

# The operation of inequality within postgraduate study in the LSE Sociology department

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## Background

My research is a continuation of the prior research conducted by Change Maker Alice Lee: *'LSE Widening Participation's HeadStart scheme: supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds in their transition from school to university'*. Lee's research investigated undergraduate students who attended state-funded schools and colleges prior to attending LSE, and how this impacted their university experience in terms of the social, financial, and academic. The widening participation team work with London non-selective state school/college students, to enable them to access to undergraduate education.

I have chosen to continue this research as I feel a personal affiliation for the topic as a postgraduate student who also attended state-funded school. This has motivated me to extend the investigation of underrepresented students' experience at LSE to also cover postgraduate students because there is an absence of measures in place to address the issue of access to postgraduate study for students from disadvantaged backgrounds at LSE. Despite LSE's population being constituted of a postgraduate majority there are no schemes like that of Widening Participation.

## Research Question

This report is an explorative investigation into LSE postgraduate students in the sociology department, who come from underrepresented backgrounds, and their experience of postgraduate study. I investigate this through conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with master's students in the sociology department who attended UK state-funded schools and colleges. However, I recognise that this report may not adequately investigate access and the experience of elite postgraduate education for the most disadvantaged students.

I have devised the following broad research question to investigate this:

**How is the experience of postgraduate education impacted by coming from a state-educated background?**

## Literature review

The LSE *'Access and Participation Plan'* [2021-2022 to 2024-2025] reveals interesting inequalities amongst students in the institution (LSE 2020). However, the report only considers these inequalities within the undergraduate student population. The plan highlights that there is an attainment gap of multiple deprivation students. This absence of investigating inequalities amongst LSE's postgraduate population is indicative of the perpetual problem of students from underrepresented backgrounds accessing postgraduate education.

This report is grounded in a Bourdieusian understanding of capital and habitus. I will consider the impact of social, economic, and cultural capital; how they intersect and are exchanged with one another in contributing to a habitus which may alienate disadvantaged students at the LSE

(Bourdieu 1984). Such capitals are also implicated in the class ceiling, as conceptualised by Friedman et al (2015). Inheriting social, cultural, and economic capital advantages these individuals by facilitating access to elite occupations. Although this is conceptualised in relation to occupation, this can also be transferred to thinking about access to and inequalities within postgraduate education.

## Methodology

I conducted four semi-structured in-depth interviews with postgraduate students in the sociology department, all of whom attended UK state-funded schools/colleges, and at no point attended an independently funded school/college. I conducted the interviews via Zoom video call as per LSE's Covid-19 guidance. The interviews ranged in duration from 1-2 hours and were narrative-based. I used Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis to guide the process. Considering my own personal affiliation with the research, this is likely to impact the process of data analysis, I thus embraced the emotional response as an embodied process.

## Data Analysis and Findings

### Participants

All interviewees attended top UK universities for their undergraduate degree, three of which attended Russell Group universities, and are all now studying full-time master's degrees in the sociology department. Participants varied in the time between undergraduate to postgraduate study, ranging from immediate transition to a gap of four years. The ages of participants ranged from 23-27. All participants were also white and therefore racial inequalities were not investigated in the report.

### Social/extra-curricular

Generally, interviewees had positive social experiences during their degrees, and they all forged meaningful relationships. However, a frequent criticism of the social side of LSE was that there was an absence of structures in place to facilitate social activity. Both Alex and Bethany expressed they felt that LSE lacked in offering students creative outlets, Bethany felt that the societies were '*geared towards undergrads*' and were career-oriented '*I went to the freshers' fair... it was terrifying... I was chased around by people in suits!*'

Having a social network in London also contributed to a source of anxiety for participants. Michael knew '*no one*' in London prior to moving for his postgraduate study and so lived in an LSE residence. Alex had an existing social network in London which thus contributed to his social capital, Amelia also expressed that although she was new to London she was moving with a social network, which alleviated the stress of having to establish a new social network. '*Because I came to London living with friends and having like a network in London... I wasn't relying on it as my main social base.*' – Amelia.

These statements from Alex and Amelia reveal how social capital operates in the holistic experience of the masters. Amelia acknowledged that having this network was a '*privilege*' and without it she '*would have found the experience scary*'.

All participants stated that the relationships they had forged had generally emerged from their course or other classroom interactions. Michael believed this to be because '*we all kind of have a similar passion*'.

## Financial

All participants tried to access financial support provided by LSE but only Alex and Michael received any support. Both Amelia and Bethany expressed disappointment in the process of applying for the graduate support scheme and not being successful. Bethany revealed that she was not eligible for the financial support because her financial need was 'too great'.

All participants engaged in a form of paid employment between graduating from their first degree and starting postgraduate education. All participants highlighted that engaging in this employment was necessary for them to fund their postgraduate education. For example, Bethany, who worked full-time for four years before embarking on her master's degree, articulated this financial necessity:

*'I think, like academically, emotionally, physically, spiritually – whatever you want to call it, I probably could have. But financially, absolutely not... I think part of me is sad I didn't do it sooner.'*  
– Bethany.

Participants also highlighted how the burden of managing their finances affected them psychologically, with all participants expressing that they experience financial anxiety in relation to funding their degrees.

## Academic

Michael, Bethany, and Amelia expressed that they had experienced imposter syndrome whilst at LSE. For Michael this occurred after receiving disappointing summative feedback, which he stated caused 'a crisis of confidence' leading him to question his ambition of a career in academia. Amelia linked her experience of imposter syndrome as intersecting with gendered classroom dynamics, expressing her belief that *'[imposter syndrome] intersects with the gender thing'*. When both Amelia and Bethany were questioned on how they found vocally contributing to their classes during they drew upon such gendered dynamics in the classroom.

*'I think it's definitely gendered... I'd like to think my perception is correct that men on the course did speak more than women overall, and for longer... despite there being way more women on the course.'* – Amelia.

Michael and Alex acknowledged an awareness of their privilege as men in the classroom.

*'I'm the only man in [my class] so I was always very cautious about dominating the discussion.'* – Michael.

Considering other inequalities, the participants alluded to those coming from privately educated and higher socioeconomic class backgrounds as having greater confidence to speak during class.

*'There are some people with very little to say but feel comfortable saying it, and then equally I'm sure there are people who, you know, don't say much, but have more insightful points to make.'* – Alex.

Participants stressed they were happy with the available academic support. Interestingly, however, Bethany and Alex felt an element of regret for not reaching out for more support, such as attending office hours. Bethany attributed this to coming from a state-educated background where *'you're used to no one helping you, so you just figure out you'll do it yourself.'*

## Overall

As I have mentioned, all participants expressed that they believed themselves to occupy a position of privilege. I believe that this demonstration of reflexivity is likely a result of the participants studying sociology, and so are perhaps more likely to consider the operation of inequalities. Consequently, this suggests that it may be valuable to conduct research on disadvantaged students beyond only the sociology department.

Because of the nature of this research, only those who were 'successful' in overcoming such financial or social hurdles are represented, and consequently, the voices of those who did not break through this 'class ceiling' are not. The participants' positive reflection of their time at LSE highlights the importance of fostering a diverse student population and working to address the obstacles that those from more disadvantaged backgrounds face in entering postgraduate education.

## Recommendations

### **Greater consideration of inequality in the postgraduate population**

LSE should fund more extensive research into inequality at the postgraduate level, considering a broader range of intersections (e.g race, sexuality, disability.)

### **Clarity on available financial support**

LSE should provide greater clarity within the graduate fees and funding on what support is available prior to application.

### **Holistic support for disadvantaged students**

It would be useful for academic mentors to organise routine meetings with such students to discuss their progress as well as any anxieties they may be facing.

### **Greater student autonomy in the sociology department**

The sociology department could offer greater student autonomy in organising more social events for postgraduate students.

### **Encourage undergraduates from disadvantaged backgrounds**

LSE should encourage more undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds to consider postgraduate education. This could be implemented through a mentoring scheme which undergraduate students who express interest in postgraduate education and postgraduate students.

## References

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