

Looking for people like me: The barriers and benefits to Student Union participation for working class students in an elite institution

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Introduction

Despite the massification of Higher Education (HE) over recent decades, students from working-class backgrounds remain less likely to attend university than their middle-class peers and face greater barriers to success once there (Watson, 2014). Drop-out rates are high amongst working-class students, a fact which Thomas argues points to wider problems of a lack of social integration and inadequate support structures (Thomas, 2002). Students from low-income families are also less likely than their middle-class peers to be in 'advantaged occupations' (i.e. Standard Occupation Classification 1-3) six months after graduation (DfE, 2016) and they continue to earn less long after that, even when controlling for degree subject and institution (Britton *et al*, 2016). Universities are under increasing pressure to address these issues: The 2016 Higher Education & Research Bill requires universities' access plans to "*look beyond the point of entry*" and to set out how the institution will tackle drop-out rates and raise levels of employability amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds (BIS, 2016).

Students' unions' charitable objectives give them the potential to improve working-class students' experiences of university by challenging institutional policy and offering opportunities for social integration and personal development. This article investigates the barriers to and benefits from Students' Union (SU) participation for working-class students at an elite university. It views SU participation as a beneficial form of student engagement but considers how SUs may be 'hard to reach' for working-class students. The findings show that such students are discouraged, prevented from participating in SU activities on multiple fronts; economic barriers count them out of participation whilst social and cultural considerations lead them to count themselves out.

Throughout, the article uses a Bourdieusian conception of class. Bourdieu argues that "*individuals are positioned in social space in relation to others, based on the amount and type of symbolically recognized capital to which they have access*" (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016: 22). He uses three types of capital to explain social stratification (Bourdieu, 1986: 241-258):

- "*Economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights;*
- *cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications;*
- *social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility."*

Bourdieu's forms of capital are particularly powerful in the context of HE as they explain the barriers students face beyond the purely financial. For example, a lack of social capital might

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mean students know very few people who have been to university and so lack sources of reliable advice and support.

This article discusses findings from a study of SU participation at an elite University where fifteen per cent of the 2015 intake came from National Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) 4-7, compared to the national intake that year of 33% of students from NS-SEC 4-7 (HESA, 2015). The central aim of the study was to understand how an SU working in this context could have positive impact upon its working-class members' experiences of HE; the research addressed several research questions, using a mixed-methods approach. This article focuses on the findings from five interviews with working-class students and uses them to demonstrate both the benefits of and barriers to participation in SU activities. In particular, the findings discuss how students' economic and cultural capital stocks affect their ability to realise the social and personal development benefits of participating in the SU. The interviewees also reflect on how well represented they feel by the SU. Below, I briefly review relevant literature and use it to show why SU participation matters for working-class students.

Literature review: Why SU participation matters

There is not space in this article for a comprehensive review of the literature on working-class students' experiences of HE. Research points to a vast range of factors that affect the 'success' of working-class students at university - from learning environments to institutional policy, from cultural alienation to experiences of social support (Watson, 2014; Greenbank, 2006; Reay *et al*, 2001; Wilcox *et al*, 2006). The numerous empirical studies do not contradict each other, but, instead, build up a picture of how working-class students are disadvantaged in multiple ways. SUs are seldom mentioned in the literature, however; their charitable objectives compel them to "promote the interests and welfare" of their members, including working-class students. Participation in SU activities could support retention and success amongst working-class students in three ways: (1) social engagement, (2) learning and personal development and (3) representation in university decision-making.

Social engagement

Throughout the literature, researchers describe experiences of cultural alienation and social isolation amongst working-class students (Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2005; Reay *et al*, 2010; Bathmaker *et al*, 2016). Working-class students are often likened to 'fish out of water' as they are faced with unfamiliar university environments where their middle-class peers are more likely to feel at home (Reay *et al*, 2010). Most studies make no mention of whether students' interactions with their SUs counter or compound their feelings of alienation. However, the What Works? report does cite SU welcome events and clubs and societies as interventions that can increase students' social engagement and feelings of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Elsewhere, Thomas argues that social engagement is fundamental to students' success and progression, as peer support helps students overcome barriers to progression, including feelings of alienation (Thomas, 2002: 435). She suggests that one way universities can support the development of students' social networks is through SUs (Thomas, 2002: 436).

Learning and personal development

In the UK, SUs are often the principle provider of extra-curricular activities. The student engagement literature in the US emphasises the direct benefits that extra-curricular activities have on students' learning and personal development. Kuh evidences the "*critical thinking, [...]*

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relational and organizational skills” that students gain from extra-curricular activities (Kuh, 1995: 150). Kuh notes that, in the US, “*participation in extracurricular activities has been a more accurate predictor of workplace competence than grades*” (Kuh, 1995: 124). Similar claims have been made in the UK: Allen *et al* found that students who participated in sport at university were likely to have higher graduate earnings and those who undertook volunteering activity alongside participation in sport were likely to have higher earnings again (Allen *et al*, 2013: 8). One explanation for class differences in employment outcomes is the extent to which students “*mobilize different forms of ‘capital’ during their undergraduate study, through participation in extra-curricular activities*” (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016: 15). For middle-class students, participation in extra-curricular activities is often a natural continuation of their life before university, whilst working-class students may avoid university social situations where they don’t feel as if they fit-in; furthermore, their time might be occupied by the need to undertake paid work (Crozier *et al*, 2008: 174; Milburn, 2012: 70). This demonstrates the need for SUs to make sure activities are accessible to working-class students.

Representation in University decision- making

In the UK, the discourse on student engagement literature has focused more closely on opportunities offered to students to shape their learning and wider university experience, often through student representation in university decision-making. Little *et al* found that “*listening to the student voice [in order to] enhance the collective student learning experience*” underpins universities’ rationale for engaging with student representatives (2009: 42). SU representatives therefore have the opportunity to raise concerns about working-class students’ experience at university and shape university policy and practice to address better the needs of these students. In fact, the SU that is the focus of this study elects each year a ‘Widening Participation Officer’ and an ‘Equality, Liberation and Access Officer’ whose portfolios focus on issues of social inequity.

Bourdieu argues that systems of representation are paradoxical, as the represented group is able to express a collective will only by delegating power to a single representative (for example, a Union officer or course representative): “*one must always risk political alienation in order to escape political alienation*” (Bourdieu, 1991: 204). Furthermore, Bourdieu contends that the risk is really taken only by the “*dominated*” (for example, working-class students) as the “*dominant*” (middle-class students) are generally more satisfied with the status quo (Bourdieu, 1991: 204). How well-represented working-class students feel is therefore important for two reasons: first, the opportunity to improve their learning experience, but, second, the risk of further alienating a group of students who already often feel isolated in the university context.

Methodology

The research discussed in this article is taken from a wider study on working-class students’ participation in an SU. This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining statistical analysis of SU participation data and qualitative interviews with working-class students. This article focuses on the findings from the qualitative interviews, which sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the barriers to participation in SU activities?
- What benefits do students perceive are gained from SU participation (if any)?

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Sample

Purposive sampling was used to identify working-class interview participants; students were contacted through SU Facebook groups and the University's Widening Participation department email list and asked to volunteer via a secure online questionnaire. The questionnaire asked students for demographic details, including indicators of class and whether they had ever participated in various SU activities.

Since Bourdieu's capitals are notoriously "*difficult to quantify and operationalize*" in social research (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016: 24), this research, for practical reasons, used the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) as a means of identifying students' class. 'Working-class students' are those whose households were classified as NS-SEC 5-7, according to their parents' employment status. The NS-SEC bases its classifications on narrower terms than Bourdieu's capitals, but it is suitable as a rough indicator of students' capital stocks. All the interview participants also met at least two of the following indicators of having low social, cultural or economic capital stocks:

- first generation to enter HE;
- receiving the maximum University bursary;
- majority of students from their secondary school did not enter HE.

Five is a very small sample of students and the study initially sought to include double the number of interviews; however, the majority of students who volunteered to interview did not meet the criteria for being considered 'working-class'. This is potentially a reflection of how few working-class students there are in the University. In spite of the small sample, the interviewees had a variety of experiences of the SU, including a non-participant, a course rep., club and society members and students with student leadership experience. The interviewees also had a range of demographics as outlined in the table below – this enabled the interviews to explore issues of intersectionality.

	Amy	Gibrani	Paul	Jemma	Kerry
Gender	Female	Male	Questioning	Female	Female
Ethnicity	Black African	Pakistani	White British	White Mixed	White British
Disability Status	None	None	Asperger's Syndrome	None	Dyslexia
Age	19 years old	20 years old	26 years old	31 years old	20 years old
Engagement in SU activities	SU Part-Time Officer & Society Member	Club & Society Member	Club & Society Committee Member	Non-participant – Has a membership of a society but never used.	Club & Society Member, Course Rep.

Note: Pseudonyms are used where interview participants requested to remain anonymous.

Table 1 Demographic details of interview participants

Interview design and analysis

The interviews took a semi-structured approach using an interview guide; they were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The questions in the interview guide sought to explore the subjective perceptions and decision-making of the working-class students in relation to the SU. Diane Reay argues that Bourdieu's concepts suggest a whole range of questions not normally addressed in empirical research; "*How well adapted is the individual to the context they find themselves in? How does personal history shape their responses to the contemporary setting?*" (Reay, 1995: 369) The questions in the interview guide referred to students' lives prior to University and outside the SU in order to examine the issues Reay discusses.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically in NVivo, using an iterative process that moved back and forth between the literature, the Bourdieusian conceptual framework and the interview data to develop useful categories. The data was also coded according to the type of activity the student was discussing (e.g. sports club, course rep. election) and level of engagement in the activity (e.g. entry point, active participant, leader). Thereby data could be retrieved that was relevant to specific activities or depths of engagement and particular themes emerged amongst 'student leaders' or 'sports club members'.

Ethical considerations

In order to ensure fully informed consent, all interview participants were emailed a copy of the consent form in advance, as well as information about the aims of the research and the process for the interview. Consent was confirmed verbally at the beginning of each interview and interviews took place at a mutually-agreed date and time. Participants chose whether to be named or anonymised and pseudonyms have been used where they wanted to remain anonymous. All data was secured and encrypted.

Findings

What are the barriers to participation in SU activities?

All the students interviewed described an initial interest in participating in SU activities, which they fulfilled to varying degrees. Whilst some students had taken on leadership roles in the SU, others had not ended up attending a single event. However, the students all described the same barriers to involvement. These fit into two categories: practical barriers and social or cultural barriers.

Hygiene factors

The term 'hygiene factors' is stolen from Herzberg's theory of motivation (Herzberg, 1966); these were practical factors that deterred the students from participating in activities. For the most part, students highlighted cost, but also mentioned time commitment, location, convenience and safety.

For the interview participants, initial membership was often a barrier but further activity costs became blocking points:

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“I could've afforded to have gone on each trip but I had to pay £60 or £70 to join, which was the same price as one of their trips” (Kerry);

“I think the price is the thing [...] The [society] organised a trip to Berlin [...] and they were going on about how, [...] they wanted to make it really, really cheap and all this kind of stuff. It was hundreds of pounds! [...] I think if they did more things that were not hundreds of pounds, it would kind of improve people's involvement in their societies” (Jemma).

As well as being a practical barrier to participation, for Jemma, the society costs made her feel unwelcome in the society. When students leading societies are not money-conscious, they are less likely to deliver events that are accessible for cash-poor students. Paul comments from his own experience as a committee leader:

“We always had on our committees people who were at the bottom line on the financial side of things, we generally had... I'd say most of our Presidents were on full or partial bursaries and we managed to organize cheap trips but we had people who asked ‘why do you go to such a rubbish bunkhouse’ and we said ‘because we can offer you a trip for forty pounds’ [...] So there was always a bit of tension... You cannot target a society at everyone, we were deliberately aiming at the lower end of things” (Paul).

Both Paul and Jemma's societies were aiming to deliver a 'cheap' trip. However, the contrast between the two situations suggests that where committee members have experience of financial hardship themselves, they understand better what constitutes a financially-accessible trip and are more motivated to deliver it, sometimes at the cost of wealthier students' participation.

Time was also a major consideration for the interviewees, both owing to work and study:

“So I felt the other sports I would've liked to join, like athletics, wasn't just one day a week, it was like four days, and I didn't feel like I could commit to all of that. So it was harder to participate in that way. I wouldn't have had time to study” (Amy);

“I mean there's the basic things we are short of, of course, money and time, because we have to spend it working” (Paul).

The time-poor interviewees often had to make a choice between participating in the SU and studying. Whilst the hope is that SU participation complements and develops students' learning, the reality for some students is that it detracts from limited study-time.

Interviewees regularly gave examples of student committees who proactively made their activities accessible; *“they delayed payments so it was all good” (Amy)*, *“they made it cheaper to get a ticket for this event” (Kerry)*, *“it was flexible, so I can go when I can make it and that's fine” (Gibrani)*. Often the most accessible activities were those led by working-class students. However, the hygiene factors that stopped interviewees from participating in clubs and societies were the very same issues that interviewees highlighted as dissuading them from becoming committee members.

Fitting in

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Students' choices about which activities to participate in were highly personalised but also highly predictable. Without exception, the students chose activities that were familiar to them from before they arrived at University and they then tested the society for social and cultural fit. Paul summarises this process neatly: *"Finding a society is a mix of finding an activity that you like and finding a group of people that you like"*.

All the interviewees joined activities of which they had some prior experience. Frequently, this meant students signed up to academic societies: *"because that's what I'm studying"* (Amy), *"so the talks were very relevant to me"* (Kerry), identity-based societies: *"LGBT+ society because it was an obvious choice"* (Paul), *"I joined the Pakistani society because that's my ethnicity"* (Gibrani) or sports they had practiced at school (*"I always played tennis growing up"* (Amy), *"I used to do a lot of running at school"* (Gibrani), *"hockey was my favourite sport at school"* (Gibrani). Occasionally, students described their motivations for joining societies as 'trying something new'. However, even in these cases, they always had related experiences. For example, Kerry joined the Zoology society *"to do something different"* but also related it to conservation work she would have done previously.

Similarly, when asked if there were any activities that they would not participate in, students cited activities that were unfamiliar to them.

"There are probably societies that feel kind of out-of-reach, like horse riding. Well, just never having experienced that or... like archery. [...] it'll be, like, too big a leap to just try something which is kind of stereotyped in a way to a certain group of people... pretty rich maybe" (Amy).

Amy's comment demonstrates that students' ambivalence towards certain activities is not just because of the unfamiliarity of the activity but also because of the types of people they associate with that activity. The students counted themselves out because they assumed they would not fit in; if all working-class students think similarly then this process in itself means some clubs and societies won't have participation from working-class students regardless of their accessibility.

Although students rarely knew members of activities before joining, they found other ways to assess whether they would fit in socially, including using society websites and social media, meeting the committee at the Welcome Fair and attending initial events. The students sought out and joined societies that seemed: *"not too intense"* (Amy), *"laid back"* (Gibrani), *"not too competitive"* (Gibrani), *"nice and friendly"* (Paul), *"not too pushy"* (Paul), *"genuine and very happy"* (Kerry). Conversely, they avoided activities that were: *"laddish"* (Gibrani), *"banter-y"* (Paul), *"way too intense"* (Gibrani), *"serious"* (Gibrani), *"populated with students that went to private school"* (Jemma). Throughout, these particular participants associated competitive and dominant behaviour with private schooling and privilege.

For the most part, students made quick judgements about whether they would fit in with a club or society and avoided those where they felt they would not fit in. However, some interviewees joined activities and then later dropped out when they felt they had not fitted in:

"It's quite isolating. Because I don't know what to say to these people, y'know? And I get the impression that they quite often don't know what to say to me. And, yeah, y'know, most of the people... [...] I'm still, even now coming to the end of second year, most of

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the people that I speak to on my course are the people that I know from the Foundation that I did [...] that's entirely, erm, widening participation” (Jemma);

“Sometimes I fear that if I go somewhere where there's a lot of people that went to private school, had a better upbringing than maybe, I don't know, maybe it would be obvious that I wasn't... or I'd be disadvantaged in doing something. [...] That has always been sort of my fear being at uni because I did this stupid thing where I came [here] without actually realising what type of uni [this] is [...] So I had a massive culture shock and ever since then I've tried avoiding places where I knew I wouldn't necessarily fit it in” (Gibrani).

Both Jemma and Gibrani connected the ambivalence they felt towards SU activities to their wider experiences of University – these examples show that where students do not find a social fit with a society, interactions with the SU can exacerbate feelings of isolation rather than building belonging.

What benefits are gained from participation in SU activities (if any)?

In general, students were able to describe numerous benefits to SU participation. Where students had negative experiences of SU activities (they didn't feel they fitted in or it was too time-consuming or costly), they stopped participating as an act of self-protection. Those who gained the most tended to be those who were most engaged (for example, those with leadership roles in the SU); the implication is that SU benefits are realised through significant personal investment in time and effort. The benefits are discussed below under four themes; the first three themes are those described in the Literature Review whilst the fourth theme, 'health and wellbeing' emerged through the interviews.

Social impact

One of the most often cited and deeply-felt benefits that students gained from participation in SU activities was social:

“And while I'd say I had a few friends there [back home], you never had the opportunity to make as close friends as I managed to do here through societies” (Paul);

“I'd probably say some of my best mates are people from societies. It's just that thing about seeing yourselves sharing similar interests I guess” (Gibrani);

“The only reason I have a strong community of friends is the Students' Union. You have the ability to meet people from different degrees and not in your accommodation” (Amy).

For some interview participants, societies created a space where they made their closest friends at University and for some they found social belonging in SU activities that they did not find elsewhere at University.

Nevertheless, developing friendships seemed highly dependent on the type of activities that students participated in and the amount of effort they put in:

“I learnt quite quickly that I couldn't be part of too much because I'd just be overwhelmed [...] I don't think for me it made me many friends [...] Um, yeah, so I suppose because

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we're all going either for the exercise or sport, or just a talk [...] I didn't really do any of the extra things to make the friends” (Kerry);

“When I started campaigning, I was more involved, [...] I got to know those people more than I would've if it was just a sport thing because they only meet once a week. With campaigning we're working together much more closely. So I think I made some good friendships there. With tennis it was irregular and you saw different people every time” (Amy).

Kerry generally attended activities in which the focus was not on social interaction, limiting her opportunity to develop deep friendships. Conversely, Amy comments that she developed relationships through campaigning because you are “*more involved*” and “*working together much more closely*”. Taken together, these two examples demonstrate a risk that the activities with better ‘hygiene’ (more flexible, less intensive time commitment) do not offer the same opportunities to develop social networks.

Learning and Personal Development

Some interviewees were motivated to participate in SU activities in order to become more employable; however, they struggled to judge the career benefits at this stage in their lives. Regardless, the students described a vast range of learning, from topic-specific knowledge to broad life-skills:

“Yeah, so I've consolidated my Arabic alphabet. And I've learnt basics like hello, how are you and that sort of stuff” (Gibrani);

“[Campaigning] helps, I guess with like research and learning skills in general. Time management is good for your studies. So that's positive as well. [...] And learning skills, leadership, communication, which is just helpful, especially if I want to be a lawyer so... I think it's great preparation for the future - social skills and political skills” (Amy);

“I think my personal background was determined less by class than by the fact that I have Asperger's Syndrome so I have been in a very kind of specialist school and environment so I think the biggest thing for me was being able to live on my own without having my family next door, being able to fit in and go to events by myself. The society definitely helped with that” (Paul).

Both Amy and Paul credit SU activities with supporting them to develop skills that will help them after the point of graduation. Amy suggests the skills she has developed will help her in future employment (“*if I want to be a Lawyer*”) but whilst she may have developed this set of skills, she cannot be sure at this point that, in the field of employment, it will be valued as she expects it to be. Testing to what extent participation in SU activities does affect working-class students' employability was beyond the limits of this study, but would be an interesting area for future investigation.

As with the social impact of participation, the students who developed themselves the most in terms of SU activities were those who had spent the most time on SU activities. For Kerry, there was a risk SU activities would impinge on her studies if she afforded it too much time: “*Yeah, it can affect my studies, but the point where I'm, like, I'm too tired to go and do that club tonight, I won't go. [...] I've got to focus on my degree.*”

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Representation and University decision-making

Interviewing current students is not the most effective way to judge the impact of student representation; whilst they were able to comment on how well represented they felt by certain campaigns or spokespeople, the students were aware only of continuing campaigns (i.e. those that had not achieved their goals yet). As Gibrani comments, campaigns always affect “*the next bunch of students that are coming*”. The students generally did not know how previous representations or campaigns had influenced institutional policy or provisions and so couldn’t comment on the extent to which they had benefited as a result. That said, the majority of the interviewees felt well represented by the SU’s ongoing campaigns:

“The SU are the only people who go out on the streets with their placards and all that kind of stuff, which I think is brilliant” (Jemma);

“I thought, y’know, yeah, the Students’ Union does represent us quite well and it’s taking action on things that matter to me personally” (Gibrani);

“When the Students’ Union brought that up, I thought, yeah, you know what, that’s actually looking out for us, especially the little people” (Kerry).

The interviewees saw the SU articulating issues of personal importance to them: “*that matters to me*” (Amy); “*that’s actually looking out for us*” (Kerry); this generally made them identify more positively with the SU and created a sense that their experiences were understood. There were two instances where interviewees had not felt well represented by spokespeople in the SU:

“Something I’ve noticed with the SU and the University in general is that they keep pushing for more WP and more diversity and stuff but it’s only ever upper middle class white people who I’ve ever heard talking about it within the SU. [...] I don’t know, it’s a little bit patronizing” (Jemma);

“I did sign up to the state school society [...] because I’m quite proud of where I’ve come from [...] but it feels like they are trying to create a divide so I kind of stepped back away from that. I was actually quite surprised how many people, they might’ve been wealthy, but they still went to a state school” (Kerry).

Both Jemma and Kerry’s comments show a frustration with the way in which they have been grouped and spoken for. These comments show a risk that SU representatives need to be aware of so that when campaigning on issues of social justice and access to HE, they don’t inadvertently disenfranchise the students they claim to represent.

Health and wellbeing

A further benefit of SU participation emerged during the interview process, which was related to students’ wellbeing.

“A really positive effect because exercise in general is definitely good so. It, like, reduces your stress basically” (Amy);

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"To have something else on the side like a society or two to go to kind of gives you the energy to pull through when work is not going well, it would, it would've been a completely different four years if I'd spent them purely focusing on work and things" (Paul);

"Wellbeing wise Zumba's definitely put a good positive spin on my wellbeing because I had a few problems last year, yeah, I'd say it helped my wellbeing in the long run" (Kerry);

"I didn't enjoy my first year... it's some way to get me out of my mind, to help me concentrate on something else and the group was always just so happy, absolutely wonderful, cheery" (Kerry).

The quotes demonstrate that the benefits students found to their health and wellbeing were often related to exercise and fitness opportunities, although not exclusively. The benefits are often described as immediate: *"it's some way to get me out of my mind"* (Kerry); *"reduces stress"* (Amy); *"gives you energy"* (Paul) and are generally attributed directly to the activity, rather than the social or personal development opportunities the activity creates. This means that, unlike some of the other impacts discussed above, health and wellbeing benefits can be felt even when students participate irregularly or casually.

Conclusion

This small-scale research study suggests that working-class students are disadvantaged on multiple fronts from participating in SU activities in an elite institution. Their lack of economic capital means that they are costed out of some activities and that they cannot afford time to participate owing to hours of paid work. However, activities with more flexible payment and lighter time commitments enable students to participate more easily; these are often led by working-class students themselves.

Whilst economic factors count students out of some aspects of participation, cultural considerations also led them to count themselves out of some activities. Crozier *et al* describe the same phenomenon in relation to HE itself: *"that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel are rightly theirs"* (2008: 172). Bourdieu calls it *"agoraphobia"* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Whereas some students avoided particular societies (often sports societies) out of a conscious *"self-protection from injury"* (Charlesworth, 2004), others' decisions about which society to join were a sub-conscious assumption about which societies were for 'people like me'.

All the interviewees described experiencing what Reay *et al* called *"the shock of the elite"* whilst at University (2009: 1110). When faced with the unfamiliar field of HE, the students felt like 'fish out of water' struggling to adjust to their new surroundings. Those who found a cultural fit in an SU activity gained a network of friends, some of whom were *"in the same boat"* (Paul), that helped them to navigate the HE field, or learn *"the rules of the game"* (Crozier *et al*, 2008). However, for those who did not find a 'fit', SU clubs and societies were a further source of ambivalence and discomfort.

For some, the benefits of participating in SU activities were profound: providing a community of friends that they had not found elsewhere in University life, preparing them with skills for the future and relieving stress during the academic year. However, in accordance with Astin's

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theory of student involvement (1984), the benefits that students gained from participation were generally proportionate to the time and effort put in, which for some students made the benefits impossible to realise.

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