A reply to O'Sullivan, O'Tuama and Kenny

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Siobhan O'Sullivan, Seamus O'Tuama and Lorna Kenny's (2017) *Universities as key responders to education inequality* offer a novel way to engage communities which struggle to relate to their local universities. The authors rightly remind universities of their status as publicly funded organisations, arguing that this translates into an ethical obligation to engage with local communities and to challenge social mobility and inequality (2-3). The authors draw upon international comparative data which shows that accessing education regardless of age can have positive effects on life chances, collective economic/social prosperity and individual social capital (4-6).

The authors argue that, through initiatives that engage deprived communities, a 'collaborative culture' can be generated which has the potential to 'drive familiarity with the university and generate a sense of expectation in the community rather than exclusion' (16). Recognising that 'retention rates and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved' (8) over the last few years, the authors offer an innovative suggestion for opening up higher education to those groups that feel 'marginalised' from university life. The authors do this by introducing a case study from the University College Cork (13-16), explaining how adult education promises to give greater 'access to university' for marginalised groups 'through a partnership model with local communities and stakeholder networks' (14) that 'can build individual and community resilience strategies to help create new imaginaries about full participation in society' (17).

Cumulative disadvantage theory (CDT)

Throughout this article, the authors do well to blend theory and practice; drawing upon a nuanced theoretical framework to convey the message that opening up universities to 'disadvantaged' and 'marginalised' groups will offer the potential for challenging 'lifelong' inequality. Specifically, they draw upon a variation of CDT to make their case (Dannefer, 2003), stating that 'lack of educational opportunity inhibits full participation in society and can lead to *cumulative disadvantage*' (O'Sullivan et al. 2017, 6) which universities are well suited to address.

According to Dannefer (2003, 237) CDT is the 'systematic tendency for interindividual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g. money, health, status) with the passage of time'. CDT is based largely on the idea that societal structures are one of the key sources of inequality because they are 'unfair' and 'benefit … some individuals well beyond the value of their contributions while ignoring or minimizing the equally meritorious contributions of others'

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(Dannefer 2003, 331-330). Developing the CDT approach further, Ferraro and Shippee (2009) have also suggested that long-term exposure to 'unfair' social processes puts individuals at risk of adverse social and personal outcomes. While CDT (and similar theories) has its strengths, not least for highlighting various institutional barriers to equality, it does have certain structuralist and deterministic overtones. Indeed, there is a sense of inevitability around the notion that exposure to unfavourable social situations leads to inequality throughout life.

This idea that *structural* changes will help tackle lifelong inequality is a key theme in O'Sullivan, O'Tuama and Kenny's (2017) piece. However, the type of university-led community engagement the authors endorse will only make a difference if people choose to engage with universities once the barriers to their participation have been removed. As Ferraro and Shippee (2009, 335) outline, while it is true that 'inequality accumulates over the life course … resource mobilization and human agency play critical roles in how trajectories are shaped'. While the authors address the 'resource mobilisation' (335) side of overcoming lifelong inequality, there is scope for more to be said about the motivations for engaging with, and the response to, university sponsored outreach programmes amongst disadvantaged communities.

Overcoming disadvantage in adulthood: the right approach for universities?

The above comments should not detract from the obvious contribution the authors make in further illuminating the structural barriers disadvantaged groups face in accessing 'lifelong learning' and the benefits that they are excluded from as a result. Nevertheless, the range of approaches available for addressing lifelong disadvantage, and their relative strengths and weaknesses, is not discussed in great depth. As such, the authors' conclusion, that community outreach programmes and adult learning opportunities have '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' (O'Sullivan, O'Tuama and Kenny 2017, 7), lacks the strength it may have had if a more comprehensive examination had been provided.

One particularly prominent issue not considered by the authors is whether culminative disadvantage is best tackled early in life rather than in adulthood, with some contention in the literature as to whether disadvantage is 'reversible' (Ferraro and Kelley-Moore, 2003, 4). Indeed, contrary to the central tenet of their article, there is a compelling argument to suggest that exclusion from university for disadvantaged groups is most acute prior to adulthood. Using English state-school education as an example to illustrate this point, inequality begins at an early age for those from economically deprived backgrounds. Disadvantaged status is often narrowly defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as 'pupils eligible for free school meals at any point within the past 6 years (Ever 6 FSM) and pupils looked after by the local authority' (Macleod et al., 2015, 8). As children go through primary and secondary school, the 'gap' between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers gets steadily wider. According to a recent report, which drew upon data from 2016, for those starting early years education (children under 5 years old), the attainment gap (i.e. what children achieve at a specific point in time) between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was 4.3 months. By age 15/16, pupils in 2014 from an economically disadvantaged background were, on average, 19.3 months behind their non-disadvantaged peers (Andrews, Robinson, and Hutchinson 2017, 13).

This trend means that, by the time students sit their GCSEs, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are substantially more likely to receive poorer grades than their non-disadvantaged peers. In 2016 (under the 'old' A*-E GSCE system) only 43.1% of disadvantaged students in state-funded schools achieved an A*-C in GCSE English and maths compared to 70.6% of non-disadvantaged pupils (Department for Education, 2016, 19). This trend continues throughout a young person's post-16 education. Official 2016/17 DfE statistics

showed that disadvantaged pupils were 10% more likely than their non-disadvantaged peers to enter a further education (FE) institution which offered non A-level alternatives. Furthermore, disadvantaged pupils were 8% less likely to be in a 'sustained destination' after school – meaning that they were more likely to change course or drop out of FE study (Department for Education, 2017, 10).

The gap in progress and attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers means that, by the time young people are considering degree level courses in the UK, disadvantaged pupils are, on the one hand, less likely to have followed traditional academic routes and, on the other, less likely to have achieved grades that permit them admission to top UK universities. Amongst those students receiving top A-level grades, the *Russell Group* outline on its website (as of November 7, 2017) that 'in 2009, only 232 students who had been on free school meals (FSMs) achieved 3As at A-level or the equivalent. This was 4.1% of the total number of FSM students taking A-levels, and less than an estimated 0.3% of all those who had received FSMs when aged 15′. Arguably, this serves to compound the notion that university education is not for disadvantaged groups from an early age.

How Universities can help break down barriers for disadvantaged young people

Despite evidence to suggest that exclusion from universities occurs prior to adulthood, the authors are still correct to assert that universities can and should play a role in overcoming lifelong inequality and disadvantage. In terms of motivating disadvantaged individuals to participate in higher education, one area that universities may want to consider revisiting is careers advice in schools. The Technical and Further Education Act (HM Government, 2017) will soon give technical education and apprenticeship providers legal 'access [to] registered pupils during the relevant phase of their education'. While a greater emphasis on non-academic careers advice is welcomed, universities also have to make the case for higher education regardless of background. As the authors rightly point out, young people from disadvantaged people feel 'disengaged' from university life (O'Sullivan, O'Tuama and Kenny 2017, 10-11) and it is imperative that they understand that technical education and apprenticeships are only two of their options. Indeed, universities can and should help spread the idea that, for all young people, there are a range of high quality academic and non-academic opportunities available. In doing so, universities should also challenge the idea that young people should choose one path in life over another simply because of their background.

Yet, changing attitudes through well rounded careers advice is only half the battle. Even if young people from disadvantaged backgrounds feel motivated to attend university, the data presented above shows that they are statistically less likely to attain the same level of GCSE and A-level grades as their non-disadvantaged peers – impeding their chances of attending the top universities in the country. Therefore, as the authors argue, universities also have an obligation to break down the structural barriers which stop disadvantaged young people from getting on in higher education. This may involve, as Boliver et al. (2017) suggests, admitting disadvantaged young people into university with a worse academic record than their peers. Although Boliver et al. (2017) outline that a lot of work is already being done to consider the contextual barriers facing students' access to university, more still needs to be done. In particular, it is about changing attitudes, not just outside of the university, but also within it – ensuring that all university stakeholders understand that attainment does not always mirror potential, especially for those with less opportunities in early life.

Disclosure statement

The author is an educational professional working for a third-sector organisation. All opinions and views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessary reflect those of his employer.

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