Universities as Key Responders to Education Inequality

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Abstract: This paper explores the responsibility of the university sector to respond to educational inequality and to those with precarious relationships to education. The paper explores how although there are considerable benefits to be attained from higher education and lifelong learning, many people are dislocated from the university sector and feel that the university is not for them. It argues that the university sector must develop a community mission to respond to these issues and explores the approach of the Centre for Adult Continuing Education in University College Cork, Ireland in developing such a community mission. Through working with communities and supporting inclusive and diverse learning opportunities, the paper argues that universities can contribute to tackling the on-going persistence of educational inequality.
Keywords: community engagement; inequality; higher education; lifelong learning

Introduction

At the outset this paper has to address two central questions. Firstly, what is the wider function of the university. Secondly, to what extent can the university ameliorate current challenges around educational inequality, the consequences of economic and social marginalisation and precarity. The first question is a perennial one, and has to remain so as no institution's societal meaning remains static. In the past the role of the university was famously articulated by Humboldt and Newman and in more recent times by Boyer (1990). All such discussions invariably reflect both internal organisational and mission questions as well as the broader societal purpose. Rather than rehearse these discussions, the persistent challenge of the university is contemporary relevance. Fitzgerald et al (2016) describe the university as a social entity which inheres a responsibility to serve a public good function. The exact nature of this public good function is obviously contestable, but the premise of this paper is that, however described, the university has a public good responsibility.

This paper assumes that a key university public good is wider community engagement and the amelioration of societal inequalities in order to enable full participation by all. It is important to acknowledge that formal education is only one element in human learning and that within formal education the university is just one type of provider. Access to university education will never be universal, nor should it be seen as the ultimate goal for all learners. In this regard it differs significantly from primary education, where a target for achieving

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universal access is an international objective being pursued by the United Nations. There is significant progress in the primary school education sector, even if it still lags behind agreed targets. Likewise, lower secondary and higher secondary education participation rates are increasing, but participation rates decline as students move up the educational ladder. There are still significant pockets of inequity for instance around gender, ethnicity, religion and geography (UNESCO 2015). Universal access is critical at foundational level education not only in providing (most often) the child with basic numeracy and literacy skills, but also as Mahlo (2017) points out it is a phase for enhancing life skills and when 'the foundation of learning is laid effectively, a critical time for promoting interest in education and positive attitudes toward school' (p.1-2). Failure at this stage may see a learner alienated from the education system. However, educational needs diverge as learners progresses through life, therefore at university level the challenge is not about universal access, but equity of participation across the population. Equity of participation can have significant individual and collective benefits socially and economically.

Some pilot projects have been designed by University College Cork to tackle issues of inequality and provide both individual and collective benefits. These are still at an early stage, but they are adopting inclusive methodologies that have potential to bring the university closer to groups and individuals that currently have low levels of engagement with the university. The paper begins by exploring the benefits of education, then highlights the extent of inequality and the dislocation of marginalised communities from the university. It goes on to argue that universities have a social responsibility to address this inequality, and to widen the orientation of the university sector through community engagement. Finally, we present some pilot projects being pursued in University College Cork in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) to address equity of access.

The benefits of education and lifelong learning
Adult education is delivered in a range of settings and at varying levels, including the community, further education training centres and colleges and by universities. In the wider educational context, the benefits for individuals, families and communities from adult education and lifelong learning are both direct and indirect as highlighted by Field (2009) in his work on well-being. The direct benefits are 'capabilities and resources which influence their well-being' and the indirect ones enhance 'their resilience in the face of risk' (Field 2009, 7). A key point he makes is that these benefits are both individual and collective as they deliver broader community good.

Investment in adult education delivers both social and economic goods such as reduced welfare and health costs, reductions in crime and the related costs of the criminal justice system. Beaven et al (2011) estimate a return of £35-£40 for each pound the invested in further education apprenticeships in the UK. Proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving is positively associated with general wellbeing including health and social cohesion. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2009, 171) reports that 'educational attainment is positively associated with self-reported health, political interest and interpersonal trust' and reiterates the strong relationship between educational attainment and health indicators in its 2013 report (OECD 2013). Bailey et al (2009) indicate that adult education promotes both physical and mental health, thereby enhancing people's self-confidence, self-esteem and dignity as a purposeful member of the community.

University education is a significant factor in determining people's life chances including the likelihood of employment, income levels (termed the graduate premium), risk of poverty, and health and wellbeing (OECD 2013). Children tend to emulate the educational attainment of parents, thus the further a parent progresses in education the further the child is likely to progress. Fragosa (2014, 61) in his analysis of the Portuguese 2006 survey on the

transition to retirement by the National Institute of Statistics says 'there is an intergenerational "transmission" of education… educating adults has the immediate effect of increasing their children's educational levels'. Irish data from the European Wide Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) demonstrates that respondents whose parents were educated to primary level or below had a 21 per cent rate or risk of poverty, three times that of respondents whose parents had a primary degree or higher (Central Statistics Office, CSO 2007). The 2011 Irish Census shows that twenty-year-olds with both parents educated to university or equivalent level have an 89 per cent propensity to pursue similar levels of education against 45 per cent for those whose parents have lower levels of education (CSO 2011).

Like other forms of education, university education also enhances social capital, the networks and associations that an individual participates in, and the shared values, contribution to common goals and social support from this participation. According to Putnam (1995), social capital is important to social cohesion since it facilitates coordinated action and mutual trust. While social capital is generated in all aspects of life, it can be strengthened through education. Granovetter (1983) claims that education gives socio-economically disadvantaged communities bridging weak ties to well-placed individuals outside their normal networks who can open up opportunities and contacts. A second dimension is that all closed communities 'suffer a lack of cognitive flexibility' (Granovetter 1983, 205). Basically the views of one's own group reinforce already held views. Bridging weak ties forces individuals to see the other in a new light and to modify their thinking to facilitate new opportunities and more open ways to see the world.

The benefits of bridging ties generated by education can be significant factors in building new networks and thus reduce precariousness and enhance resilience. Lin (1999, 42) states that 'social resources or social capital enhances an individual's attained statuses.' Put simply an individual with stronger social capital will do better in terms of income, career and status than someone with lower social capital with similar education, family and community context. However, as the next section demonstrates, marginalised communities are often dislocated from the university and this limited access restricts their opportunities to benefit from higher education.

Dislocation of marginalised communities from the university

Lack of educational opportunity inhibits full participation in society and can lead to cumulative disadvantage, for example through being trapped in low paid work (Nolan and Whelan 1999; Armano and Murgia 2011). Educational inequality in Ireland and Britain is persistent, some can be mapped to specific geographical areas, some is intergenerational and class based as described below. However, as Dockery, Seymour and Koshy (2016) point out ascertaining factors influencing access to university education is extremely complex.

The determinants of lack of educational attainment and progression are a combination of personal, economic, social and cultural factors. Financial issues deter disadvantaged groups from entering higher education in the first place or make continuing with courses more difficult (McCoy et al 2009). Lack of or unaffordable childcare is also a significant barrier (Maxwell and Dorrity 2010). There is clear statistical evidence that social class is a significant determinant of education. According to a review by Perry and Francis (2010, 5) 'children's educational attainment is overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income, and qualifications'. Those from higher social classes have greater educational attainment and progression. Additionally, research shows large differences in progression to higher education depending on where people live. The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) reports that 'in Dublin there are differences in participation between postal districts – over 99% of 18–20 year olds in one postal district go on to higher education, while in another the rate is as low as 15%' (HEA 2015, 14). Although the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

found that 50% of the entrant population to full-time degrees in 2015 had parents/guardians without a higher education (HE) qualification, just 23% of those students attended a high tariff institution compared to 40% of students who parents/guardians have a HE qualification. There were also significant spatial/area-based differences in participation rates across England (HEFCE, 2017).

Discussion on dislocation gains from the use of the concept of Socio-Economic Status (SES) used by Dockery et al (2009) in which they draw attention to 'strong feedback cycles which operate across generations' (p. 1697). Specifically, they highlight links between parental SES and likely educational outcomes for their children. Higher parental SES 'contribute to informational power' and also to income, prestige, status and civic engagement (p. 1697). Breaking that cycle is critical to enhanced mobility for subsequent generations. What this also indicates is that using postcodes is in itself too simplistic an analysis, even if there are neighbourhood forces that militate against SES progression. It indicates the importance of lifelong learning in breaking intergenerational cycles. Parents, and also grandparents, who return to education create new opportunities for themselves. In doing this they create an intergenerational bridge that mitigates the potential negative impact of their own previous unsatisfactory experiences within the formal educational system on subsequent generations.

While there have been many efforts over many years to widen university participation, including financial supports such as grants and allowances, educational inequality remains persistent. Indeed studies have highlighted 'that equalising formal rights to education, or proportionate patterns of participation, does not equate with equal rates of success or outcomes for disadvantaged groups' (Lynch 1999, 16). In Ireland the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (2015) stated that:

> neither the rapid expansion in higher education nor the removal of tuition fees have significantly reduced the most glaring inequities in access, namely, the under-representation of the lower socio-economic groups and the small share of mature students (p. 22)

Similarly, in the UK, the Social Mobility Commission (2017) found that:

> Despite universities' success in opening their doors to more working class youngsters than ever before, retention rates and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved over the period... In higher education, it will take more than 80 years before the participation gap between students from disadvantaged and more advantaged areas closes (p. 4).

The reasons for this continued inequality are multiple and complex and inlcude the impact of funding cuts, social and cultural barriers and attitudinal factors. In Ireland, the impact of the 2008 crisis and subsequent neo-liberal austerity measures following the collapse of the so-called Celtic Tiger have resulted in cuts to grants schemes (including higher, vocational and trainee grants), changes in eligibility criteria for allowances and grants that have impacted on mature students, increased charges for study at higher education through the Student Contribution Fund and cuts to community education funding. Even prior to the onset of these cuts, McCoy et al (2009, 86) found that 'grant payments typically meet between just one-quarter and one-third of average expenditure levels of disadvantaged students', who are hence under greater levels of financial strain. A further disincentive for people to engage in higher education is the lack of supports for part-time study in the Irish system. Part-time students 'are not entitled to receive the basic state grant nor many of the supplementary supports available to their full-time equivalents' (McCoy et al 2009, 4; OECD 2006). However, in September

2017 the Irish Higher Education Authority announced the extension of its Student Assistance Fund to certain groups of part-time students covering expenses such as books, rent, heating/lighting bills, food, travel and childcare although it is still too early to assess the impact of this initiative.

Social and cultural factors also create barriers to education. These could include the feeling that higher education is remote and alien to family life (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998), that it does not align with perceptions of masculinity and occupational status in working class areas, it conflicts with caring responsibilities, or could have a psychological dimension such as low self-esteem and limited self-belief related to wider inequalities (Maxwell and Dorrity, 2010). Perry and Francis (2010) argue that these factors, combined with economic barriers, lead many working-class people to believe that university is 'not for the likes of us' (p. 8) and propose that education needs to actively include working-class people, 'by supporting their agency to exercise more control over their education' (ibid, p. 18). Such supports must be multi-faceted (practical and pastoral) and reflective of a complex range of factors according to Maxwell and Dorrity (2010) in order to sustain students, especially mature students, those with little formal education and those who had previous negative experiences in education. Similarly McGlynn (2014, 22) argues that quality adult education should include a good matching of courses to the needs of individual learners and provide 'programme supports' and 'flexibility to take into account the life circumstances of the adult participants'. Analyses of widening participation strategies in Wales 'suggest that most effective are programmes such as outreach which provide supported routes to undergraduate degrees' (Stephens 2015: 370).

Like Perry and Francis (2010), Harwood et al (2013) point to the significance of attitudinal factors, in particular imagining having a university education, and highlight how young people from disadvantaged communities believe that university is not for them. Harwood et al (2013) explore the perspectives of young people who live in disadvantaged areas in Australia, refugee youths living in Australia and indigenous Australian aboriginals. They examine the significance of cultural norms and expectations, and how for these young people:

> being unable to imagine a university education is intricately bound up with a sense of not belonging to education, a sense that is linked to the experience of poverty and disadvantage (Harwood et al 2013, 33).

While the young people in the study have an imagination of the university (e.g. they state that it is a place of big buildings, posh), they lack an imagination of *having or getting* a university education. The young people articulate that university is for smart and rich people and depict themselves and their communities as lazy and not smart (Harwood et al 2013), which may reflect the internalisation of stigmatisation and low self-esteem. The young people interviewed by Harwood et al essentially self-identify as not being full members of society, being outside the pale in terms of even imagining the possibility of university education.

How these young people construct their own place in society, plays out in the complexity and interdependence inherent in contemporary society. McCarthy (1990) highlights links between mutual recognition and personal identity which should also extend to collective identity for groups within society that are given designations of exclusion perhaps on the basis of their economic status, their religious beliefs, where they live, their race, their skin colour, gender or any number of other identifiers. McCarthy talks about 'reciprocal vulnerability that calls for guarantees of mutual consideration to preserve both the integrity of individuals and the web of interpersonal relations in which they form and maintain their identities' (1990, x).

How and Why Ought Universities address inequality

Many scholars have written about the role of universities in widening or equalising access to quality higher education and breaking cycles of educational inequality, whether class, race, geographical or intergenerationally based (e.g. Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Brennan and Naidoo, 2008; Kezar et al, 2005). Harwood et al (2013) highlight lacunae in how universities relate to those with precarious relationships to education for example, access programmes often pursue links to schools, which can miss those who are not embedded in formal education. They argue that universities have a moral responsibility to both recognise and respond to education inequality and precariousness. Essential to enhancing access for marginalised groups is the building of familiarity with the university as a place in order to normalise and demystify the university environment. As they state, 'the very act of "being" within the campus environment is significant' (Harwood et al 2013, 36). Universities must listen to 'the other' and connect to people at varying points throughout their experience of education, in different settings and with different programmes. This connection is essential if participation in university education is to be established or maintained (Harwood et al 2013, 26). Wilson-Strydom (2015) in her work on South Africa argues that while policy and practice to widen participation for those who are excluded from universities is essential, there also needs to be a shift in focus in universities to understand the 'conversion factors that enhance or limit students' capabilities to convert their place at university into successful functioning as a university student' (p.152).

Boyer (1990, 77) proposed an orientation in which 'higher education must focus with special urgency on questions that affect profoundly the destiny of all'. In his model universities would engage, internally as a community of scholars, across and between disciplines, in addressing the big challenges of the day and contributing to and benefitting from a dynamic interaction with wider society. This contribution has been conceptualised in a myriad of ways – as civic, community and democratic engagement (Post et al 2016, Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011, Biesta 2011) – all of which capture the social responsibility and impact on society of the university sector towards the public good. Such a mission has been embedded through numerous approaches across universities including in participatory and applied research, service learning, access and outreach programmes and advisory services (Doberneck et al 2010).

Fitzgerald et al (2016) echo Boyer's (1990) re-evaluation of the role of the professoriate. They advocate that the university should 'make engagement scholarship a central aspect of its work, spanning the spectrum of its disciplinary units, centres, and institutes' (Fitzgerald et al 2016, 245). They support this contention by identifying universities as social institutions that thus have 'an implicit responsibility to serve the public' (Fitzgerald et al 2016, 245). They propose that universities become less top-down and more 'demand-driven, creating a culture that reinforces the democratization of knowledge' (Fitzgerald et al 2016, 247), and adopt co-creative approaches. Universities need to engage in a sophisticated way that recognises individual and collective needs are not only economic or job related. Fitzgerald et al (2016) analysis is also relevant to the concept of 'reflexive activation' originally developed by Warner et al (2005). This can be defined as a way to 'balance the educational, social and economic needs of the individual and the wider community' and to include the learner in the decision-making process (Ó Tuama 2016, 108).

Adult education is one of the dynamic ways universities engage with the wider world, but external engagement itself does not necessarily sit comfortably with many universities and can be contentious (Watson et al 2011). Jongbloed et al (2008) talk about universities 'being forced' to re-examine their wider societal mission and the COMMIT project's (2016, 28) analysis of 'external drivers' in European universities seems to endorse this. However, reluctantly or otherwise, universities are embedded in a complex environment. Jongbloed et al (2008) summarise this as local, regional, national and international having external functions around social and economic impact. They highlight the liminal fuzzy boundaries between

inside and out, which is the very habitus of adult education, in areas like 'teaching, research and knowledge transfer' (Jongbloed et al 2008, 304).

Adult Education as a Community Engagement
Adult education does not cover all the bases in terms of the university mission for community engagement. Neither should it be peripheral. From 2013 ACE, the adult education centre at University College Cork, in the Republic of Ireland adopted a mission to 'lead the university's outreach mission through contributing to the networked university concept' (Ó Tuama, 2013: 16). Through this mission it is re-invigorating both external engagement with a range of community partnerships and also animating internal partnerships within the university. ACE delivers accredited and non-accredited part-time programmes to approximately 3,000 students (primarily over the age of 21) annually ranging from general interest to professional development. These programmes are delivered on site and online throughout the island of Ireland.

ACE also leads two pilot projects aimed at enhancing access to university in marginalised areas that are dislocated from the university, opening wider educational opportunities, and animating social and economic opportunity through a partnership model with local communities and stakeholder networks. The urban project, Cork Learning Neighbourhoods, fits under the umbrella of the Cork UNESCO Learning City project. UCC is one of the four founding partners and a strong proponent of the UNESCO Learning City project, in partnership with Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board and Cork Institute of Technology. On behalf of the university ACE promotes a programme called 'The Free University' in the annual Cork Lifelong Learning Festival which includes learning events on campus and in the community. Learning Neighbourhoods is currently operating in four Cork city neighbourhoods, Ballyphehane, Knocknaheeny, Mayfield and Togher. It aims to include all denizens[2], agencies and stakeholders to nurture synergies and learning connections at city, national and global levels using an EcCoWell approach (Kearns, 2012). Learning Neighbourhoods use a community development approach to build trust, embeddedness and community ownership of the project. People, their skills, knowledge, and identity are the strengths and assets that communities can activate to create futures (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2006).

Through consultation and involvement Learning Neighbourhoods aims to build 'authentic reciprocity in partnerships between those working at colleges and universities and those in the wider community' (Hartley and Saltmarsh, 2016). The project recognises that working with community and education organisations, 'grass roots networks of learning champions', is essential to developing lifelong learning as they focus 'on building relationships to support people into and through learning' (Sandbrook 2009, 4). It draws on the vision of Learning Cities outlined by Sandbrook (2009) that they should celebrate community and culture, be explicit about encouraging people to recognise their learning and develop a sense of themselves as learners, and actively support the collaboration of networks of providers and other organisations involved in lifelong learning to enable learners pursue their learning pathways.

The pilot rural project, Skellig Centre for Research and Innovation, aims at leveraging the potential of the university through on-site teaching, learning and research to contribute to the overall mission to re-establish the town of Cahersiveen as the agora for the western end of the peninsula of Iveragh. This peninsula has experienced population decline, few career and

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[2] Denizen here refers to all people in a neighbourhood, regardless of their legal or residence status, including citizens and non-citizens, those homeless or in any form of residence including institutional contexts and those who work in, visit and transition through the neighbourhood and others who identify with or have affiliations to the neighbourhood.

employment opportunities, reduction of services, feelings of isolation and the outward migration of young people, the university is working in partnership with Kerry County Council and South Kerry Development Partnership and with extensive denizen and stakeholder engagement.

These projects challenge the dislocation from the university highlighted by Harwood et al (2013). ACE, in a small study of adult learners from areas characterised by deprivation and low SES, has also documented feelings of vulnerability and insecurity in terms of one's identity and sense of belonging to the university (O'Sullivan et al, forthcoming). Respondents felt that University College Cork (UCC) was a foreign place, exclusively for rich and middle class people. They articulated an expectation that they would be told to leave for being the wrong type of person and thus not deserving to be there, and one felt that even the walls were saying 'you do not belong here'. The projects align with McCarthy's (1990) advocacy of mutual consideration to support individual and collective integrity and identity and aim to institutionalise university-community engagement to tackle educational inequality.

Conclusions

Educational exclusion and inequality are the sorts of challenges that are not resolved by short-term policy initiatives nor by any one part of the educational landscape. All of us learn in informal and non-formal contexts, virtually everyone experiences formal learning. The university sector is just one dimension of the formal sector. Aspirations to study at university should be open to as many as possible, but it should never be presented as the ultimate goal. Universities, like all major institutions, have to re-invent themselves to maintain relevance and in the contemporary era one key area of relevance is their role vis-à-vis the wider community and in addressing the grand challenges of today. One of those challenges is in making university education more available and responsive, especially to the needs of those currently excluded as piloted by ACE through a model based on collaborative culture, working in and with the community it serves. In this mission universities need to enhance the links and partnership between higher education and disadvantaged communities, drive familiarity with the university and generate a sense of expectation in the community rather than exclusion.

The idea of expectation is to counter the sorts of barriers identified by Harwood et al (2013) and help build more robust individual and community identities in line with McCarthy (1990) and expand the type of weak ties and cognitive flexibility identified by Granovetter (1983). Together this can build individual and community resilience strategies to help create new imaginaries about full participation in society including access to education, a greater share of economic output, demands for better services and opportunities and recognition as equal citizens and members of society. This can help place greater value on learning as an enabler of individual and community change and reduce cultural barriers to access to university education. It is not the solution to inequality but it has the potential to be a key component in giving individuals and communities new voice, confidence and experiences to address the persistence of educational inequality that directly impacts them intergenerationally.

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