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# 'I feel like I have a disadvantage': how socio-economically disadvantaged students make the decision to study at a prestigious university

K. O'Sullivan <sup>a</sup>, J. Robson<sup>b</sup> and N. Winters<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Adult & Community Education, Maynooth University, Kildare, Ireland; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from an interpretative phenomenological analysis with 20 students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who were accepted onto a Foundation Year in Oxford University. It explores the factors that impacted on their decision to apply to a prestigious university and student's views on their transition to the prestigious university. The analysis highlighted four key factors:

- (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.

The identified factors have two key implications: (1) a need to engage in system-wide structural reform that empowers students to develop an agentic approach to HE choices and (2) a need for prestigious institutions to ensure that schools and teachers are empowered with cultural capital and knowledge of the admissions processes to support students' applications in an equitable way.

## KEYWORDS

Widening participation;  
student choice; agency;  
university choice; support

## Introduction

While the percentage of students entering higher education institutions (HEIs) 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 lower than national averages, despite targeted initiatives and provisions. Furthermore, those from SED groups are less likely to apply to and attend more prestigious institutions (e.g. Reay et al. 2001; Perna and 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) 2016; HEA 2017) with graduates being less likely to experience unemployment, enjoying greater job satisfaction, more participation in society and better health (HEA 2017). This paper explores the cultural, academic and social experiences of

20 SED students and examines how these factors intersect to support SED students' decision to apply to a Foundation Year in a prestigious university in the UK. The paper adds to the existing body of literature as it moves beyond dichotomous discourses that discuss issues around widening participation in terms of either aspiration or attainment and reconceptualises access and university decision-making in terms of student agency.

## **Background**

Bourdieu's (1984) paradigm of cultural reproduction, the dominant explanation for inequalities in social mobility (Donnelly and Evans 2016), highlights habitus and cultural capital as central to student choice. Habitus is the 'product' of socialisation and cultural induction in particular institutional settings and is often characterised by material inequalities in power relations (Reay et al., 2001). Habitus results in a disposition to favour one's own experience within the fields of practice that the person finds themselves. Hence students will show favour to universities that reflect their own experiences (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). 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' (495) are the ones that prevail and work to exclude the minority classes from attending certain universities (Baker and Brown 2007).

When students lack access to forms of cultural capital that are valued by the dominant middle classes, their educational opportunities and outcomes are severely limited (Reay 2005; Reay et al. 2008, Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009). 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 of Education and Skills 2014), compared to parents with a history of HE. These schools then act to reinforce cultural capital and social stratification by emphasising vocational options over university progression, and through the expectations placed on students. For example, state school teachers are less likely to push their students to apply to Russell group universities (Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016) with a significant proportion reporting 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). Perez-Adamson and Mercer (2016) examined how state and private schools prepare students for Cambridge University and found that private schools generate a sense of entitlement to a Cambridge education for their students and the cultural practices of these private schools were in line with those of Cambridge academic and social practices. Whereas the state school students 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. While these studies highlight the impact that state schools have on students deciding NOT to apply to prestigious universities, they give less insight into the processes that underpin a student's decision TO apply. They pay less attention to the factors, which support admissions and the intersectional nature of student decision-making.

Other explanations of university choice assert that academic achievement and academic confidence explains disparities in university choice between SED students and their more affluent counterparts (Coley 2002; Feinstein 2003; Jones and Thomas 2005; Burgess et al. 2008; Chowdry et al. 2013; McKnight 2015). They contend that university choice is based on academic performance and the confidence which emerges from students' post-primary educational experiences. According to Putnam (2000), social capital equally impacts the education choices of SED students. Social capital is an intangible resource that exists within interpersonal relations: including information, contacts and sources of advice that reinforce the norms of the social network. When considering university choice social capital can be categorised in two ways: bridging capital and bonding capital. Bridging capital facilitates social mobility through the development of new relationships which 'bridge' the gap between students existing social capital and potentially new forms of capital; whereas bonding capital exists in the form of capital or norms which bonds communities, and often acts to reproduce existing

inequalities through reproduction of the norms of the social network. In the realm of university choice access to bridging capital could be seen as crucial for facilitating progression to prestigious universities for SED 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 such institutions is not the norm (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2009).

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 a significant amount of agency and self-belief, and to-date there is little examination of the role that student agency plays in university decision-making. According to Walker (2008), Wilson-Strydom (2012), Hannon, Faas, and O'Sullivan (2017), student agency is defined as the freedom to decide and 'the power to act and be effective' (Crocker and Robeyns 2009, 75; Wilson-Strydom 2012, 2016), and is one of a set of human capabilities that is overlooked when considering the educational outcomes of SED students. When considering individual factors in decision-making, there is often a broad assumption that within certain classes skill and/or motivation are the main reason for lack of progression to prestigious institutions. According to Greenbank (2006), this view places responsibility for lack of social mobility on the individual and in certain cases leads to 'victim blaming'. In reality, the social capital and cultural experiences inherent in certain classes, and the practices undertaken in prestigious schools and universities, are within a socio-cultural subset familiar to only the middle and upper socio-economic levels (Devlin 2013). These facilitate the success of students familiar with the norms and discourses of these groups and often exclude students from SED classes. Considering the social, cultural and academic lives of SED students alongside student choice and individual agency challenges these assumptions and provides insight into the processes which support students' success as opposed to students' failure.

### **Current research**

The current research adds to the current body of literature by exploring how SED students' cultural, academic and social experiences impact upon their decision to apply to a prestigious university and considers how student agency is implicated in this decision-making process. The research is unique insofar as it asks 20 SED students who have been accepted onto a Foundation Year in Oxford University to detail their experiences up to their application, specifically focusing on the decision-making process and the factors that supported and/or hampered their choices. 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, hence it is perfectly placed to provide insight into the factors which impact upon the decision to study at a prestigious university. This study adds to the existing body of literature by following up with nine of these students once they have completed the Foundation Year; exploring with them what, in retrospect, would have aided their progression directly into the university, and describing their view on what SED students 'need' to support entrance into prestigious universities. Hence this study reports the narratives of 20 SED students and addresses the research questions: What factors impact upon SED students' decision to apply to a prestigious university? And what factors do students from SED backgrounds see as important to in supporting their transition into a prestigious university?

### **Methodology**

Data were collected at two phases and involved 20 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.

We obtained data from 4 focus groups with the 20 students, 5 students in each; 10 students participated in September 2016 (cohort 1), and 10 participated in September of 2017 (cohort 2). In both years, focus groups happened before the year of study had started. In November of 2017, nine students from cohort 1 were asked *additional* questions as a result of the analysis of the findings. For these nine students, we used a brief online questionnaire and telephone interviews and one focus group.

The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 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 the decision-making process involved in their HE choices.

## Participants

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 institution 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 a process that would support them in the application process. Students were invited to participate in the research project by email.

At the start of each year, the students in cohort 1 and cohort 2 were included in four focus groups. Each focus group had five students in and was semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes. All 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 an 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.

In November of 2017, the 10 students in cohort 1 were asked to participate in a follow-up survey and interviews. They were sent a short online survey which included the questions listed below and nine students responded.

- (1) What supports do you think your schooling could have offered you to get into Oxford directly? Please describe how they would have helped you;
- (2) Now that you have experienced Oxford how would you design a programme which supported the transition of state school students to Oxford – what would it include? Describe how these activities/events/supports would help students.

These questions emerged from the overall themes from the 2016 and 2017 focus group data which showed that the students had only applied to the Foundation Year, and that they still saw Oxford as a distant goal even though they were accepted onto the Foundation Year programme; the questions also sought to expand upon an emerging theme that role models were an important part of the decision-making process.

These nine students were then followed up with for short telephone interview (four students) and a short focus group (four students). These posed questions about students' perceptions of what could support state school students' transition to the prestigious university and exploring the factors which supported transitions to Oxford and the impact of the Foundation Year on those transitions.

## **Data analysis**

In accordance with IPA, the focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) and the 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. Themes and sub-themes 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**

The 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 and the second part of the analysis, which incorporated the follow-up date, highlighted the supports the students perceive would have made their transition to the university easier. These themes included:

- (1) The complex relationship the students had with their schools and the wider education system;
- (2) The strong sense of agency they showed in fighting to overcome a range of systemic and structural barriers;
- (3) Social relationships with family members, peers and the wider community;
- (4) Supporting transitions; 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'. And like when I did get in, like when they did offer me the interview I had interview practice with my (subject) teacher. Which wasn't that helpful either because we just got side-tracked but they tried to help as much as they could when it came to applying.

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'. However, she described how her school simply did not have this specific knowledge and so could not 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'. There was also evidence of an interaction between the schools lack of support and the students' own perceptions of their capability to navigate the complex application process. When students describe having support from their school they described their own lack of belief in being 'Oxbridge ready' as hindering their chance of availing of these supports.

I applied to Oxford for Biomed and my teachers helped me with my BMAT practice cause I had to do an admissions test. So they helped with that, they sent me on like a day course, like a crash course and it. That wasn't helpful ... because I wasn't doing the work before that anyway. I didn't really care. I didn't think I was going to get in 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. They believed in themselves despite the lack of belief demonstrated by their schools/teachers, but the lack of guidance and support had the potential to affect their chances of success in applying to such institutions and negatively shape their motivations to do so. Where they did receive 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 organisation 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 jeopardised their ability to excel academically and attain top grades needed to access prestigious institutions. Teachers were seen as focusing on maximising the number of students achieving passing grades in exams and offering borderline students the most support. A student talks about this issue and having to fight for a tutor:

... all the departments are pretty much in competition to see if they can get the best pass rates. So she cared about the pass rate but she didn't really do much to help us do well so most of us had to take it into our own hands anyway to, um, get a tutor. I had to beg my head of sixth form for a tutor and we didn't get one until half way through the year. So we were pretty much lost until a couple of month before exams.

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. This mistrust is seen in the following students' experience

(the teachers only work) so that the department looks good so if, because with my school all the departments are pretty much in competition to see if they can get the best pass rates. So she cared about the pass rate but she didn't really do much to help us do well so most of us had to take it into our own hands anyway to, um, get a tutor. I had to beg my head of sixth form for a tutor and we didn't get one until half way through the year. So we were pretty much lost until a couple of month before exams.

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 emphasising 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 Oxbridge directly; they described the lack of knowledge and a lack of belief in the teachers and their schools; alongside a lack of belief in their own potential, highlighting the multi-layered nature of their decision-making process. 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 student described forcing his school to provide advanced math, and how he had to petition his fellow students to ensure his math needs were being met:

By literally year 12 I asked them and they told me 'No'. They, like I said like 'Why?', because there's not enough, I can't just do another subject for like a year ... 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. So that's why they started it.

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.



So I strong-armed my way there. Em, after my AS, I got decent grades. Not as good as Cambridge and Oxford and because of that when I, I mean when I submitted my application to Cambridge. 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' And um, I mean, um I still said 'It's my choice. I am going to apply anyway. I just want to, I know I'm not going to get in but I'm just going to apply'. There are, it's only one choice. I have four choices, which have decent grades requirements, and I'll get in to them, definitely. If not there is an extra UCAS clearing, extra. 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.

This highlight the complex relationship students have with their education systems and the necessity of a strong sense of agency to defy educational structural norms and expectations and 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 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 HE, they might lack the skills other students have and would therefore feel at a disadvantage. 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 HEIs. In some cases, students said that 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 prejudice 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***

The 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, 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 they 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 HE, 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 talked about the impact of having had a student who completed the Foundation Year from her school; she described the change in perception in her schools outlook on Oxford and how seeing someone successfully progress to Oxford through the Foundation Year changed her view of her own potential but also shifted the schools view of what is possible for their students. In this sense, the presence of a role model, or a trail blazer, positively impacted upon the students' sense of agency and their own capacity to apply to the prestigious university:

I don't know I never really thought about it. Um, but one of the previous years, a girl I think she did Biomed here and she applied for the LMH foundation year as well, so yeah ... So when I heard about the foundation year and found out I was eligible they (my 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 power. 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.

Yeah like as I was saying before 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 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 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 HE and demonstrated a strong sense of agency in their decision 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, like, her mother wanted her to, and so did my dad, but my dad went in Pakistan um ... so I think my mum, 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. It was also illustrated that in difficult times and when faced with rejection, support from parents or family members can help a student to overcome the obstacle and continue trying.

### **Exclusivity in HE**

It was clear that students within this study perceived HEIs 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 their just like the best Uni's in the world. So I just didn't think that I'd get in ... Um 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**

Students emphasised that schools played an essential part in supporting students to prepare for the interviews/application process – and at times they referred to the inadequacy of the supports they received. Having experienced the full process, with support and guidance from the tutors during their time on the Foundation Year, the students saw first hand how the guidance from their schools lacked the content to support a successful application. One student makes this point highlighting the inadequacies of the state school advise they received:

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 advise for the interview process was inadequate. They suggested that their state school should be supported to provide proper guidance in terms of written work and verbal feedback on that work.

Using the knowledge gained from the Foundation Year programme, students were ideally placed to reflect on how their schools could have made the transition easier. Students said that their school provided the university with very generic reference, which did not help their case. They thought that the university should have known and understood the deeper implications of having attended a state school, and the impact this can have on the students overall grades. This was highlighted in the following quote:

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 my 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.

Students said that they were aware 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 supports that he was receiving and why he was receiving them. He said that if students and staff knew the differences between state school and public school students, and the challenges that SED can place on education outcomes, it would have helped his transition to the prestigious environment, without this knowledge the direct entry students were at times unhappy about the extra supports that Foundation Year students received:

they had had (subject) tuition their whole lives whereas I'd only had it for a few year ... 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.

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 follow-up data highlighted the impact that the Foundation Year itself 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 has transformed their sense of belief and buffered against the feeling 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 It was based on that mainly ... that and like finances so when I came and my tutors were really reassuring and also 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 and they've been doing (subject) since like God knows when and 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.

There was also reference to the transformative effect of having someone considered good or of high status being supportive. A student talks about how they still feel unsure of their capacity to perform at the Oxford standard but the relationship with a tutor who is willing to tell them they are good enough helped get them through the doubtful periods:

Yeah, although 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 and things like that 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 student's decision to apply to a prestigious university and examined how the students' capacity for agency and autonomy influences this decision. It is unique insofar as it sought to examine student decision-making from a broad frame of reference and asked the students themselves to speculate on the type of support they see as important in supporting successful transition into the prestigious university environment. The results highlight the complex relationship that exists between their 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 (Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016) our findings add a layer of understanding which moves beyond that of all state school students. By showcasing the narratives of students who have made the choice to apply to the prestigious university, we are able to draw parallels between the students in this study and students in state education more generally while elaborating upon the different processes which support those who do apply to prestigious universities and those who do not. Thus while many of the quotes included may highlight structural limitations which resonate with a wide range of state school students, we are able to elaborate upon how these limitations interact with other elements of the students' life and experience to support applications to the prestigious university.

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 socio-economic 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 who take this harder option are more likely to have a rich support network of family and friends. However, as observed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), a key factor in students aspiring and applying to prestigious institutions is a 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' (1990, 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 HEIs 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 intra-personal 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 maximising 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 are 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 re-define 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.

The current research provided voice to the SED student in a way that has not been done in previous research. By asking them 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 analysis. 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 important for enriching the social capital available to SED students.

## Conclusion

Recent debates about increasing participation in HE and opening up access to 'prestigious' institutions have focused on 'barriers' to application or entry, and while these are important they tell

only part of the story of patterns of access. The distribution of classes across HEIs has to be understood as the outcome of several stages of decision-making. Many students never get to a position where they can contemplate HE. Others are qualified to do so but exclude themselves from prestigious institutions (Archer and Hutchings 2000). For SED students, for a combination of negative and positive factors, other institutions are attractive (Reay 2000; Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 2013). 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.

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 (Devlin 2013). The current research shows that this can *only* happen in the right context. 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.

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## ORCID

K. O'Sullivan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7202-0033>

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