds had on their overall grades:

They wrote a very generic reference which did not highlight the context in which I achieved my grades. It was a very basic and simple reference. So in turn, Oxford does not know how much my schooling differed from others. Sure they have the pass rate and that sort of data, but the reference could have been an opportunity to explain deeper the actual implications of this.

The students also described gaining an awareness of how little the university understood the impact that coming from a low SED community can have on student outcomes. The students appeared to feel they needed support in integrating into the wider university beyond the Foundation Year and they suggested that the 'normal' Oxford students should also be informed about the challenges SED students face. One student talked about feeling different from other students and feeling like those students did not understand the extra support that he was receiving and why he was receiving it. He said that if students and staff knew the differences between his educational experiences and those of other students at Oxford, and the challenges that SED can place on educational outcomes, it would have helped his transition to the prestigious environment.

All of the students said that being connected to someone who had successfully gone through the Oxbridge application process would have helped their transition to the prestigious environment. One student said that a student shadowing scheme would have helped them to fit in, another student said that "having an Oxford representative or point of reference for the state schools that don't typically send people to Oxbridge" would have been helpful and supported their transition.

Supporting Transitions - The Foundation Year

The data, particularly the data from phase 2, suggested that, for the students involved in this study, the existence of the Foundation Year itself played a significant role in their decision making process. It offered them not just a pathway

to the university in pragmatic terms, but was seen as a form of bridging capital that would enable them to participate in the university in a similar way to their direct entry peers. The existence of this opportunity gave the students the confidence and self belief to engage with the university. This was borne out in the follow up data, which highlighted the impact that the Foundation Year had on student transition and how the process of being embedded in the tutorial system had a pivotal impact upon students' sense of academic confidence. Students referenced the importance of the new relationships with academic staff and how the support and nature of the relationship had acted as a bridge between their former, more doubtful academic self, to their newer, more confident autonomous self. A student states;

"I feel so much more confident in the way that I can just go up to my tutors and professors and ask them any questions even though it might be a stupid question... and I know that even though I won't have the same tutors or professors... I can still go to the previous ones if I am struggling and I know how to talk to them about my problems, I know how like to write an essay, I know the things I can improve on so just like I am more confident about my academic side than anything else."

The students described the effect that having someone from within the academic staff believe in them and support them and how this transformed their sense of belief and shielded them against feelings of being unworthy or not as good as the 'other' students;

"Everyone else has got A stars and As and I don't so I already felt really really scared and nervous and I was contemplating whether I should come or not... the people on my course have been doing (subject) since they were like eight years old...and I have nothing like...I was coming in on no knowledge whatsoever... so that was another thing that was stressing me out like oh my God, they are on a completely different level to me but my tutors have been so good to me and they understand that I have nothing and they have been really, really good and reassuring"

For some students, the effect of having someone being supportive who was considered high status within the structure of the institution was transformative, particularly when compared with their previous educational experience. For example, one student described how their relationship with a tutor who was willing to tell them they were good enough helped get them through the doubtful periods:

At times I do feel like maybe I am not doing it completely right and I'm making mistakes and these brilliant tutors are probably thinking oh what kind of stupid mistakes is she making... but they're really reassuring so like that really helps... it just gives you a confidence boost almost. Just to know that someone of that caliber is saying that you are okay"

Discussion

This paper sought to understand the intersectional nature of the factors which impact upon SED students' decision to apply to a prestigious university and

particularly highlights the ways in which student agency shaped the decision making process. The findings highlight the complex relationship that exists between students' experiences in school, their social relationships and the variety of intrapersonal factors that influenced their decision making process. Participants demonstrated the capacity to overcome significant barriers *in spite of* their education system. This emerged most strongly in the tension between the institutional habitus of this system (where structural limitations shaped teachers' expectations, support, the range of available opportunities, and students' decision making) and students' own individual aspirations, motivations and agency. While it is important to note that the structural limitations inherent in the state school system have been evidenced elsewhere (e.g. Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2015) our findings add a layer of understanding that showcases the narratives of students who have made the *conscious choice* to apply to a prestigious university.

In doing this, it was clear that there are common structural limitations faced by all state school students. However, from an interpretivist perspective, it is important to highlight that the participants viewed their challenging experiences in schools and the education system as a *manifestation of their disadvantage*. Although universities and foundation years use a variety of measures to assess SED status, the students appeared overtly to root their disadvantaged status in their experiences in school, highlighting an implicit tension between socio-economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage and the implied discourse in the student data that socioeconomic disadvantage shapes and amplifies educational disadvantage. Understanding the complex relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage from the perspectives of all stakeholders is an essential part of the future research agenda for those working in widening participation. Consequently, although the arguments made in this paper are likely to have implications for the whole state sector, we have maintained focus on issues for and perceived by SED students in particular, reflecting the voices of our participants.

The current research, therefore, throws light on the factors which support SED students to take what can be viewed as the 'harder' option and agentically 'fight' against an embedded structure to both aspire to and apply to a prestigious institution. The students that take this harder option are more likely to have a rich support network of family and friends. However, as observed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), a key factor in students aspiring and applying to prestigious institutions is direct experience of such institutions among family and peer groups. Participants in this study particularly highlighted the value of knowing peers from their communities who had not only been successful in applying to Oxbridge but had also been successful in overcoming the same systemic constraints experienced by the participants. As such, the modelling of *both* attainment and agency within students' peer groups was vital in both raising aspirations and developing a similar sense of individual agency and a desire to overcome structural limitations and expectations.

In many ways the students in this study were lucky to have such valuable familial and peer support networks and so, in Bourdieu and Passeron's terms, can be considered 'the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged' (1977: 26). Their

social support networks endowed them with social capital and a form of bridging capital (Putnam 1998) that enabled them to navigate both the social world of the education system in which they engaged (taking an agentically pugnacious approach) and the social world associated with prestigious institutions. This bridging capital enabled the participants in this study to see a route between their education systems and prestigious HE institutions so they could engage with and navigate the application process in a meaningful way.

However, it was clear from the study that in this 'least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged group', such bridging capital was fragile. It hinged on the serendipitous combination of access to inspiring role models within the students' social networks (often only one individual), powerful intrapersonal factors to translate such inspiration into aspiration, motivation and agency, and access to appropriate cultural capital to support an application to a prestigious institution in practical terms. The removal of any one of these factors would clearly have negatively affected students' desire and ability to apply to a prestigious institution. Given the fragility of this combination of factors, this study highlights a need to support all disadvantaged students in the following ways. Firstly, the students perceived a lack of support and low expectations in their schools as being key structural limitations (as similarly found by Perez-Adamson and Mercer, 2016). Schools should, therefore, be encouraged to move beyond what students described as utilitarian models of education that focus on maximizing passing grades. Instead, an ethos should be developed that supports the development of social and cultural capital that enhances higher aspirations and enables students to excel.

Secondly, the study highlights the need for prestigious institutions to ensure that all areas of the education system is empowered with cultural capital and knowledge of the admissions processes to support students' applications in an equitable way. Provision of training to teachers in state schools that focuses on navigating institution-specific application processes, while working in partnership with schools to ensure SED students have access to role models, who have successfully navigated such application processes. Prestigious institutions could also consider harnessing the power of their existing widening participation students, encouraging them to speak to students from state schools; providing guidance on the cultural and educational process which support the application process and progression through the prestigious university system.

The study also highlights the need for prestigious institutions to gain a far deeper understanding of the embedded structural limitations that exist within the education system experienced by SED students. By recognising and understanding these limitations, prestigious HEIs are challenged to engage with both the 'least disadvantaged of the disadvantaged' and the 'most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged' and tailor outreach programmes to all members of these groups. However, understanding the structural limitations also places a challenge upon prestigious institutions to redefine their conceptualisations of potential within the widening participation context, reconsider the support such students need prior to, during and after the application process itself, and radically reconsider the minimum attainment requirements for entry. A considered and evidence-based

focus on the relationship between student agency and education system structures would be a necessary first step in achieving this aim.

By asking SED students to reflect upon what they saw as important in their transition to the prestigious university, this study, provides an alternative to the dominant methods of implementing widening participation. The model of support provided through the Foundation Year tutor system was described as pivotal in moving the students from 'doubtful hopefuls' to academically confident, first year students. These social support networks endowed them with further social capital and a form of bridging capital (Putnam 1998) that enabled them to see themselves as students who belonged in the prestigious environment. Thus, bridging capital was fundamental to the SED students decision to apply to the prestigious university and to their transition to the university itself, making social relationships essential for enriching the social capital available to SED students.

Conclusion

While cultural, academic and social processes impact upon the educational opportunities of all students, there is often little exploration of how these factors intersect to support SED students' decision to apply to a university that is not the 'norm' for their social class. There is also a tendency to ignore the capability set that the students bring to the decision making process. Making the choice to take the road that they value, in spite of obstacles, requires significant agency and self-belief. In the current study, we see that some students can convert their academic and social capital into a decision to 'face the unknown' despite the barriers they have faced. The presence of role models, and family support, seem to be pivotal in this decision, supporting aspiration, motivation and agency even in the face of active discouragement by their schools and a wide range of limiting structures embedded in the education system. Alongside this, the existence of empowering pathways into HE that conceptualise widening participation in a way that emphasises the need for holistic support and bridging capital and actively encourages an agentic approach to education is essential.

However, our findings must be considered with caution; it would be easy to think that, if SED students work harder, persevere enough or believe enough in their own ability, they can successfully navigate the prestigious institution system. It would be easy to say that, with 'skill and will', SED students can flourish in the prestigious environment (Devin, 2013). The current research shows that this can *only* happen in the right context, where student agency is high, defined as the students' freedom to decide and 'the power to act and be effective' (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009, p. 75; Wilson-Strydom, 2012, 2016), a human capability that is overlooked when considering the educational outcomes of SED students. It shows a real need to broaden the focus of widening participation efforts from situational and dispositional barriers to include those created by the broader education system, and the prestigious institutions themselves. In the context of such structural limitations that perpetuate inequalities and progression to prestigious institutions (Tett, 2004; Perez-Adamson and Mercer, 2016), it would be unfair to expect the burden of change to fall solely on the SED student or indeed schools. The study highlights the need for schools and HEI to work in partnership to make changes to ensure that *all* students have the aspiration, motivation and agency to

seriously consider applying to a prestigious institution when making their university choice.

References

Archer, Louise, and Merryn Hutchings. "Bettering Yourself? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21.4 (2000): 555-574.

Baker, Sally., and Brown, B. "Images of excellence: constructions of institutional prestige and reflections in the university choice process." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28.3 (2007): 377-391.

Ball, Stephen, Sheila Macrae, and Meg Maguire. *Choice, pathways and transitions post-16: New youth, new economies in the global city*. Routledge, 2013.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard university press, 1984

Bourdieu, P. with Passeron, J.C. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.

Burgess, Diana J., et al. "The association between perceived discrimination and underutilization of needed medical and mental health care in a multi-ethnic community sample." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 19.3 (2008): 894-911.

Crocker, D. A. & Robeyns, I. (2009) Capability and agency, in: C. Morris (Ed) Amartya Sen (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press), 60–90

Crossick, Geoffrey. "Monographs and open access." *Insights* 29.1 (2016).
Department of Education and Skills. *Annual Report of the Department of Education and Skills 2013*. Dublin, Department of Education and Skills, 2014.

Devlin, Marcia. "Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: Conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* 38.6 (2013): 939-949.

Donnelly, Michael, and Ceryn Evans. "Framing the geographies of higher education participation: Schools, place and national identity." *British Educational Research Journal* 42.1 (2016): 74-92.

Great Britain. Department for Education and Skills (United Kingdom);. "Widening participation in higher education." (2003).

Greenbank, Paul. "Institutional Widening Participation Policy in Higher Education: dealing with the." *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 8.1 (2006): 1-10.

Hannon, C., Faas, D. and O'Sullivan, K. (2017), Widening the educational capabilities of socio-economically disadvantaged students through a model of social and cultural capital development. *Br Educ Res J*, 43: 1225-1245. doi:10.1002/berj.3309

HEA. National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-19. Dublin, Higher Education Authority, 2017.

Heath, Sue, Alison Fuller, and Brenda Johnston. "Chasing shadows: defining network boundaries in qualitative social network analysis." *Qualitative Research* 9.5 (2009): 645-661.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. "It's a Struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education." *Journal of Education Policy* 18.6 (2003): 597-615

Lupton, Mandy. *The learning connection: information literacy and the student experience*. Auslib Press, 2004.

McCaig, Colin, et al. "Closing the gap: understanding the impact of institutional financial support on student success." (2016).

Perez-Adamson, Clara, and Neil Mercer. "How do different types of schools prepare students for life at Cambridge?" *Cambridge Journal of Education* 46.1 (2016): 19-35.

Perna, Laura W., and Marvin A. Titus. "Understanding differences in the choice of college attended: The role of state public policies." *The Review of Higher Education* 27.4 (2004): 501-525.

Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital." *Culture and politics*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000. 223-234.

Reay, Diane, et al. "Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process." *Sociology* 35.4 (2001): 855-874.

Reay, Diane, et al. "Re - invigorating democracy?: White middle class identities and comprehensive schooling." *The Sociological Review* 56.2 (2008): 238-255.

Reay, Diane, Gill Crozier, and John Clayton. "'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities." *Sociology* 43.6 (2009): 1103-1121.

Reay, Diane. "A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework?: emotional capital as a way of understanding mothers' involvement in their children's education?" *The Sociological Review* 48.4 (2000): 568-585.

Reay, Diane. "Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class." *Sociology* 39.5 (2005): 911-928.

Smith, J. A., P. Flowers, and M. Larkin. "Planning an IPA research study." *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. London: SAGE Publications (2009): 40-55.

Sutton Trust. "Teachers' Oxbridge perceptions polling." 2016.

Tett, Lyn. "Mature working-class students in an 'elite' university: Discourses of risk, choice and exclusion." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 36.2 (2004): 252-264.

UCAS. *End of Cycle report 2015*. UCAS Analysis and Research Business Unit, Cheltenham, 2015.

Walker, M. (2008) *Widening participation; widening capability*, *London Review of Education*, 6(3), 267–279.

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2012) *A framework for facilitating the transition from school to university in South Africa: A capabilities approach* (Bloemfontein, University of the Free State).

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2016) *A capabilities list for equitable transitions to university: A top-down and bottom-up approach*, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(2), 145–160.