



# 'You got into Oxbridge?' Under-represented students' experiences of an elite university in the south of England

Joshua E. Stubbs<sup>1</sup>  | Emily C. Murphy<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education, Psychology in Education Research Centre (PERC), University of York, York, UK

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education, Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

## Abstract

Amid concerns about the skewed socio-demographic composition of England's elite universities, this study sought to better understand what undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds found supportive in the process of them gaining an offer of admission from a prestigious university, and their social and academic experience of higher education. Twelve undergraduates who self-identified as originating from under-represented backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants needed to experience explicit validation of their academic capabilities at national level, and of their (localised) social identities, before considering Oxbridge a viable institution for 'people like them'; in other words, these students engaged in their own form of benchmarking depending on their school setting. On entering higher education, some participants experienced being 'alienated' from certain social and academic spaces on the basis that many other students already 'seemed to know each other'. Findings suggest that the application process to more prestigious universities could be prioritised at earlier stages of education among under-represented groups, and that widening participation initiatives cannot simply stop at entrance to higher education.

## Résumé

Cette étude vise à mieux comprendre les dispositifs qui ont permis aux étudiants de bachelor issus de groupes sous-représentés d'envisager leur admission dans une université

prestigieuse, ainsi que leur expérience sociale et académique. Tout cela dans un environnement qui est fortement marqué par des inégalités de représentation au sein des universités prestigieuses d'Angleterre dans leur composition sociodémographique. Douze étudiants de bachelor qui se sont identifiés comme étant issus de milieux sous-représentés ont participé à des entretiens semi-structurés. Les participants devaient avoir fait l'expérience d'une validation explicite de leurs capacités académiques au niveau national (examens), et de leur identité sociale (localisée) —rencontrer des étudiants avec le même parcours—avant de considérer Oxbridge (mot-valise désignant les deux plus prestigieuses universités britanniques, Oxford et Cambridge) comme une institution viable pour des «gens comme eux». Ce qui signifie que ces étudiants ont analysé leur environnement scolaire afin d'évaluer leurs chances d'être admis dans une université prestigieuse. Certains participants disent s'être senti «aliénés» dans certains espaces sociaux et académiques lors de leur entrée à l'université. En effet, la plupart des autres étudiants semblaient se connaître d'avant. Les résultats suggèrent que le processus de candidature ainsi que d'admission à des universités prestigieuses devraient être envisagés plus tôt dans le parcours scolaire des groupes sous-représentés, et que «les widening participation initiatives» ne devraient pas s'arrêter à l'admission dans une université.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Policy-makers' support for widening access to higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) has long been grounded in the belief that it will 'raise aspiration' and create a more socially mobile society (Harrison & Waller, 2018). Yet social representation in higher education, in particular within England's most elite universities, remains 'far from "fair"' (Boliver, 2013). The term 'under-represented' is generally used to refer to undergraduates who are the first in their family to enter higher education, as well as undergraduates who originate from working-class backgrounds; belong to ethnic minorities; or originate from regions that do not send a large proportion of students to higher education (Clancy & Goastelle, 2007; Office for Students, 2019). In the present study, the term 'under-represented' assumes a particular meaning in the sense that it is being used specifically in relation to undergraduates in the UK's most prestigious universities, where those from dominant social backgrounds are over-represented (Boliver, 2013; Crawford, Deardon, Micklewright., & Vignoles, 2017; Montacute & Cullinane, 2018).

Research directly examining issues of equity is warranted (Boliver, 2013; Crawford et al., 2017), and made more so given the growing body of evidence demonstrating that what undergraduates study and where has significant

repercussions for their employment and earnings prospects (Britton, Dearden, Shepard, & Vignoles, 2016; Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Sullivan, Parsons, Green, Wiggins, & Ploubidis., 2018; Wakeling & Savage, 2015). What can practically be done to assist students from under-represented backgrounds gain access to and flourish at prestigious universities, however, remains unclear (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Harrison, Davies, Harris, & Waller, 2018; O'Sullivan, Robson, & Winters, 2018; Younger, Gascoine, Menzies, & Torgeson, 2018).

This study addresses two key questions: first, what do undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds consider to have been supportive in the process of them accessing a prestigious university; and secondly, how do such undergraduates experience the social and academic aspects of higher education. Findings contribute to an evidence-based understanding of how students perceive and make sense of themselves in relation to elite educational environments, as well as ways in which educational institutions can mobilise towards becoming more socially and academically inclusive. In so doing, we engage reflection on 'structures of merit' in elite institutions that allocate reward unequally—whether directly or indirectly—across racialised, classed and gendered lines (Burke & McManus, 2011; Mijs, 2016).

## 1.1 | Accessing elite universities

In their exploration of students' decision-making processes regarding their choice of university, Reay, David, and Ball (2005) found that students from working-class backgrounds often failed to perceive themselves to be reflected in the characteristics that are associated with prestigious universities such as the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge). Instead, such students repeatedly spoke of a sense of belonging relating to local, modern and less prestigious universities, where they thought they would be better able to fit in and retain an 'authentic' sense of their social class and ethnic-based identities.

The dominant explanation for the reproduction of social inequalities in access to prestigious universities is couched in Bourdieu's (1984) notions of field, habitus, and cultural, social and economic capital (Donnelly & Evans, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). Put simply, the notion of field refers to social spaces in which what positions the status of individuals in relation to one another is their different abilities to mobilise a combination of resources and dispositions that are favourable in relation to the social space in question. The notion of habitus, moreover, refers to how our accumulated experiences inform our sense of self and, consequently, influence our decisions about how to behave in relation to other individuals or institutions based on our perceptions of what is expected from 'people like us'. Relational positionality is thereby emphasised. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that social reality exists:

*... twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus ... And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).*

In their study, Reay et al. (2005) found that this led to 'a process of class-matching ... between student and university; a synchronisation of familial and institutional habitus' (p. 92). In comparison to the students from working-class backgrounds, students from middle-class backgrounds often experienced an acute sense of belonging in relation to prestigious universities embodying characteristics that reflected those of their selective schools.

Several studies have found that students from middle-class backgrounds typically possess far more of the dominant cultural, social and economic capital that can be mobilised to gain access to prestigious universities (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Lareau, 2011; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital refers to the activities that one feels confident and knowledgeable engaging with; social capital refers to social contacts such as acquaintances, friends and family; and economic capital refers to financial assets such as income and wealth. Importantly, cultural, social and economic capital can be accumulated and exchanged, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, and in doing so, contribute to the reproduction

of social inequalities. It is important to emphasise that while middle-class (dominant) cultural and social capital is not inherently better than working-class cultural and social capital, it is of greater utility in relation to middle-class fields and can thus be utilised, intentionally or not, to outmanoeuvre and subjugate those without it (Bourdieu, 1984).

What is thus critical to acknowledge in theorising inclusivity in educational environments is that there is little neutrality to be found in how and when a mobilisation of forms of capital begins, nor what is recognised as 'potential' or 'talent' in educational 'technologies of assessments' (Burke & McManus, 2011; Mijs, 2016). This is particularly important in the intense field of competition to access Oxbridge, where success is predicated on poorly defined or 'vague knowledge requirements' (Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009). Thereby, while these are not neutral, schools and universities still become 'conversion' sites in which some social classes achieve social dominance in representation, and crucially, their social domination is thus legitimated (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Serre & Wagner, 2015).

While students from working-class backgrounds often apply to local universities due to financial constraints limiting their freedom to move to alternative regions (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Reay et al., 2005), those from middle-class backgrounds freely consider relocating and have access to more well-informed information and support from teachers, parents and peers during higher education application processes (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2005). In some cases, the mere act of moving out of home is taken to signal willingness to engage, to partake of the educational 'experience' (Burke & McManus, 2011). Students from middle-class backgrounds consequently perceive entering higher education to be something that 'people like us do' in contrast to students from working-class backgrounds for whom higher education can often be characterised as a risk-laden effort of going 'against the grain'. Where higher education is perceived foremost as a risk, it only becomes conceivable once an appreciable amount of academic success, as well as encouragement, has been experienced (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Finnegen & Merrill, 2017; Lareau, 2011; O'Sullivan et al., 2018; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009, 2010). What we might expect then is a differentiation between students' education in schools feeding a large proportion versus a low proportion of students to higher education in terms of a tailored strategic path that starts earlier or later—and orientates students towards more or less prestigious universities—which implicates a 'when' and 'how' element to application timings (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011; Montacute & Cullinane, 2018; Reay et al., 2005).

## 1.2 | Social and academic experiences of elite universities

Prior studies have demonstrated that undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds can find it difficult to fit in and experience a sense of belonging in university settings (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Finnegen & Merrill, 2017; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Read, Burke, & Crozier, 2018; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009; Reay et al., 2010). The sensation of being 'out of place' can detrimentally affect undergraduates' well-being, as well as their social and academic experiences, partly because it can lead them to question their capabilities (Finnegen & Merrill, 2017; Mallman, 2017; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016).

Mallman (2017), for example, interviewed Australian adults who had been socially mobile over the course of their lifetimes, and found that most had interpreted their academic struggles during HE as a result of personal inadequacy rather than structural disadvantage. Having since left the university environment, these adults recalled feelings of illegitimacy and insecurity in the presence of undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds. Mallman (2017) argues that undergraduates from working-class backgrounds are prone to misinterpret their comparative lack of dominant cultural capital as proof of their 'deficient intellectual ability' in comparison to undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds, and has referred to this experience as 'inherent vice'. One expectation is for this dynamic to play out more forcefully and be even more acute when dealing with the social and academic aspects of life in elite institutions. A study conducted at the (prestigious) University of Bristol illustrated how, when faced with students from middle-class backgrounds who centred their initial conversations around their private school

**TABLE 1** Summary of self-reported participant characteristics

	Gender	First generation	Secondary education	Further education	Low-income household	Ethnic minority	Region of UK
Emma	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Yes	Yes	South of England
Olivia	Female	Yes	Grammar	Grammar	Yes	No	South of England
Isabelle	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	FE College	Yes	No	South of Wales
Sophia	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	FE College	Yes	No	North of Wales
Amelia	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Yes	No	South of England
Mia	Female	Yes	Independent (Scholarship)	Independent (Scholarship)	Yes	No	North of England
Charlotte	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Yes	No	North of Scotland
Mila	Female	Yes	Comprehensive	Free	Yes	Yes	South of England
Ava	Female	No	Comprehensive	Grammar	No	No	South of England
Harper	Female	No	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	No	No	North of England
Liam <sup>a</sup>	Male	No	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	No	No	East of England
Aria	Female	No	Grammar	Grammar	No	Yes	South of England

<sup>a</sup>Only male participant; all participants were UK residents.

experiences, undergraduates from working-class backgrounds subsequently felt 'out of place' (Bathmaker et al., 2016).

There is therefore a need to listen to students from under-represented backgrounds in an effort to put their voices at the forefront of questioning how perceived ability, educational progression pathways and social experiences relate to individuals' 'flourishing' in elite universities such as Oxbridge.

## 2 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 | Interview site and sampling technique

Convenience sampling was used to recruit undergraduates who self-identified as originating from under-represented backgrounds. An email advertising the recruitment of undergraduates who self-identify as originating from under-represented backgrounds to participate in this study was circulated via access officers at an ancient university in the south of England that will be referred to as 'Oxbridge'. Once the undergraduates had responded to the email and had read the information sheet and consent form, a time and place to conduct the interview was arranged. The fieldwork took place over the course of a month in the summer of 2018.

The 12 undergraduates who participated in this study originated from a range of backgrounds: 9 out of 12 of them had attended comprehensive secondary schools; 8 out of 12 of them had been the first in their family to enter higher education and/or originated from low-income households; 6 out of 12 of them originated from geographical regions outside the south of England; and 3 out of 12 of them belonged to ethnic minorities. The participants' characteristics are reported in Table 1. What it is important to recognise is that these participants identified as under-represented specifically in relation to Oxbridge, where privately educated students are seven times more likely to gain a place than those educated in comprehensive schools (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018).

A conscious effort was made to permit the interviewees to decide for themselves what it meant to be from an under-represented background at Oxbridge in the hope that this would allow them to take ownership over their identities and freely elaborate on their understanding of how their backgrounds had influenced their experiences.

## 3 | INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

A semi-structured interview technique was adopted for the purposes of this study because it has the combined benefit of prompting the interviewer to touch on the same focal points in each interview, while also permitting certain topics to be explored in greater depth (Liamputtong, 2013).

The interviews lasted approximately half an hour. To encourage the participants to take a lead in the interview, they took place in spacious local cafes due to their relaxed atmosphere. Once the interview began, participants were asked to describe, in their own words, why it was that they self-identified as originating from an under-represented background, but were also reminded that this question was not a test and that it was their own account of their experiences that was considered to be important. In so doing, the interviewees were positioned as 'knowing and approving experts' as opposed to 'vulnerable knowledge seekers' (Edwards & Holland, 2013), and were therefore empowered to take on what Hoffman (2007) refers to as the 'leading role'.

A specific set of interview questions was developed to ensure that the questions were both sensitive to the intimate topics being discussed and explicitly aimed at eliciting responses that prompted the participants to reflect deeply on their lived experiences. Rather than asking the participants to explain why they applied to Oxbridge, for example, the participants were asked to recall the first time they encountered Oxbridge, before reflecting on their initial impressions of it as an institution, as well as the subsequent turning points that led them to apply to it.

Throughout the interviews, short prompts and silence were used as a strategy for showing them that their voice was of utmost importance.

### 3.1 | Limitations

The small sample size ( $n = 12$ ) and predominance of female students (11 out of 12), as well as students who studied subjects in the arts and humanities and social sciences (11 out of 12), constitute the major limitation to this study in that the representativeness of the sample is restricted.

### 3.2 | Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed before theme mapping was used to analyse the data in depth (Thomas, 2017). This meant reading the transcripts several times, while highlighting words and phrases that appeared to be important in response to the research questions. These words and phrases were then assorted into separate, potential themes called temporary constructs. Using the temporary constructs as a reference, the transcripts were read again, with quotations that appeared to illustrate the temporary constructs being highlighted. After this, the themes deemed to be most important were indexed as second-order constructs. Using the second-order constructs as a reference, transcripts were then read again, with quotations that appeared to illustrate dominant themes being identified and refined. Questions guiding the analysis included: When did the participants first encounter Oxbridge, and what was their first impression of it? At what stage, if any, did they begin conceiving of themselves as potential 'Oxbridge material'? How have they found the academic demands of Oxbridge?

## 4 | FINDINGS

### 4.1 | Accessing elite education: A staggered process of an imagined future in higher education

Accessing prestigious universities frequently requires an almost 'superhuman' amount of resilience and determination from students from under-represented backgrounds (Reay et al., 2009). The findings illustrate how this process is staged and demarcated by particular critical time junctures, and particularly important people act collectively to propel students towards entry into such places as Oxbridge. Study participants conveyed their sense of 'questioning' along the way, as applying to Oxbridge was not considered a regular progression pathway between secondary school and higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2016). All of the participants spoke of how their parents had offered them emotional encouragement and support. Furthermore, most of the participants cited at least one teacher or (state-funded) tutor who had been pivotal to their progression to higher education. Several participants pointed out that Oxbridge had first been mentioned to them by one of their teachers. One participant, Harper, reflected on how her teacher had kick-started her thinking about the idea of applying to Oxbridge, and how she had been motivated at different stages by telling herself: "If you do well at GCSE, then maybe think about it." And then I did, so I thought, "If you do well in your AS Levels, then maybe apply." Others spoke of the encouraging manner in which their teachers had celebrated the news that they were planning to apply to Oxbridge. In every case, such encouragement was cited by the participants as key to the formation of their academic identities and perception of Oxbridge.

Like the participants from working-class backgrounds in Reay et al.'s (2009) study, participants who had attended comprehensive schools spoke of feeling as though they stood out in comparison to their peers during school in the sense that, unlike their peers, they had been extraordinarily committed to their academic studies

and had subsequently experienced a high degree of success in assessments. Experiencing a high degree of success in *national* assessments, in particular, acted as tangible proof of their academic capabilities in comparison with students nationwide. Unlike participants who had attended grammar or independent schools, for whom performing well in assessments in comparison to their immediate peers was sufficient for them to begin entertaining the notion that they could be potential 'Oxbridge material', participants who had attended comprehensive schools needed to experience a high degree of success in national assessments before this became possible. Thus, different forms of benchmarking take place among students attending different types of schools.

The need for confirmation of their academic capabilities in comparison to students on a national rather than local scale resulted in the participants who had attended comprehensive schools failing to entertain the notion that they could be potential 'Oxbridge material' until the age of 15 or later. Liam, a student who had attended a comprehensive school, self-identified as working class and originated from a region of England that he described as 'weird' and isolated, began considering the idea of applying to Oxbridge after performing particularly well in a national assessment during his penultimate school year:

*Liam: I've always been smart for my school ... and then I had this, like, countrywide validation for it. So instead, that was the first sort of ... proof that I actually had a brain compared to other people at other schools, rather than just my school.*

Liam's ability to imagine himself attending Oxbridge, like the participants from working-class backgrounds in Bathmaker et al.'s (2016) study, unfurled on a gradual basis. Success in national assessments opened up opportunities for him to compare his academic capabilities to that of students nationwide and thus entertain the notion that attending Oxbridge could be 'doable'.

Emma, a 'first generation', mixed-race student from a low-income, single-parent household who had grown up in what she described as 'Grenfell Tower-like' social housing, attended a comprehensive school and enrolled on widening participation to higher education schemes, first began considering the notion of entering higher education after performing well in national assessments during her final school year. Yet Emma did not begin considering the idea of applying to Oxbridge until a year later, when she performed particularly well in national assessments during post-compulsory education:

*Emma: I thought that if I get good enough grades in sixth form, and I want to go to university, then maybe I'd apply to one of the ones I'd gone to a summer school on, but not Oxbridge ... But then AS results day, when I got good grades, I thought, 'Urm, maybe. Like, maybe yeah.'*

The crucial point is that these participants' ability to imagine that they could be potential 'Oxbridge material' was mediated by tangible proof of their academic capabilities in comparison to students on a national rather than local scale. Once a high degree of success in national assessments had been experienced, the participants began to consider themselves as potential 'Oxbridge material' with a greater degree of confidence and actionable intent.

In addition to being able to imagine that they could be potential 'Oxbridge material' from an academic standpoint, however, participants also needed to be able to see themselves as 'Oxbridge material' from a social standpoint as well. Yet this did not come easily for several of them: their experience of success in national assessments provided insufficient evidence that they would be able to 'fit in' and experience a sense of belonging among undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds at Oxbridge. Other studies have found that students' social-class backgrounds constitute a defining aspect of their sense of self, and that this shapes their habitus and attracts them to less prestigious universities that do not seem 'too alien' (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2010, 2005). The wish to preserve their sense of self and the familiar manifested in how several participants perceived even Oxbridge's architecture. Reflecting on their motivations for choosing a particular Oxbridge college, for example, Emma mentioned that the 'buildings weren't too grand', while Olivia described hers as 'not too imposing'.



Several participants spoke of the difficulty they experienced imagining themselves establishing friendships at Oxbridge until they had come into immediate contact with Oxbridge undergraduates who originated from similar backgrounds and therefore represented situated manifestations of familiarity and normality. Even after he had performed exceptionally well in national assessments, Liam, for example, continued to question whether he would fit in at Oxbridge:

*Liam: Urm, it was whether I'd fit in ... So I kind of, in Year 12 I was having these doubts. Like, 'Would I prefer to go to Durham? Would I prefer to go to Birmingham?' Places that are a bit more normal.*

After participating in a widening participation to higher education scheme in which Liam attended an Oxbridge college that makes an explicit effort to recruit a large proportion of undergraduates from comprehensive schools, however, he began to imagine himself being able to feel included at Oxbridge: 'it felt like the kind of place that I would actually fit in.'

Emma also spoke of not being sure whether she would be able to fit in and experience a sense of belonging at Oxbridge until she came into immediate contact with an Oxbridge undergraduate who had attended her school:

*Emma: Someone from my school but a few years above who'd got in, she came back, and she, like I didn't know about her, I hadn't met her, and although a few other people had been telling me, 'Come on, you can do it.' [...] But then ... that was like, for once not reinforcing the stereotypes because ... you're hearing from someone who was, like, from a similar school and said, she kind of confirmed, 'No you don't.' Like, the stuff that you might read online. Like, you kind of read a typical Oxbridge student has straight A's, went to this famous school, knows how to do this and that. No, she was just normal.*

Coming into contact with an Oxbridge undergraduate who was from a similar background and considered to be 'just normal', as well as able to provide an account of what it is like to attend Oxbridge which counteracted Emma's preconceptions of it, rendered Oxbridge a desirable, rather than merely feasible, university to attend.

Amelia, who had attended a comprehensive school and originated from a low-income, single-parent household, felt deterred from applying to Oxbridge after she and her mother had encountered other Oxbridge applicants and their middle-class parents who made them feel like 'fish out of water':

*Amelia: Like, I know the A Level music syllabus, that's it. Like, I haven't been to concerts ... I'd done none of this stuff! And they were just talking about everything, and also everyone seemed to know each other in some way. Like musicians, they were like, 'Oh, you go to National Youth Orchestra ...' Or stuff like that. Talking about all different schools, and like different choral courses they'd been on, it was horrendous. So we all came out of that, and I was like, 'I can't go here!' And my mum was like, 'You can't, this would be awful!'*

Middle-class applicants seemed to benefit from their parents' active engagement in a cultivation of cultural capital at younger ages (Lareau, 2011); the consequence being that they 'spoke the same language' and appeared to already know one another. This led Amelia to experience what Reay (2015) refers to as the 'affective dimensions' of social class, such as 'feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority' (p. 21). Yet having decided against the idea of applying to Oxbridge, Amelia later wandered to another Oxbridge college, where she serendipitously met what she described as a 'down-to-earth and normal' undergraduate who explained to her that not all Oxbridge undergraduates are like those she had encountered:

*Amelia: He was like, 'Don't worry.' Like, he was just like, 'They are talking absolute rubbish and you don't need it.' And stuff like that. Like, 'Not everyone's like that.' [...] He was just like, 'You should apply. There is no reason why you shouldn't. Don't let them put you off!' And so like, it was literally him.*

*Interviewer: If you hadn't gone to that college?*

*Amelia: I wouldn't have applied.*

What these quotes indicate is that as well as needing to experience success in national assessments, be resilient and determined, and receive support from parents and educators, it is also important for under-represented students to be able to perceive Oxbridge as a place that can be for 'normal' people like them, as opposed to just for those from middle-class backgrounds comfortable with exchanges demonstrating their knowledge of dominant or 'high' cultural capital (Savage et al., 2015; Zimdars et al., 2009). Emma's and Amelia's experiences also clearly demonstrate how one person—but one person who represented for them a particular 'familiar' figure—proved to be formative in their decisions to apply to Oxbridge. In developing such a perception, it appears that students can begin imagining themselves fitting in and experiencing a sense of belonging at Oxbridge without needing to compromise their sense of self; something which can consequently lead them to renegotiate their relationship to the higher education field and their concomitant sense of 'proper place within it' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 474).

## 4.2 | Experiencing inclusive and exclusive social and academic spaces in higher education

In a similar manner to undergraduates from working-class backgrounds in other studies (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Finnegeen & Merrill, 2017; Reay et al., 2009, 2010), the majority (11 of the 12) of participants noticed differences between themselves and undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds at Oxbridge in terms of their access to dominant cultural, social and economic capital. For some participants, noticing such differences disturbed neither their capacity nor their desire to establish friendships with undergraduates from such backgrounds, even if being made conscious of such differences occasionally led them to feel embarrassed or 'like an idiot' for not being able to participate in (often expensive) activities or understand middle-class cultural references. Yet for other participants, noticing such differences led them to feel 'alienated', 'down', 'out of place' and 'weird', which often prompted them to search out and establish friendships with undergraduates from similar backgrounds, as well as engage in a range of efforts to change Oxbridge's dominant culture.

Aria, who identified as under-represented because she did not perceive Oxbridge to reflect her cultural heritage and ethnicity, spoke of noticing differences in the distribution of economic capital among undergraduates at her college. Witnessing undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds 'spending loads and loads of money' on partying seemed 'weird' to Aria in the sense that she was both unfamiliar with such behaviour and unable to participate in it due to her comparative lack of money. Despite suggesting that 'it wasn't a problem', Aria spoke of not forming friendships with such undergraduates, who also appeared to be familiar with one another:

*Aria: ... it felt like a lot of people from West London private schools, or like Eton and Harrow, they already knew a lot of people here and were already in friendship groups. So like, I kind of walked into Freshers' Week and I was like, 'How does everyone know everyone?'*

That Aria opted to form friendships with what she described as a 'weird tribe' of Oxbridge undergraduates who 'have the same experiences' and were engaged in a range of efforts aimed at changing the dominant culture at Oxbridge through campaigning and journalism suggests that, despite her assertion that encountering explicit differences in access to dominant cultural, social and economic capital posed no problems, it had nonetheless influenced the formation of her friendship group and the extent to which she was able to feel included and experience a sense of belonging.

In addition, Amelia also spoke of encountering differences in mobilising 'high' cultural capital (Savage et al., 2015) in the sense that most of her counterparts appeared to dress and converse in a manner that she, like Aria, interpreted as 'weird':

*Amelia: Everyone dresses in shirts and I'm just like, 'That doesn't look comfortable!' Like, 'That's weird!' And just speak about, Music [undergraduates] in particular, people have a habit of just listing pieces of music that I've never heard of. And I'm like, again, I'm like, 'I know the A Level course and that's it ...'*

Encounters such as these led Amelia to conclude that she did not want to interact with undergraduates in her department. Instead she opted to establish friendships with undergraduates in either her college or the First Generation Society. Another 'first generation' undergraduate from a low-income background, Mia, felt 'out of place' in the presence of undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds and academics who made assumptions about her:

*Mia: At first it was awful. Yeah, I hated it. I nearly dropped out. I just felt so out of place ... there were just little comments made here and there, like, by lecturers saying, 'Oh, you'll have been to Paris ...' Or, 'You'll know this from being in France ...' But I'd never been to France, so ... I used to go for walks, in the evenings. Like, I'd just walk as far as I could. Like, away from college, and then trudge back.*

The evidence on ease of access to travel is notable for its obvious translation into demonstrations of economic and cultural capital (Serre & Wagner, 2015). The manner in which Mia walked 'as far' as she could in an attempt to process her feelings and create physical distance between herself and an institution that was causing her to experience a sense of 'social distance' (Finnegen & Merrill, 2017, p. 318) highlights the harm that can be inflicted in a field which assumes the possession of, and prioritises, dominant forms of cultural capital.

For Mia, as well as Olivia, Aria and Amelia, these strange and sometimes unpleasant encounters with the unfamiliar led them to feel excluded and consequently prompted them to exclude themselves from social situations in which such feelings could arise again. It did, however, also prompt them to search for and establish more socially inclusive spaces alongside undergraduates from similar backgrounds, as well as engage in campaigns, journalism and widening participation to higher education schemes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the participants described their academic experiences at Oxbridge as 'difficult' or 'hard', but nonetheless spoke of incrementally adjusting to academic demands made of them. Some participants did, however, speak of noticing that privately educated undergraduates seemed to be more accustomed to the approach to presenting academic arguments that is demanded in higher education. Harper, for example, who had attended a comprehensive school in the north of England, spoke of the confident, 'punchy and powerful' approach that such undergraduates took towards presenting their ideas, and pointed out that she had had to: 'learn to use that confident 'I' in an essay, and to be really direct in tutorials.' The participants' awareness of the confidence that undergraduates from privately educated backgrounds possess in relation to academic knowledge (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011), in contrast to their more tentative approaches to presenting ideas, suggests that educational interventions aimed explicitly at helping undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds adapt to the academic demands of higher education could help level the field.

Importantly, however, none of the undergraduates interpreted their academic struggles through a 'lens of personal inadequacy rather than structural disadvantage' (Mallman, 2017, p. 245). Instead, the participants understood their academic difficulties to be symptomatic of them having had less access to academic support and expertise prior to entering higher education. Differences in structural (dis)advantages by type of secondary-school attendance also appeared tied to one social space in particular, that of performance art-based.

### 4.3 | Exclusion from performance art

Although all of the participants had participated in Oxbridge clubs and societies, those who had attempted to participate in performance art-based clubs and societies spoke of encountering 'intimidating' and 'exclusionary' cliques of privately educated undergraduates from the south of England. Ava, for example, who had attended a

comprehensive school, spoke of how social capital appeared to be concentrated among a specific group of privately educated undergraduates in the drama club:

*Ava: ... in the drama scene at Oxbridge, people manage to ... get parts in the first two weeks of starting here, simply because they knew people from school. You only really get cast in anything if you know someone already.*

When asked to provide an example of when this had happened, Ava recounted two instances. In the first, Ava recounted the manner in which using social media led her to notice that the undergraduates who dominate the drama club are from similar backgrounds. In the second, Ava recounted the manner in which the familiarity that this had bred had led to her humiliation:

*Ava: I got a call back ... and got really excited so I went on Facebook and 'stalked' the people auditioning me and noticed that ... they'd all been to very similar schools and they all kind of knew each other. And then the worst example of it ... was when I got another call back. I went to it and ... the director was also a fresher, and as soon as I got there, sort of everyone knew each other by their first name but no one knew who I was. They were sort of going, 'Where's so and so? Where's so and so? I want her here now, because I want to audition her for this.' They'd clearly been set apart for this role. And then ... they held me there for thirty minutes doing nothing, and then I did a sort of audition. I got five lines in and they were like, then the director, this first year, she was like, 'OK, that's enough. Thank you.' And I never heard from them again.*

Mila also spoke of feeling both 'discouraged' and 'intimidated' by 'cliques' of undergraduates from privately educated backgrounds in the south of England in the drama club, while Olivia spoke of encountering similar 'cliques' of undergraduates in the orchestra:

*Olivia: I wasn't in that until third term of last year, and I have a feeling it's because of the cliques because ... the panels are made up of students. And I think they do a thing where they basically go, 'Oh, I know him. Let's put him in.' Whereas they didn't know who I was. And when I got there I expected everyone to be, like, amazing, so much better than me, but they were kind of about the same. So I thought, 'OK, something's going on here ...' It's to do with that. I suspected that anyway, but then when I got there it kind of confirmed it.*

This finding contributes towards an understanding of why those from working-class background are less likely to experience successful careers in the performance arts (Friedman & Laurison, 2018; O'Brian, Laurison, Miles, & Friedman, 2016). It also serves to underscore that the skewed demographic composition of the Oxbridge undergraduate population can actively harm those from under-represented backgrounds. It suggests that many relational aspects of universities' student bodies reproduce socially dominant representation through being indirectly but collectively engaged in practices that can not only make those students who are under-represented feel 'out of place', but also lead to their repeated exclusion from certain spaces. There is thus room for future research to analyse 'median level' interrelated practices within elite educational institutions (Burke, Emmerich, & Ingram, 2013).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This study points to two vital supports which participants who had attended comprehensive schools needed to experience before they could entertain the notion that they could be potential 'Oxbridge material'. From an

academic standpoint, it was experiencing success in national assessments. From a social standpoint, it was meeting Oxbridge undergraduates from similar backgrounds. Once these things had happened, participants began to consider the notion that accessing Oxbridge could be both feasible and indeed desirable, since it suggested to them that it could be possible for them to perform well academically, fit in and experience a sense of belonging at Oxbridge without needing to compromise their identities.

This study illustrates that undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds seemed to have been aware that they were both 'smart for their school', but also that 'their school' might not be an adequate measure of elite educational potential. The need for participants who had attended comprehensive schools to experience success in national assessments before they began considering themselves to be 'Oxbridge material' suggests that their academic identities in relation to Oxbridge and other elite universities formed later than it does for those from middle-class backgrounds (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Lareau, 2011; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). Applying to a prestigious university is a process, and processes are time-dependent. It may be that the likelihood of such students applying to prestigious universities could be increased, were they helped in becoming more confident in their academic abilities at earlier stages of their educational trajectories.

This chimes with the idea that pursuing fairer access to higher education requires 'starting positions' to be equalised, since the ways in which educational institutions are themselves organised results in distorted meritocratic ideals (Mijs, 2016). In this vein, national application timelines might be re-evaluated in light of findings of this study and prior research on widening participation. The freedom for Oxbridge to set application deadlines in October rather than January, as other universities in the UK do, is not inconsequential. Students from under-represented backgrounds may not consider applying to Oxbridge until the end of their first year of post-compulsory education, meaning that the period of time in which they have to apply to Oxbridge is truncated in comparison to that which is open to students from dominant social backgrounds, for whom applying to Oxbridge is more likely to constitute a process that is several years in the making of expected educational paths.

Findings did not support the theory of 'inherent vice', in which people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds attribute any discomfort felt to 'natural' ability deficits, which thus internalise illegitimate systems of rewards (Mallman, 2017). This provides new evidence that in the elite settings of a prestigious English university, under-represented students show an acute awareness at a young age of being structurally disadvantaged, in both the process of getting into a prestigious university and adjusting to the social and academic requirements of the university settings.

What is clear from this study is that widening participation to higher education should not stop at the point of entrance. While some of the participants perceived encountering differences in their access to resources to be something that 'happens in all walks of life', others spoke of it making them feel 'alienated', 'overwhelmed', 'out of place' and 'weird'. This finding contributes to an evidence base which suggests that undergraduates from 'under-represented' backgrounds can experience difficulties pertaining to their idea of familiarity: fitting in and experiencing a sense of belonging in prestigious universities. This can in turn lead them to become excluded from the accumulation and exchange of cultural, social and economic capital that undergraduates from middle-class backgrounds (continue to) engage in during higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016). Perhaps more concerning, however, is the finding that all of the participants who had attempted to participate in performance arts-based clubs and societies reported feeling excluded from them—where those from working-class backgrounds remain poorly represented in the creative industries, these participants' experiences suggest it begins with student panels feeding into job panels (Friedman & Laurison, 2018; O'Brian et al., 2016). If prestigious universities are to justify the often extreme efforts that those from under-represented backgrounds go to in an attempt to access them, they need to become more vigilant of socially exclusive behaviours both inside the lecture theatre and beyond. Monitoring of the composition, perceived accessibility and inclusiveness of student clubs and societies may be a necessary step.

Resonating with findings from O'Sullivan et al.'s (2018) study, it seems that widening participation to higher education schemes that actively involve undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds could be more effective than those that do not. This may be due to their capacity to demonstrate to students from similar backgrounds

that Oxbridge can also be a place for 'people like them' and not just for those from dominant social backgrounds. From a higher education system-wide perspective, quotas could be used more assertively to pressure prestigious universities into admitting more students from under-represented backgrounds, based on their academic potential rather than achievement (Clayton, 2012). Findings from this study suggest that doing so could ignite a virtuous cycle of relational positionality in which future cohorts of potential higher education applicants are exposed to more undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds in prestigious universities, increasing the likelihood of them subsequently applying to such institutions while simultaneously bringing about more socially inclusive environments within higher education.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based on work carried out as part of Joshua Stubbs' master's dissertation under the supervision of Emily Murphy. The authors would like to thank the students who kindly agreed to participate in this study; and would also like to thank Vanessa Brandalesi and Maily Korber for their help on the French text translation.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

## ORCID

Joshua E. Stubbs  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0703-2342>

Emily C. Murphy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3063-455X>

## REFERENCES

- Bathmaker, A., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., & Bradley, H. (2016). *The degree generation: Higher education, social class and social mobility*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *British Journal of Sociology*, 64(2), 344–364. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12021>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Britton, J., Deardon, L., Shephard, N., & Vignoles, A. (2016). *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*. Retrieved from <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/wps/wp201606.pdf>
- Burke, C. T., Emmerich, N., & Ingram, N. (2013). Well-founded social fictions: A defence of the concepts of institutional and familial habitus. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(2), 165–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.746263>
- Burke, P. J., & McManus, J. (2011). Art for a few: Exclusions and misrecognitions in higher education admissions practices. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(5), 699–712.
- Clancy, P., & Goastelle, G. (2007). Exploring access and equity in higher education: Policy and performance in a comparative perspective. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(2), 136–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2007.00343.x>
- Clayton, M. (2012). On widening participation to higher education through positive discrimination. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46(3), 414–431.
- Crawford, C., Deardon, L., & Micklewright, J., & Vignoles, A. (2017). *Family background and University success: Differences in higher education access and outcomes in England*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Donnelly, M., & Evans, C. (2016). Framing the geographies of higher education participation: Schools, place and national identity. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(1), 74–92. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3196>
- Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2013). *What is qualitative interviewing?* London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Finnegen, F., & Merrill, B. (2017). 'We're as good as anybody else': A comparative study of working-class university students' experiences in England and Ireland. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(3), 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1081054>
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2018). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2011). Bullshit as resistance: Justifying unearned privilege among students at an elite boarding school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(5), 581–586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.600272>

- Harrison, N., Davies, S., Harris, R., & Waller, R. (2018). Access, participation and capabilities: Theorising the contribution of university bursaries to students' well-being, flourishing and success. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(6), 677–695. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2017.1401586>
- Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 914–938. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475>
- Hoffman, E. A. (2007). Open-ended interviews, power and emotional labour. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36, 318–346.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Liamputtong, P. (2013). *Qualitative research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Mallman, M. (2017). The perceived inherent vice of working-class university students. *The Sociological Review*, 65(2), 235–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12422>
- Mijs, J. J. B. (2016). The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education. *Social Justice Research*, 29(1), 13–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0228-0>
- Montacute, R., & Cullinane, C. (2018). *Access to advantage: The influence of school and place on admissions to top universities*. London, UK: The Sutton Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/AccessToAdvantage-2018.pdf>.
- O'Brian, D., Laurison, D., Miles, A., & Friedman, S. (2016). Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey. *Cultural Trends*, 25(2), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2016.1170943>
- O'Sullivan, K., Robson, J., & Winters, N. (2018). 'I feel like I have a disadvantage': How socio-economically disadvantaged students make the decision to study at a prestigious university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(9) 1676–1690.
- Office for Students (2019). *Map of young participation areas*. Retrieved from <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas/>
- Perez-Adamson, C., & Mercer, N. (2016). How do different types of schools prepare students for life at Cambridge? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(1), 19–35.
- Read, B., Burke, P. J., & Crozier, G. (2018). 'It is like school sometimes': Friendship and sociality on university campuses and patterns of social inequality. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 1–13. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01596306.2018.1457626?needAccess=true> <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1457626>
- Reay, D. (2015). Habitus and the psychosocial: Bourdieu with feelings. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45(1), 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2014.990420>
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700>
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925>
- Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in Higher Education*. London, UK: Institute of Education Press.
- Savage, M., Cunningham, N., Devine, F., Friedman, S., Laurison, D., McKenzie, L., ... Wakeling, P. (2015). *Social class in the 21st century*. London, UK: Pelican.
- Serre, D., & Wagner, A. C. (2015). For a relational approach to cultural capital: A concept tested by changes in the French social space. *The Sociological Review*, 63(2), 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12292>
- Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. (2014). *Elitist Britain?* Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/347915/Elitist\\_Britain\\_-\\_Final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/347915/Elitist_Britain_-_Final.pdf)
- Sullivan, A., Parsons, S., Green, F., Wiggins, R. D., & Ploubidis, G. (2018). Elite universities, fields of study and top salaries. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(4), 663–680.
- Thomas, G. (2017). *How to do your research project: A guide for students in education and applied social sciences*, (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Wakeling, P., & Savage, M. (2015). Entry to elite positions and the stratification of higher education in Britain. *The Sociological Review*, 63(2), 290–320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12284>
- Younger, K., Gascoine, L., Menzies, V., & Torgeson, C. (2018). A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(6), 742–773.
- Zimdars, A., Sullivan, A., & Heath, A. (2009). Elite higher education admissions in the arts and sciences: Is cultural capital the key? *Sociology*, 43(4), 648–666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509105413>

**How to cite this article:** Stubbs JE, Murphy EC. 'You got into Oxbridge?' Under-represented students' experiences of an elite university in the south of England. *Higher Educ Q*. 2020;74:516–530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12251>