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Academic identity, confidence and belonging: The role of contextualised admissions and foundation years in higher education

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This article presents a cross-national exploration of responses to widening participation (WP), with a specific focus on the provision of foundation year (FY) programmes and the use of contextualised admissions (CA) in *selective* Irish and UK institutions. There remains a dearth of research on these routes, with little understanding of the characteristics of students who utilise them, of why students use these routes and little knowledge of their effect on students' experiences in university and their overall sense of belonging. A year-long longitudinal comparative case study design examined three alternative entry routes in two selective higher education institutions (HEIs) in England and Ireland: a well-established FY; a newly formed FY; and a CA pathway. Data were collected through a mixed-method approach. Questionnaires and in-depth focus groups were employed at fixed points with participating students in each route. Results indicated that FY students had lower levels of familial educational history and parental occupation. FY students' sense of belonging significantly increased over the year, with students reporting increased confidence and sense of belonging due to the relationships established during the FY. CA students' sense of belonging remained the same, with students reporting feeling different and isolated. Results indicate that while students utilising FYs may be 'more disadvantaged' than CA students, their experiences helped establish a sense of belonging; illustrating the need for diverse WP routes catering to a wide range of needs. Results highlight the importance of providing opportunities to develop social and bridging social capital for all non-traditional students.

Keywords: Access; England; higher education admission; Ireland; selective universities; social class; widening participation

Introduction

Research shows that students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are less likely to enter university, particularly more prestigious institutions, due to various personal, social and academic reasons. The majority of widening participation (WP) work has historically focused on raising low SES students' aspirations to participate

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in higher education (HE) and to apply to prestigious institutions through a variety of outreach programmes and marketing initiatives. Such interventions are primarily focused on students who have already achieved high academic attainment in their schools and so do little to widen participation for those students who do not achieve top grades resulting from structural and social reasons associated with their low SES.

A variety of alternative entry routes are beginning to become established in higher education institutions (HEIs) to bridge this gap, providing low SES students with entry routes based on reduced grades and/or access to supports which target social capital, experience of university life and academic skills. These take two main forms: embedded approaches to contextualised admissions (CA), where admissions decisions are based on understanding applicants' academic attainment in the context of their schools and homes; and through foundation years (FYs), which aim to support student development prior to starting as undergraduates. In practice, these approaches overlap, with FYs often contextualising admissions criteria. However, despite growing policy discourses emphasising the need for CA and FYs (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2016), these kinds of initiatives are under-researched and comparative research on these WP activities both within and across country contexts remains under-explored.

This article examines these issues in detail by presenting a comparative case study of three alternative access routes: a well-established FY; a newly introduced FY; and a CA route. These cases explored the characteristics of students accessing these routes, student perceptions of the routes and how they supported participation in HE. These WP cases span two international contexts: England and Ireland, selected as fruitful comparators as the prestigious university in Ireland used for the case studies has spearheaded both alternative access routes. Their approach is becoming established as the model taken up in many UK WP cases.

Background

In England and Ireland, longitudinal data show the positive effects of participation in higher education (HE), not only in terms of economic status but also health and happiness (McCoy *et al.*, 2010). In recent years the proportion of 17 to 30-year-olds progressing to HE has increased in England from just 5% in 1960 to 49% in 2015/16 (NCIHE, 1997; DfES, 2017) and in Ireland from 20% of young adults during the 1980s to 52% in 2015 (HEA, 2010, 2015). However, growth has only been seen in some quarters and there are growing disparities between those who have access to prestigious universities and those who do not. For example, young people with professional parents are three times more likely to enter HE in the UK compared to those from low SES backgrounds (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). The growing distinction in institutional prestige has further complicated the WP agenda; social groups with historically low participation rates are least well represented in the more prestigious universities. Low SES students are particularly poorly represented in old universities (Boliver, 2011) and especially so in Russell Group universities (Zimdars *et al.*, 2009). Not surprisingly, at least a quarter of the difference in access to prestigious universities in the UK is not explained by academic ability (Jerrim, 2013).

Aspirations and academics. The aspiration strand of WP policy discourse explains differential rates of participation on the basis of attitudinal factors, implying that non-participation is due to lack of expectation or 'low aspirations' (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). In a climate of access agreements in England and performance-related funding indicators in Ireland, universities are expected to take some responsibility for aspiration gaps and offer outreach activities, attempting to raise aspirations of low SES students. The emphasis of these aspiration-raising activities is often to identify the students with the most potential or the 'most gifted' students, and to support them into and through HE. This approach does not seek to improve the educational achievement of target groups, but merely tries to encourage more appropriately qualified pupils from low SES groups to 'aspire' to enter university. This policy approach is known as 'cream-skimming' as it takes the 'most intelligent' students from the low SES community and places them in the 'top' universities (Thomas, 2001), doing nothing to address the societal and structural barriers which limit progression and aspirations (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). According to Thomas (2001), these activities reinforce cultural and socio-economic divisions based on a deficit model of the potential entrant, placing the responsibility for change on the student in a manner similar to 'victim blaming' (Tight, 1998).

Others assert that academic achievement is the primary barrier to HE participation (Chowdry *et al.*, 2013), with large disparities observed between the attainment of low SES students and their more affluent counterparts (McKnight, 2015). This approach frames access to HE in terms of human capital; seeing education reform and curriculum changes as preconditions to improved economic responsiveness and increasing employment opportunities for low SES students (Hannon *et al.*, 2017). Universities currently active in promoting WP under this policy focus are employing activities like subject supports, guidance and learning supports alongside financial supports. However, these generally have little impact on institutional culture (Bowes *et al.*, 2013) and fail to recognise the complex nature of educational disadvantage, running the risk of raising aspirations without actually affecting academic performance (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2017).

While attainment and aspiration definitely contribute to inequalities in HE participation, the underlying reasons for these are varied and complex. Bourdieu's (1984) paradigm of cultural reproduction explains inequalities in student mobility (Donnelly & Evans, 2016), highlighting its intersectional nature. According to this paradigm, each class has a different habitus which determines the possession of core values, practices and beliefs that are played out in behaviour and actions; these are 'internalised, "embodied" social structures … [which] function below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 6), guiding behaviour. Low SES students do not always possess the 'navigational capital' (which refers to the students' ability to navigate the complex and unfamiliar university system) to support progression to HE, and they lack experience of the 'norms' associated with HE (Reay *et al.*, 2009). Social mobility can, however, be facilitated through the acquisition of certain forms of 'social capital', a concept which has begun to gain salience as a means of understanding how low SES students navigate HE, despite facing significant barriers (Hannon *et al.*, 2017; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2017, 2018). While Bourdieu talks about the limits associated with social capital, Putnam's (2000) more contemporary definition provides an

explanation of how social capital can facilitate social mobility. He distinguishes between two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital occurs when people with similar backgrounds enter into relationships and collaborate to achieve shared goals. These associations are inward looking and may reinforce stratification by keeping low SES students bonded to beliefs about where they belong in terms of education (Hardie, 2015; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). Bridging social capital has the potential to forge connections between heterogeneous groups, which promotes social connections and linkages with diverse groups, having the power to provide access to a broad range of 'new' opportunities (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001). Through such capital, people from different backgrounds can connect and social mobility becomes possible. These networks and ties are outward looking and can comprise people from different social classes and identities. Bridging social capital may therefore provide an ideal mechanism to understand how individuals overcome the barriers associated with educational disadvantage. Access to bridging capital is crucial for facilitating progression to HE in low SES groups as it provides access to 'new' forms of capital, whereas bonding capital has the potential to close down opportunities within networks where progression to HE is not the norm (Vaughn *et al.*, 2015; Hannon *et al.*, 2017; Nicholson & Cleland, 2017.

Building bridges; alternative entry routes to HE. Since the late 1990s, there have been several policy changes in both England and Ireland to try to improve access to HE for low SES groups. These are beginning to move away from simplistic explanations of inequality and are considering the complex nature of its causes, recognising that WP activities need to address human, social and cultural capital factors if students are to succeed in HE. The last 10 years have seen a rise in the use of contextualised data and alternative entry routes are becoming a more central feature of national policy, with FYs and CA routes becoming more common in both Ireland and England.

Foundation years. Universities in Ireland and England have developed FY programmes[1] as a way of supporting students to transition into university and to supplement 'attainment gaps'. These are intended for students without the formal entry qualifications for their chosen degree. They are designed to prepare entrants for degree-level study (Rienties *et al.*, 2012). There is greater momentum around university provision of FY programmes in England than Ireland, and currently there are over 700 programmes available through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admission Service), with considerable variation in terms of what they offer and their target student. They have generally taken three directions: provision for international students, provision for the general student population and provision to widen the participation rates of under-represented groups in university. In Ireland, FYs have traditionally been delivered in the university context and have targeted under-represented student groups. Recent WP policy in Ireland has advocated the continued delivery of FYs largely oriented towards young adults and mature students but with a remit to promote links between HE and further education (FE) providers. Unlike in England, application to FY programmes is made directly to the university/HEI. Currently, in Ireland, each of the seven universities run FY programmes for under-represented groups.

FY programmes recognise that the challenges facing under-represented groups in HE are complex, and see the importance of supporting the development of peer relationships, academic skills and sense of belonging in the university. These activities aim to prevent students feeling under-qualified compared to their peers and aim to provide them with access to forms of bridging capital that support transitions and retention within HE (Heil *et al.*, 2014). In Ireland, evidence shows the success of the FY model in terms of student outcomes, with FY retention and graduation statistics reflecting those of direct entry students (>90%) (TCD, 2017). In England, evidence for the FY model is sparse, although some research shows that FY programmes which run in prestigious universities, targeting low SES students, are successful in supporting students to develop the social and cultural capital needed to progress into the prestigious university environment (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018).

Contextualised admissions. The use of contextualised data is on the rise internationally and it varies in its application. For example, a holistic admissions approach is taken in the USA (for a discussion, see Zimdars, 2016), whereby each applicant is looked at individually in relation to all the information provided about or by them, while in England and Ireland the system flags indicators of disadvantage during admissions and provides these students with preferences in terms of interview or grade reduction. Four types of indicators are generally used: individual level, area level, school level and participation in WP programmes. In England the most commonly used type of contextual information is applicants in care/care leaver status, declaration of exceptional circumstances or involvement in WP activity (Boliver *et al.*, 2017). In Ireland, school type, family income and parental occupation are more commonly used. There are key differences between how England and Ireland use contextualised data. In England, A-Level students apply to HE centrally through UCAS. Admissions tutors in individual universities apply the contextualised 'flags'. In some universities contextual applicants are prioritised for a reduced grade offer at one or more grades below the standard offer, while in other universities they are guaranteed an interview. In a 2015 survey of 68 UK universities, 84% said they were using some form of contextualised admissions, but most appeared to use contextual information in a broad sense rather than for reduced grade entry (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2016).

In Ireland the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a national programme which contextualises applicants' admissions data centrally using predefined flags for low SES developed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland. Students who meet specified flags are then considered for degree entry by individual universities on a reduced points offer. The post-secondary terminal examinations result in students' grades is transformed into a points tally which ranges from 0 to 600. All degree courses in public universities have a point requirement for entry, based on demand for the course. The HEAR scheme recognises the impact that low SES has on student attainment by permitting entry to a degree with a 10–15% reduction of the points requirement. This shift in admission has resulted in greater access for students from low SES groupings to HE and growing diversity in the HE system (Byrne *et al.*, 2014).

There is currently a dearth of research into the role that FYs and CA routes play in the broad WP agenda; there is little understanding of the demographic make-up of the students who access these programmes or long-term examination of their impact on student outcomes. The current research aims to extend the existing body of knowledge by examining who is accessing these routes in England and Ireland and how students experience these programmes. It aims to understand what elements of these programmes support low SES students' development and their sense of belonging in HE.

This article will address the following research questions:

1. What is the demographic make-up of students engaging with alternative entry routes and do they differ across groups?
2. What factors influenced students' decision to enter university through an alternative entry route?
3. How do the supports offered by the alternative entry routes influence students' capability to participate in university?
4. Where do alternative entry routes fit within the broader WP agenda?

Methods

A year-long longitudinal comparative case study design was employed, examining three alternative entry routes in two HEIs: a well-established FY at Trinity College Dublin (TCDFY); a newly formed FY at Oxford University (OUFY); and a CA pathway at Trinity College Dublin (TCDCA). The study was undertaken in the 2016–2017 academic year. Data were collected through a multiple methods approach in each case, utilising questionnaires and in-depth focus groups at fixed points across the academic year, administered to participating students in each route.

Participants

Participants consisted of students from each entry route. All students registered on the TCDFY, OUFY and TCDCA routes were invited to participate in completing an online questionnaire: 28 TCDFY, 10 OUFY and 113 TCDCA students initially agreed to participate, with 21 TCDFY, 9 OUFY and 32 TCDCA students completing follow-up questionnaires; 25 students in the TCDFY, 10 in the OUFY and 20 in the TCDCA also completed focus groups at two fixed points in the year. The students were randomly sampled for invitation to participate in the focus groups from the TCDCA group to ensure a representative sample was included.

Questionnaire

Students completed an online questionnaire at the start of the academic year to establish demographic information, levels of academic capital and sense of belonging in the university. At the end of the year, a similar questionnaire was administered online, to investigate students' sense of belonging again and to evaluate the supports provided over the year. Questionnaires were sent out to all students registered on the

TCDFY, OUFY and TCDCA routes: 28 TCDFY, 10 OUFY and 113 TCDCA students completed the survey before the year started, while 21 TCDFY, 9 OUFY and 32 TCDCA students completed the follow-up survey at the end of the academic year. At time point one 100% of the TCDFY and OUFY cohort completed the survey and the TCDFY had a 75% response rate, while the OUFY had a 90% response rate at time point two. The TCDCA group had a 28% response rate.

Measures

Time one. Demographic information was collected, including gender, parental education, family structure and parental job.

Psychological sense of university membership. An adapted version of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (Goodenow, 1993) scale was developed for use. The wording was changed to reflect specific university settings (e.g. TCD or Oxford). This included 18 items with a Likert rating of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

College supports. Students were asked to rate the quality of social, academic, personal and financial supports they received in the last year from the entry route on a scale of 1 = poor to 5 = excellent.

Focus groups. In-depth focus groups were undertaken with students in each route: 25 students in the TCDFY, 10 in the OUFY and 20 in the TCDCA. These took place before the academic year began and at the end. Each focus group had four to five students and was semi-structured, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Groups were led by two facilitators. The focus groups at the start of the year started with a vignette, depicting the educational path of two students, one affluent and one from a low SES community. Initial questions were posed around 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 answers to each question, encouraging discussion of any issues. Focus groups at the end of the year were structured around the themes of students' experiences of university, the challenges and supports they experienced. All students had the opportunity to provide answers to each question. Discussion of any issues was encouraged.

Analysis. Descriptive analysis was performed on demographic data to identify the types of students who access alternative entry routs to HE. A within and between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, examining patterns in sense of belonging over the course of the year. Qualitative data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith *et al.*, 2009), a qualitative approach which explores in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. 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 how the programme they are involved in impacted upon their capacity to participate in HE. In accordance with IPA, the focus

groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed (Smith *et al.*, 2009) and the qualitative questionnaire data were collated and added to the transcriptions. Transcriptions were analysed independently by the authors for content and emergent themes, using the NVIVO computer package. Two researchers coded themes and subthemes independently and the results were 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, subthemes emerged and are discussed. Cross-case analysis was then undertaken to examine the similarities and differences between each of the alternative routes studied.

Results

Structure of alternative entry routes

Trinity College Dublin foundation year. The TCDFY is a year-long programme, which is delivered in one building on the outskirts of the TCD campus. Students are taught together as a class group and generally in the same two small lecture rooms. Students spend little or no time with direct entry students. The course is full time and the academic supports involve core modules of study skills, educational guidance and information technology. Following two weeks of induction classes, students choose the arts/social science (AS) stream or the science (SS) stream. The former includes four introductory courses in a range of AS subjects and mathematics at intermediate or advanced level, the latter involves biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics for science. The cultural and social supports include individualised educational guidance, where students explore the degree courses on offer in TCD and their suitability for them. This includes shadowing of TCDFY alumni in their degree course and taster lectures. Students apply directly through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system in February. The university reserves up to 30% of places for underrepresented groups, which places students in competition for places within their class group and with direct entry students. Most students receive their first preference. The students have access to a wide range of other social and cultural supports; the course coordinator meets all students monthly for updates, they have a financial bursary and can access extra academic support. They have full use of the university library and academic support, and participate in a week-long shadowing of TCDFY graduates in a degree course within TCD. There is a social programme, where students attend social activities and receive mentoring from affluent businesses in Ireland.

Oxford University foundation year. The OUFY is a year-long programme that is embedded within an Oxford college. Students live in the college, housed with direct entry students and have access to the tutoring system that the direct entry students use. There are 16 subjects to choose from, including a range of sciences and humanities, and students must know which degree they wish to progress onto before applying to the FY. Students take a subject-specific course. The students also have group

teaching that includes the core modules of academic writing and preparation for undergraduate study. Students apply through the UCAS system in November and must sit an interview as well as an examination to be considered eligible for the degree course they wish to progress onto. Lectures by guest speakers and educational visits occur throughout the FY and these sessions are shared with undergraduate students.

Contextualised admissions route. The HEAR is a nationwide university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are resident in the Republic of Ireland. The support offered to TCDCA students includes a pre-university programme. Students come into TCD a week before term begins to learn about the college system, meet other HEAR students and acclimatise to university life. TCDCA students receive financial support, can apply for scholarships and have a TCD advisor who is available throughout their degree to provide advice and advocate on their behalf when needed.

Characteristics of students. Analysis of the demographics of student groups indicated similarities in gender distribution and family structure across the three groups. More females are accessing university through the alternative entry routes than males, reflecting national trends in HE entry rates. When considering family structure, the data show that a higher proportion of students entering university through these alternative entry routes are coming from one-parent families in comparison to national averages; for example, in England only 25% of the population are from lone-parent families while 50% of the OUFY group are from lone-parent families. Similarly, in Ireland 18% of all family units are one-parent families (CSO, 2016) while 42% of students in the TCDFY and the TCDCA groups are from one-parent families (Figure 1).

Results indicate that the students utilising the FY had lower levels of capital relating to family history of education; the OUFY and TCDFY students had a higher proportion of parents who had only completed primary education, in comparison to the TCDCA students (Figure 2) and the FY groups had a higher proportion of parents who finished school before age 16, in comparison to the TCDCA students.

The FY students had capital differences relating to parental occupation. The OUFY (15%) and the TCDFY (12%) students had a higher proportion of parents

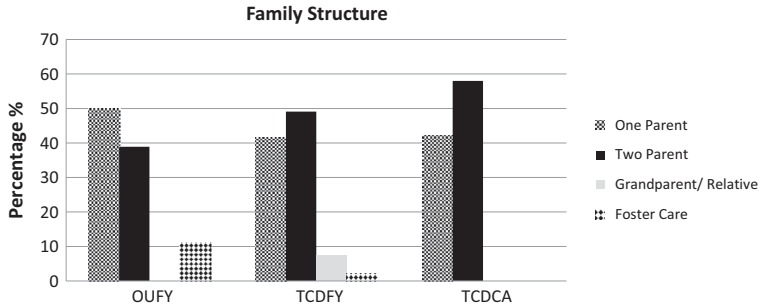

Figure 1. Family structure or primary carer of all three student groups

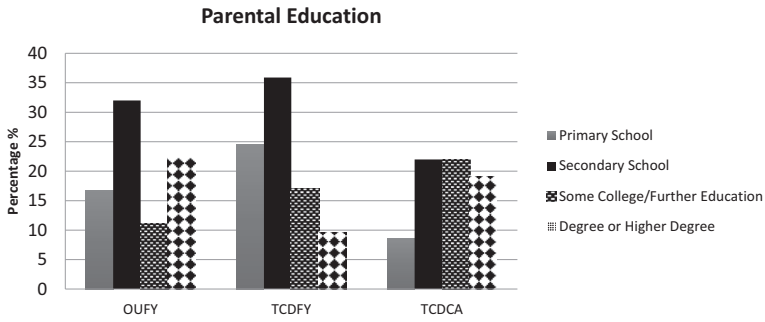

Figure 2. Highest level of parental education of the three student groups

who were unemployed, in comparison to the TCDCA students; whereas the TCDCA students had a higher proportion of parents working in hourly paid jobs, in comparison to the FY groups (Figure 3). The results may suggest that both FYs are accessing students who are 'more disadvantaged' in terms of family history of education and family occupation than those entering through the CA route. There are no higher professional parental jobs across all groups and lower professional jobs are low across the three groups.

Sense of belonging. When considering how students feel they belong when entering university, paired sample *t*-tests revealed that the OUFY sense of belonging significantly increased from the start of the year (M = 3.5, SD = 0.26) to the end of the year (M = 3.8, SD = 0.23); $t(8) = -3.14$, $p = 0.016$, as did the TCDFY sense of belonging from the start of the year (M = 3.5, SD = 0.40) to the end of the year (M = 3.7, SD = 0.20); $t(24) = 2.41$, $p = 0.023$. There was no change in the TCDCA sense of belonging over the course of the year (Figure 4).

Qualitative analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis of the focus groups conducted at the start of the academic year explored students' experiences before entering university and perceptions of why they needed the alternative entry route. The analysis identified two

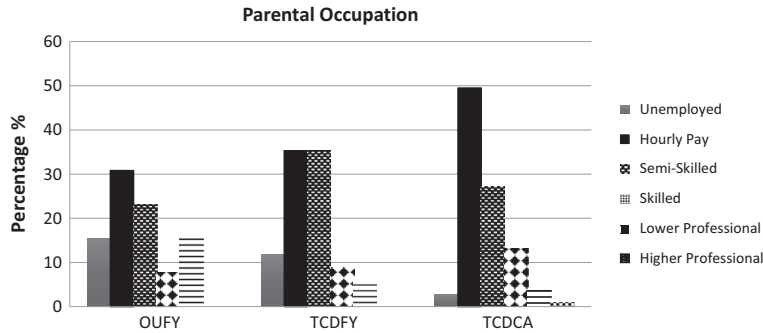

Figure 3. Parental occupation levels of the three students groups

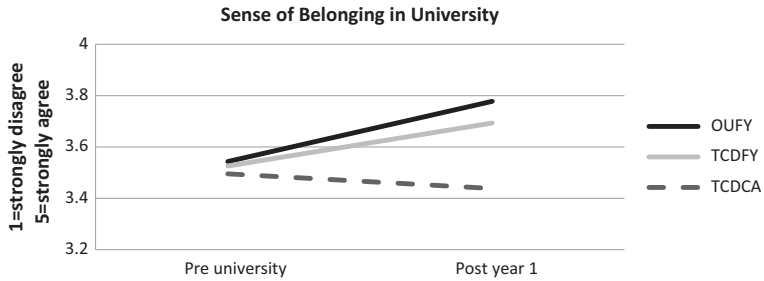

Figure 4. Changes in sense of belonging for the three groups across the year

key themes across the groups which had both a positive and a negative influence on students' access to HE, these included: (1) perception of equality within the system; (2) community and family role models. The following subsection describes these themes, highlighting where similarities and differences occur across the groups.

Perception of equality within the system. Students across the three groups and across both countries highlighted fundamental inequalities in the education system. They perceived HE as an inherent rite of passage for students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds and HEIs such as Oxford, Cambridge and TCD as being inherently for the upper-middle class, viewing this as obstructive in access. All students, across both countries, felt let down and annoyed by their schools' structural shortcomings, especially the lack of consistent guidance and support related to university applications. The FY students reported higher levels of inequality and less guidance from within the system, while the CA students had more sporadic experience of guidance.

Foundation year students. One student in the TCDFY group talked about the norms for affluent students and how their path is generally set:

> *You can kind of tell, if someone goes to a private college well a private secondary school, they are going to be going to a major university*. (TCDFY)

Another student discusses how this view is internalised:

> *Oxford, it's like, stereotypically like, I dunno, like an all-boys club . . . It's like (for) the white middle class people. I just didn't think I'd get in cause I'm not in that criteria.* (OUFY)

When describing this type of inequality, a TCDCA student described how this was played out in their schooling and how the teachers

> *. . . drew a divide between the people that could afford it and people that couldn't . . . our guidance counsellor was kind of encouraging us . . . from like socially disadvantaged areas to just pursue PLCs (non-university study options) even though we were able to go to HE.* (TCDCA)

A lack of encouragement to pursue HE or to apply to prestigious universities was a common theme across the groups and countries, especially for the FY students. A TCDFY student stated:

> *The school I was in . . . the encouragement isn't there . . . if you go to a private school it is more (encouraged) . . . so they have an advantage*. (TCDFY)

The TCDFY group highlighted nuances in the encouragement levels, stating that only certain types of students were encouraged to go on to HE and it was often dependent on the teacher, rather than the system:

> *It was kind of like, I think there were a few favourites, do you know there were the people who would get the academic achievements for the full six years and they probably would have been more encouraged.* (TCDFY)

It was clear from the OUFY that they 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 being completely discouraged from aiming high in terms of university options:

> *Well, my school . . . they were just, like, I think it's a waste of your time if you apply to Oxford you will probably get a rejection.* (OUFY)

In many instances, this lack of support appeared to be rooted in the structural assumptions of the schools that their students would not 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.* (OUFY)

Contextualised admission students. The TCDCA were the only students to report some encouragement from guidance teachers to apply to the contextualised admission scheme, when asked how they heard about the scheme many reported hearing about it in a school session:

> *It was like the career guidance teacher he was telling about HEAR and my Mum was working fulltime and then she was diagnosed with cancer and then she couldn't work with like fulltime again so she was working part-time. And then that was like the income thing . . . So uh yeah we took, we took that there. Umm, from the careers guidance and we just followed it through then.* (TCDCA)

> *Yeah, our guidance counsellor kinda realised we had a lot of it's targeted at like students from like DEIS schools who realised like the potential and the ability.* (TCDCA)

They also described very ad hoc guidance processes and, in some cases, accidently learning about the alternative entry route:

> *. . . it's just me and my brother who's been . . . like we're the first generation to go to college. My brother found out about it* [the HEAR scheme] *in his school. But like in my school it wasn't really spoken about at all.* (TCDCA)

Community role models and family. Throughout the discussion, *all* students described a lack of 'navigational capital' which supports progression to HE coming from within their community, and how having one person to act as a role model was pivotal in

changing their views. This is particularly relevant to the notion of bonding and bridging capital. Students reported competing influences throughout the discussion, with students describing the presence of role models as facilitating their decision to apply to HE, while also talking about how they were bonded to a community that lacked HE role models and how this was a barrier. These experiences in relation to role models was complex and nuanced, but consistent across all groups and both countries. The OUFY group consistently conveyed that when they witnessed someone similar to them achieve a place in a prestigious university, their dreams about HE began to seem like real possibilities. This acted as a form of bridging capital. They also mentioned that seeing someone from their school (despite lack of support) go on to HE counteracted 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 that kind of motivates me being able to actually see someone that has gone through that.* (OUFY)

This exemplifies the interaction seen between students bonding and bridging social capital; students' strongest experiences had been those which discouraged applications to prestigious HE, however the contact with a student who had made it was the bridge through which hope and self-belief happened. Furthermore, being bonded to a group of students that were motivated and focused on HE helped:

> *In my year specifically everyone was like quite high achievers . . . we broke the record in our school for getting the best grades.* (TCDCA)

> *. . . all my friends that I would hang around with at home, they're in Trinity as well.* (TCDCA)

There were reports of students being actively discouraged from applying to HE from family and friends, a TCDFY student discussed how she was criticised by friends for applying to HE and how this was a message which came from the whole system:

> *Like even school friends, I was applying to University and people were saying aw why . . . like there is no real push to go, like nobody is really encouraged to go . . . It's more encouraged to do PLC's or . . . apprenticeships and stuff like that . . .* (TCDFY)

Just as role models among peers and the community were important, students also emphasised the importance of having a role model within the family attending or having been through HE. However, this family drive was seen primarily in the OUFY and the TCDCA group and less so in the TCDFY group. The TCDFY students described having a lack of role models within the family setting and how this acted as both a barrier and a motivator. They often underlined the inequality between students like themselves and students who had parents coming from educational backgrounds, and how the latter were at an advantage in relation to access to HE and educational engagement:

> *If I went home to my ma and said, 'I'm after getting a first', she'd say 'what's that?' . . . She wouldn't know.* (TCDFY)

These students described how a lack of community role models, accompanied by an absence of community hope and motivation as a result of an array of social problems, is a definite deterrent to accessing HE.

Post-year analysis

Thematic analysis of the focus groups conducted at the end of the academic year explored students' experiences of the alternative entry route, their perceptions of how the route impacted upon their capacity to participate in university life and any challenges students faced over the year. The analysis identified the processes of change which occurred over the course of the year, with three key themes across the three groups emerging: (1) academic identity and ability; (2) confidence; (3) belonging. The following subsection examines the experiences and processes which supported these changes and looks at the FY and CA groups separately, adding comparisons where they occur.

Academic identity and ability. *Foundation year students*—Across both countries the FY students described a marked shift in how they viewed their academic potential. Academic courses, focused on essay writing and critical skills, coupled with a supportive, accessible tutoring system, influenced how students perceived their academic selves. Students reported reading differently, thinking differently and a general sense that they could achieve what was expected of them in university:

> *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.* (OUFY)

These students describe growing in confidence and belief, and being 'more sure' that they will be able to succeed in the first year as a result of being taught how to write essays, how to read and how to debate.

Having these lessons and building strong relationships with tutors reassured them that their work was good enough and appeared to provide the basis for a shift in their perceived academic identity. The students referred to moving from unskilled to skilled:

> *I can't word it but it's just drawing on a lot of skills that I don't think I would have been able to gain elsewhere or in the depth in which I've been able to gain the skills. So for instance, when it comes to reading an article, there's things that I have in my mind prior to reading the article that normally I would just pick up the article and I wouldn't really question it . . . Question the source, and I think like that's been very helpful in developing my skills.* (OUFY)

They talked about the importance of the tutor system, the accessibility of 'qualified' people, people who know the system, who know what quality work is. The presence of a more experienced tutor to guide and reassure them was pivotal in their shift in academic confidence.

Contextual admissions students—Conversely, the TCDCA students do not talk about changes in academic skills, they describe feeling inferior and intimidated by the 'other' students and afraid that they lack the capability to perform at the same level. Having to go into lectures without guidance or a connection was daunting, and they felt like everyone knew more than them:

> *. . . the lecturer was just like going like really deep into science and just talking very scientific, like I'd been studying this for years. And it's very like the expectations are really high. And it's very fast paced as well.* (TCDCA)

These students are navigating the academic side of university life independently and have to try to make sense of where they belong in the structure. They described times of feeling 'less than' and inferior to direct entry students, fearing that their academic attainment at secondary school would place them at a disadvantage compared to more affluent students. They described feeling they had to work harder to prove themselves as academically equal and to show that their place was not a mistake.

These students also described an anxious need to take advantage of and not waste an opportunity that few members of their family had experienced:

> *Cause like my uh my parents only went to like primary school like no like they didn't even go to secondary school. So, it's kinda like oh my god, I'm getting the opportunity to go to like third level. Like, that's you know . . . It's not like every oh everyone in my family went to college so it's a big deal . . . So you feel like you have to work hard . . . to do well . . . to like make the most of it, like appreciate it kind of.* (TCDCA)

Comparison—Both FY student groups reported growth in their academic identity as a direct result of their contact with staff in the programmes. Having a reassuring, long-term relationship with an academic helped move these students from unsure to sure, from unskilled to skilled—even if there was no real change in their grades, their perception of their academic capability changed. This was not the case for the TCDCA group, even at the end of year one there was a sense of being unsure about their academic capability and worry that the contextualised route meant they had less academic capability.

Confidence. Foundation year students—Confidence emerged as a theme throughout the focus groups, with students describing some key factors influencing their confidence. Again, the relationship with tutors and administrative staff was fundamental to a growth in confidence in the FY students:

> *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.* (TCDFY)

Knowing that these relationships were long term and enduring appeared to be an important part of supporting the development of confidence:

> *I know that even though I won't have the same tutors or professors next year . . . I can still go to the previous ones.* (OUFY)

This highlights the impact that the tutor system in the OUFY—and to a lesser extent in the TCDFY—had on student confidence. Having an academic mentor, who recognised the students' potential and history, provided space for the student to grow in confidence and develop capacity to navigate university.

Alongside the relationship with staff, students in both FYs described the importance of 'knowing the college' and developing 'the navigational capital' which supports progression to and through HE. They discussed knowing the university system before they were properly in their degree as being important for confidence:

> *. . . you know things like where all the printing stations are around campus . . . and where the library is.* (TCDFY)

Contextual admission students. In contrast, the TCDCA group made no reference to relationships with university tutors or to improved confidence. They described attending their prestigious university in negative terms, reducing their confidence through feelings of inadequacy, comparison with 'normal students' and an ongoing sense of being an imposter:

> *It can be really intimidating . . . a lot of people . . . they're very confident . . . It's not like you know oh they think they're full of themselves. But they are confident. And they know like what they're able and it can be really intimidating even though you know like you know that "oh I am able as well", you might not feel it as much.* (TCDCA)

These issues of outsider identity often manifest in the data in more critical terms, with TCDCA students describing seeing 'other' students' confidence as part of a sense of entitlement:

> *Because they give off this sense of entitlement that they . . . you know from day one that their path was leading up to this place. Whereas for us it's not been like that and you know they all give off that vibe and it's so easy for them just to fit into this place and there's no show behind it like they were comfortable and for us it's been a massive struggle.* (TCDCA)

Comparison. There was a stark contrast between the FY students change in confidence, compared to the CA group. The FY students notably shifted in their comfort and ease in the prestigious institution, they reported knowing the system, knowing people and feeling less daunted by the structures. Whereas, the CA group felt separate from the 'other' students and in some places reported feeling less confident as a result of being exposed to 'other' students.

Belonging. Students sense of belonging was facilitated by connection with other students 'like them', especially other students on FY programmes. However, exposure to and experience of 'other' direct entry students negatively impacted upon the students sense of belonging, especially those on the CA and OUFY programme..

Foundation year students. Throughout the focus groups there were conflicting narratives about belonging; students had preconceived ideas about the direct entry students and felt 'safer' with students they knew had entered the university through a similar route to them. These themes emerged only for the students who were in regular contact with the direct entry students. The OUFY students described how being on the FY and living with the direct entry groups sometimes increased a sense of separateness:

> *. . . everyone else in 1st year they are friends with people who are also in their classes . . . I don't know it just seems like errm it just seems a bit separated the foundation year and the undergraduates for me at least . . . so it has made me less outgoing because there are less people.* (OUFY)

At times the support offered to the OUFY students increased this feeling of separateness, with direct entry students being unhappy at what was perceived as 'special treatment' of the FY:

> *I've been getting lessons from* [famous person] *but we had other students . . . they weren't happy about it but it wasn't anything personal towards me like they expressed that they just thought it was unfair, but like I think it was because they didn't understand that they had had* [subject] *tuition their whole lives whereas I'd only had it for a few years . . . they're not happy about it because they're not so aware like that I come from a disadvantaged background and maybe they think that I've had tuition since I was four.* (OUFY)

The students on the OUFY did, however, talk about the importance of having each other and how being on the FY has highlighted their needs and made the students more aware and open:

> *I feel like the fact that I have actually been on the foundation year has actually been a good thing in a way, because everyone is more aware of it so they have made an effort to make an effort because they don't want me to feel isolated in a sense, so like my floor, we are all really really close we do completely different subjects but we are so close and they do everything they can to involve me, and I feel a lot more involved than I think I would feel if I was in first year, because I wouldn't have needed to make that effort.* (OUFY)

Conversely, the TCDFY group demonstrated no real conflict around belonging and in some ways they seemed naïve to the challenges associated with attending university. They reported strong bonds with the students on the FY and lacked awareness of the 'other' students.

Contextualised admission students. The TCDCA students described how the 'other' students formed 'little closed groups' early on and how it was hard to break into them. They perceived these groups as making college life easier for the direct entry students and there was an assumption that these students knew each other before university:

> *. . . it's probably easier when you have someone to go sit beside because you know them from your area, or you know whatever like you went to school with them or whatever.* (TCDCA)

When this point was explored further there was no real evidence that direct entry students knew each other prior to university; the students had made the assumption, which may reflect a bias in their own perceptions. Through discussion it emerged that this biased view was based on a pre-existing view that the TCDCA students do not fit into the 'norm' when considering who usually goes to university. They felt insecure about the fact that they had entered university through an alternative route:

> *So it's not like an active, like exclusion or . . . It's just like a "sure we're fine we have our friend already" . . . I think it's sometimes our own insecurities that make us feel like that they're judgin' us, when really they're not.* (TCDCA)

It was also clear from these student narratives that the support offered by the university buffered against these feelings of separateness. They describe building relationships with students who are 'like them' and how the entry route they took facilitated this. For example, the pre-university programme and the ambassador programme provided students with a social network which facilitated participation in university and a sense of belonging:

> *. . . we met in the pre-uni course uhh he was like my leader . . . we became friends after that there. And it was just so brilliant to have some who's in like a year further than you. Ah telling you what's coming next. Even in exams, get tips, and he would send me like lecture notes and uh notes, he had past exam papers like uh resources that you wouldn't necessarily have umm if you were on your own*. (TCDCA)

and

> *I stayed here for the orientation thing and like I thought that was one of the best things about it. Like I just got to stay on campus and like the whole campus life you get to see it before everyone else does. So when I was like, when I actually got into my course a lot of people would ask me 'where's this and that', and like you kinda just feel good that you already know the place.* (TCDCA).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a useful insight into the role that alternative entry routes to higher education play in the WP policy agenda in both England and Ireland. As might be expected, the analysis of student demographics suggests that students participating in the foundation years have less cultural and social capital compared to those entering university through the CA route. As such, in both educational terms as well as in relation to SES, students engaging with the foundation years could be considered to be 'more disadvantaged' than those going through the contextualised admissions route, who in turn are 'more disadvantaged' than those going through mainstream admissions. This illustrates the importance of having a diverse WP ecosystem that caters to a wide range of needs and students from a range of backgrounds. When considering the cross-national comparisons, we see little or no differences in the experiences of students prior to entering the prestigious university or whilst within the system. Thus, country context has little impact in this study when considering alternative entry routes to prestigious universities. Students experience similar challenges in terms of school and community barriers and have similar experiences within the universities, irrespective of country.

The decision-making narratives offered by students suggest that successful navigation of this WP ecosystem in both countries is largely based on luck—a fortuitous combination of social and cultural capital (e.g. meeting someone who knew about the specific foundation year, having HE demystified by peers or family members, etc.)—rather than active pathway selection. Few participants described having rich information about *all* the different HE access routes and making truly informed decisions. Therefore, while many of the students showed significant personal drive and a sense of agency in their decision to engage with HE in general terms (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018), in practice, their choices about specific WP pathways were limited by a variety of structural factors, appearing to hinge on the availability of information within the school system, the limitations of knowledge and understanding of the WP ecosystem by key teachers, peers and family members, as well as embedded assumptions within the admissions process about which pathways are most suitable for which young people.

Within this patchwork of information and assumptions, the biggest factor in the decision-making process appeared to be attainment, with those participants with the

lowest grades tending to join the foundation years. Presumably this reflects a perceived need for the extra educational support offered by foundation years. However, as illustrated by the findings, the foundation years provided more than just educational support for the participants. They provide social and cultural capital, including social support and networks, long-term relationships with tutors, and the time and space to acclimatise to HE. These capital-forming processes provided many students with confidence to engage with HE in a meaningful way and develop a sense of belonging. Previous academic attainment may not always be an indicator of a need to develop this kind of confidence and academic identity, and our data indicated that many of the students on the CA route would have benefited from this kind of wider support.

The relationships formed through the foundation years provide a deeper understanding of the impact that bridging capital, as described by Putnam (2000), can have on student outcomes. The staff and tutor system and the ambassador programmes endowed the students with a form of bridging capital that supported movement from what could be considered a non-academic or a weak academic identity to a stronger academic identity. This enabled students to feel confident in their ability to transition into their undergraduate studies. The relationship with someone from outside their existing social group, someone who was embedded within the university, provided a bridge through which students seemingly moved from a sense of separateness and difference in terms of their academic capabilities to a sense of confidence in their ability to perform academically. Thus, bridging social capital seemingly laid a foundation for the development of academic confidence, a new academic identity and was a catalyst for a growing sense of belonging. Interestingly, students' relationships with each other on the FY was an important form of social capital, which supported a growing sense of belonging in the university. Putnam's theory of bonding capital is relevant here insofar as the FY students saw the other students on the FY as 'their group' and this connection to a group of students from similar backgrounds, but also aiming to participate in university life, bonded them. The impact of new forms of bridging social capital on students' sense of belonging was stronger in the TCDFY, mostly influenced by the strength and number of relationships developed in the year. Having relationships with both staff and students increased their sense of growth and belonging.

The observation that bridging capital was important in student outcomes was further surmounted by the reports from the CA students. They had less opportunity to forge strong bonds with students from within the university and were exposed to the 'other' students more regularly; they reported higher levels of disconnection and isolation than those in both FYs. Although the pre-university programme provided some contact with existing students, many still felt isolated, outsiders, lacking in confidence and feeling the need to work harder than what they perceived as their more affluent peers. Their experiences were similar to those of other non-traditional students entering through mainstream routes, feeling on the periphery of dominant university cultures and having a sense of isolation and alienation (Hannon & O'Sullivan, 2018). Thus, belonging was facilitated by the different forms of capital and at different rates. The students on the TCDFY felt the strongest sense of belonging, and this was based on links with academic staff and the development of a belief in their academic ability and associated confidence. They also had access to the least bridging capital in the

form of 'other' students, but strong bonding capital with peers who have entered via the same route. Conversely, students entering the same institution via contextual admissions experienced more alienation, experienced the 'other' students more often and had little opportunity to form new bonds within the institution. The CA students were constructing and performing academic identities that were rooted in this sense of isolation and manifest in an often misplaced sense of belligerence against peers. Without adequate bridging capital and social support, several participants appeared to feel tension between their educational experiences and their perceptions of ideal student identity (Robson, 2018). They appeared to view ideal student identity as rooted in affluence, privilege and attainment. Feeling unable to achieve this, several adopted antagonistic identity positions, aspiring to the confidence of their peers while being deeply critical of it and what it represented.

This suggests that there is a clear need to support non-traditional students throughout their time at university in ways that go beyond academic support. WP should not end at the point of access. Students coming in through the CA route (as well as non-traditional students entering through normal admissions) are likely to need social support and the means to develop appropriate bridging capital to construct and perform academic identities that encourage belonging, confidence and well-being. It is likely that lessons can be learned from FYs and some of the support structures could be included in other access pathways. At the same time there appears to be a clear need to support students' decision-making about specific access routes for HE prior to application, ensuring adequate information is available to students, family members and teachers, and that this includes details of the potential advantages of each pathway in terms that go beyond attainment, focusing on wider benefits.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide a deeper understanding of the developing context of alternative access routes into HE. In doing so, we have compared three cases of such routes across the contexts of England and Ireland. This work highlights the value that such routes, particularly FYs, can add to students' sense of belonging, providing them with social support, social networks and adequate social capital that enables them to engage with HE and construct and perform academic identities that support a sense of success. The work highlights instances where students entering HE directly, without support, has not been sufficient and can result in students feeling isolated, alienated and lacking in confidence. When considering the international context, we see that the student experiences are similar across England and Ireland. However, this may just be based on the nature of the institutions rather than a national trend. Both FYs are fully funded and the students have no experience of the university fee system, especially in the UK. When considering the place of FYs in the broader widening participation arena, their cost (especially in the UK, where fees are £9000 plus per year) needs to be considered in terms of their 'value'. Also, the cost of adding a further year of study must be considered when assessing the overall value of alternative entry routes. Furthermore, at a time when university prestige is becoming an important predictor of social mobility, there is a need to assess the value of these routes across a range of institution types and to establish

the longer-term impact in terms of educational and employment outcomes. The findings of this study do, however, showcase the value of the FY model in the contexts described, but also emphasise the need for a future research agenda focused on understanding non-traditional students' experiences at university after the point of access and a need to develop new support structures for students across the lifecycle of their degrees.

NOTE

[1] In Ireland, these are known as access courses or foundation courses. For the purposes of consistency, this article will use the term foundation year, which incorporates those offered in both England and Ireland.

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