

## Background

South Asians represent the second-largest minority group in the United Kingdom. They have had to navigate complex racial and class-based barriers across several generations, with higher education being no exception. During my time in London, I came to appreciate the particular British-South Asian identity that has emerged from these diasporic experiences. Building upon a staff-proposed project of researching the impact of race and class at LSE, I chose to focus specifically on South Asian home students. I sought to understand how their racial and class identities impacted their experiences at the London School of Economics, what implications this held, and how their unique challenges could be addressed.

## Literature review

There is substantial anthropological and sociological literature about the experiences of South Asian students at British universities. Some themes I encountered during my literature review informed my methodology and approach. Studies typically focused on interviewing South Asian students to analyze their experiences. Hussain and Bagguley (2016) highlighted the use of reflexivity and negotiation with parents as key components of social mobility of South Asian women in British universities. Scandone (2018) underscored the value of participating in minority ethnic university societies and courses focused on critical race analysis as an empowering source for South Asian students, and including "out" groups (like white students) in these activities also helped dispel stereotypes in the wider community. In a different study, Scandone (2018) further noted that widening participation in education itself wasn't enough to guarantee parity between South Asians and their white counterparts in post-graduation employment as South Asian students and their families didn't benefit from the cultural integration (as expressed in their "habitus") into the wider British professional space like their white peers. My review crystalized many concepts for me, providing a framework and reference point to conduct research that is both original and builds upon existing academic work.

## Methodology

I decided to analyze the experiences of South Asian students through Pierre Bourdieu's frameworks of capital, which emphasizes the importance of social and cultural capital in our interactions with the world. Bourdieu is arguably one of the most influential sociologists in history, and his frameworks have been a common feature in studies of race and class in academia. Focusing on social and cultural capital allowed me to specifically highlight how race and class could impact a student's life, as access to different forms of these capitals is often based on the communal identities a person acquires while growing up. I conducted one-hour-long interviews with seven different South Asian home students at the London School of Economics. I aimed to create a diverse sample, representing various genders, religions, nationalities, programs, and year groups at the school. These biographic interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of their experiences at LSE, focusing on their academic, social, and professional trajectories. Students were also given space to raise issues directly. I analyzed the interview transcripts to identify common themes, their root causes, and potential solutions.

## Findings

**"I felt only people who looked like me were going to be my friends"**

**My analysis revealed three prominent themes :**

### 1. Living with parents and commuting was a notable issue.

Due to escalating costs, many interviewees were living with their parents (if based in London) to cut down on expenses. Less affluent students were unsurprisingly more likely to opt for this arrangement. Some students, women in particular, also felt that cultural sensitivities and norms made them more comfortable with commuting over living in LSE accommodation. Commuters were frustrated because they benefited less from LSE's offerings, for example, not being able to stay late to take part in important developmental activities like workshops, club involvements, networking ,etc, and less-affluent and female students were disproportionately affected.

### 2. South Asian students were extremely likely to only be socially involved in their own racial and religious groups.

In fact, the vast majority of interviewees said they did not have any close relationships outside of their racial group. Interestingly, racial identities were far more important than class boundaries in social groups: students from less affluent backgrounds were able to leverage shared cultural and social identities with other South Asian students to gain access to vital social and cultural capital, such as knowledge about career opportunities, accolades, connections, etc. Therefore, spaces such as the Pakistan Society and Bangladesh Society became important drivers of career growth for many students. However, these network benefits were locked within racial groups. Students who managed to transcend racial boundaries in their social lives already had more diverse social groups before LSE, usually attributable to private school education. They had an easier time making friends across the board compared to students who grew up in racially homogenous neighborhoods. Students often expressed disappointment in having a less diverse social circle and asserted it was unintentional. Cultural and religious societies also emerged as significant sources of empowerment and community. Most students had met close friends almost exclusively through these societies. Many articulated these were the only spaces on campus where they felt "understood" and "comfortable".

This is in contrast to other societies, particularly some sports societies. One student mentioned leaving a sports society because it was mostly "white British people", and even though everyone was "very nice", the society's social culture being built around drinking and clubbing made them feel isolated due to their cultural and religious beliefs.

### 3. A major source of stress for students was applications for internships interfering with their studies, applications being cited as a bigger stress than classes.

This transcended class boundaries and was felt across different programs. Many attributed it to interactions with peers mostly focusing on career prospects, spring week applications, etc. This led many to devote significant time to tasks like cover letter writing and interview preparation as early as their first year. Students with student loans were particularly victimized. They were often terrified that missing a Spring Week or summer internship would lower the ceiling on their career and ability to pay back loans in good time. The broader LSE student culture seemed to push students previously not interested in "high-paying" job positions towards them. This often meant students changed interests from fields like research and civil service to investment banking and consulting. One student mentioned a pressure to "actually use their LSE degree" as the motivation behind switching career interests from geographic research to banking. Another student said they were "tired of being belittled" by "finance students" for doing a "fake degree" like anthropology. South Asian students are already less likely to pursue humanities and social sciences, and there seems to be additional pressure on them to abandon their interests. Due to a lack of South Asian students in social science programs at LSE compared to economics, finance, etc., and the tendency to socialize mostly within one's own racial group, South Asian students in social sciences felt particularly isolated, as their friends weren't in their programs. Sometimes, these pressures predated their enrollment in LSE and came from parents, but this wasn't usually the case. In fact, contrary to modern stereotypes about overbearing Asian parents, the vast majority of students believed their parents empowered them to be independent.

## Recommendations

### Support for Commuters:

- Establish an Uber voucher system for commuting students to attend society events that run until after 6pm, for students who have shown commitment to their societies.
- Establish a dedicated point of contact at LSE Life for Commuters, who can help students navigate the challenges of trying to get involved in life at LSE.
- Reevaluate the existing Off Campus Support Scheme to see if it is fulfilling its purpose and potential, and devise a more direct way of advertising its benefits to commuting students.

### Promoting racial and class inclusivity:

- Understand the racial compositions of LSE societies and try to promote more diversity by introducing cross-events with cultural and religious societies.
- Host a bi-annual event at LSE where all ethnic and cultural societies can come together to promote cross-pollination.
- Use LSE Welcome to explicitly talk about the experiences of different racial and class groups at LSE. Consider making some level of 'soft' racial awareness events mandatory as part of orientation.
- Form a committee to evaluate the role of alcohol as part of community life. Some international educational institutions, like the United World Colleges, have a model which reconciles alcohol consumption and abstinence that could be studied.

### Academics:

- Create better strategies for students to balance career and academics. This could involve opening a dialogue with recruiters to stop pressuring students to undergo rigorous selection processes as early as their first years or educating the students that their spring weeks or internships will not define their whole careers.

## References

- Bagguley, P., & Hussain, Y. (2014). Negotiating mobility: South Asian women and higher education. *Sociology*, 50(1), 43–59.
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