



'It's like two Europes here, the West and the East'. Belonging and fitting in at an elite graduate school

Adél Pásztor

To cite this article: Adél Pásztor (16 Apr 2024): 'It's like two Europes here, the West and the East'. Belonging and fitting in at an elite graduate school, Studies in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2024.2342514](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2342514)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2342514>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Apr 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 525




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

'It's like two Europes here, the West and the East'. Belonging and fitting in at an elite graduate school

Adél Pásztor 

Department of Sociology, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

While there has been a proliferation of research on the experiences of nonelite students in elite settings, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on institutions like the Ivy League or Oxbridge, leaving other geographical locales, notably in Europe, understudied. Past research has primarily concentrated on the initial entry to higher education, with limited attention given to postgraduate levels, which this study aims to remedy. Through interviews with a cohort of final-year Ph.D. students at a highly prestigious European graduate school, this paper specifically delves into the social integration of Eastern European students navigating their fit among a predominantly Western European, elite-university-educated student body. Employing the concept of 'segregated inclusion,' the study illustrates how cultural and socio-economic differences contribute to stratified social relationships, ultimately impacting the extent to which Eastern European students can leverage their membership in an elite university.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 August 2023
Accepted 8 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Belonging; elite university;
Eastern Europe; nonelite
students; social integration

Introduction

Elite universities serve as pipelines to prestigious professions, as individuals from the educational elite often ascend to the occupational elite (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016). This trend is particularly pronounced in academia, where recent US data (Sugimoto 2022) expose systemic disparities in hiring, revealing a narrow band of universities dominating the origins of tenure track faculty. Notably, upper middle-class families play a significant role in perpetuating this academic pipeline, with a quarter of faculty members having at least one parent with a Ph.D. (Wapman et al. 2022). Whether examining the US, UK, or other European regions, the professoriate remains predominantly accessible to the socioeconomically privileged.

In the context of the intense competition for admission to elite Ph.D. programs globally (Posselt 2018), scholars face limited opportunities to explore the experiences of first-generation students with nonelite credentials pursuing a Ph.D. at an elite university. This article seizes a unique chance to investigate the experiences of Eastern European (EE) students enrolled in a highly selective European graduate school, hereafter referred to as Paradise (pseudonym). Paradise offers a distinctly European setting with its entirely international student body, as all admitted students relocate from their countries of origin to reside on its campus throughout their studies. Providing fully funded positions and selection based on merit, Paradise presents unparalleled opportunities for upward mobility, irrespective of one's social origin. Despite this exceptional chance to study at a prestigious

CONTACT Adél Pásztor  adel.pasztor@uni-corvinus.hu

university, EE students, constituting a numerical minority, encounter challenges integrating into the predominantly Western European student body. By examining fitting in as an interactional process, the paper aims to explore the experiences of these students vis-a-vis their peers and faculty, considering variations based on social class.

Despite the EU enlargement occurring several years ago, the increasing number of EE students studying at Western European (WE) universities has received limited attention. Overall, there has been minimal research specifically dedicated to EEs as a student group (see, e.g. Chankseliani 2017; Genova 2016; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021; Marcu 2015), and, to my knowledge, none has delved into their social integration within elite settings. This study significantly contributes to the literature by going beyond the exploration of experiences of EE students at elite universities. Firstly, it seeks to examine students seemingly on an 'equal footing.' Many elite universities, as highlighted by Jack (2016), are nonresidential and consist of a diverse student body whose experiences are influenced by various factors such as their status (local, commuting, international; self-paying vs. scholarship etc.). At Paradise, all students share the same social milieu throughout their studies and benefit from scholarships that enable them to graduate debt-free.

While evidence suggests that social mobility does not always lead to the assimilation of elite university graduates into the higher social classes they aspire to emulate (Friedman and Laurison 2019), further research is needed to explore the experiences and outcomes of nonelite students at elite universities, particularly at the postgraduate level, which has received limited attention in scholarship (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018). The predominant focus on undergraduate levels may implicitly assume that life-course effects will mitigate any dissonance experienced earlier in life (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). However, this oversight fails to acknowledge the significance of postgraduate qualifications, crucial for entry into the salariat (Friedman, Laurison, and Miles 2015), and, in the case of a Ph.D., a gateway to academic careers. This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of EE students who, despite originating from nonelite home and/or school backgrounds, have successfully gained admission to pursue a Ph.D. at an elite European graduate school.

Fitting in or standing out: insights from scholarship

Scholars examining the impact of long-range mobility on upwardly mobile individuals have long been concerned with the clash between nonelite habitus and the new elite habitat. Interested in the process of 'adapting' to this new habitat, they have continued to explore social mobility through the experiences of first-generation students – those who are the first in their families to enroll in a higher education institution. In doing so, much of the literature has relied on Tinto's framework (see, e.g. 1975), the most influential body of work on student retention, which outlines the crucial relationship between the university's academic and social sides, both playing a critical role in protecting individuals unfamiliar with the higher education landscape from dropout or withdrawal.

While many scholars have predominantly focused on the academic side rather than the social aspect, Xie and Reay's (2020) paper stands out as one of the few to underscore – without directly referencing Tinto – that the social side of university life is just as vital as the academic side. Similarly, Pásztor's (2014) earlier research on ethnic minority students in the Netherlands has documented the potentially higher value placed on social fit among Turkish students, who willingly compromised their academic fit for the sake of social integration. In the UK, Crozier and colleagues (2008) delved into the dynamics of belonging and fitting in across different university types, revealing a trade-off: while low-ranking universities offered a strong social fit at the cost of academic fit, prestigious universities exhibited the opposite trend, with social fit being undermined by factors such as one's previous schooling and social class.

Institutional variability evidently shapes the relationship between first-generation students and their new habitat, with elite universities, perceived as bastions of privilege, posing the ultimate challenge to those seeking upward mobility. Research in the UK has long documented the plight of

disadvantaged students who encounter the ‘shock of the elite’ upon arrival (see, e.g. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Class differences significantly contribute to the culture shock experienced by ethnic minority and/or working-class students as they confront a relatively unfamiliar field, one that is starkly distinct from the ‘real’ or ‘ordinary’ world they inhabited before their arrival. Speech, dress, and consumption differences, typical of higher social classes, position them as cultural outsiders in their new elite habitat (Stuber 2011). Focusing specifically on the elite environment of a US law school, Granfield (1991) found working-class students consistently downplaying or even concealing their social class background by emulating their more privileged colleagues. While their strategy of ‘making it by faking it’ brought rewards, it also came at a cost, as many faced the burden of guilt associated with ‘selling out’ their own class, all the while deeply concerned about being discovered.

Scholars (e.g. Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018; Rodriguez Anaiz 2022) recently have drawn attention to the ways in which social exclusion can manifest even in seemingly inclusive places. They employ the term ‘segregated inclusion’ to convey the idea that, while inclusion may challenge the separation of groups, it does not necessarily address the boundaries between these groups. In other words, inclusion itself might lead to inequality when subordinate groups are integrated into social institutions historically controlled by dominant groups in society. In the subsequent sections, I will delve into the social integration of EE students on a university campus traditionally dominated by the Western elite for generations. The objective is to ascertain the extent to which ‘newcomers’ experience social inclusion and/or exclusion.

The research setting

The backdrop for this research is a perhaps lesser-known but highly influential higher education institution, referred to here as Paradise (a pseudonym). Paradise boasts levels of selectivity and graduate outcomes comparable to Oxbridge or the Ivy League and is renowned for offering one of the largest and most distinguished doctoral programs in the social sciences in Europe. The high quality of education is ensured by a faculty drawn from some of the most elite universities in Europe and beyond. A majority of their graduates secure academic positions, while the remaining alumni hold prominent roles in European and international organizations (e.g. the European Commission, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, etc.) or pursue careers in the public or private sector.

The choice of the pseudonym ‘Paradise’ is inspired by the truly magnificent surroundings of the university. Its charming villas, each housing a different department, with their meticulously maintained gardens, provide an unparalleled environment for those fortunate enough to be admitted for their Ph.D. As every student receives a scholarship for the duration of their studies, admission is highly selective, with only about 10% of applicants having a chance to get in. Although admission is based on merit, the selection process occurs within each country, preventing young, talented EE scholars from being overshadowed by more ‘qualified’ graduates applying with elite Western European degrees. While the majority of students come from a small number of prestigious universities within each sending country, there is still room for non-Western-educated EE students to secure a place at this esteemed university. Given that EE students represent a relatively recent addition to the university’s longstanding history, they comprise only approximately 20% of the student body and are significantly underrepresented among the faculty of Paradise.

Despite all students receiving scholarships, significant financial disparities persist within the student body. While all students face similar expenses during their studies, the state-sponsored nature of the scholarship leads to varying levels of financial assistance based on the student’s country of origin rather than the destination. Consequently, EE students receive some of the lowest stipends, with Norwegian or Danish students receiving more than three times the amount received by Estonians. This disparity contributes to the perception among EE students of being considered second-class citizens at Paradise, despite their contributions and efforts.

The study relies on in-depth interviews conducted with final-year Ph.D. students of EE nationality (from post-socialist countries) across four academic areas: economics, law, history, and social science. The selection of final-year students has been deliberate. Given the structured nature of the Ph.D. program, students in the initial two years are often occupied with coursework and potentially still adjusting to their new academic environment. Later cohorts may be inaccessible due to fieldwork obligations. Consequently, students in their final year of writing-up were considered the most appropriate candidates to offer reflections on their experiences at Paradise.

A total of 20 students were interviewed, roughly reflecting their proportion in any incoming cohort (approximately 100 students). Students were identified through the university website and contacted via email to request their participation. All but three interviewees were part of a specific cohort. The three students who were unavailable or unable to participate were replaced by EE students recruited from lower years. The interviews, lasting an average of one hour, were supplemented by a detailed questionnaire aimed at mapping participants' previous educational trajectories and collecting data on demographic characteristics. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research adhered to the British Sociological Association's (BSA 2017) guidelines on ethical conduct following approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee. To ensure complete anonymity, actual names were replaced with pseudonyms. Specific details such as the year of entry, country of origin, and field of study will not be disclosed in this manuscript to uphold confidentiality.

EE students as a group are not homogeneous in terms of their parental background and prior education. Among the sample, one-third are first-generation students whose parents worked in blue-collar occupations (e.g. cleaner, baker, bus driver). Additionally, the sample includes two students with a parent holding a Ph.D., one of whom is a university professor. The remaining students had degree-educated parents working in professions (e.g. teachers, accountants, engineers). While all students completed their undergraduate studies in their home countries, three students pursued master's degrees at Oxford or Cambridge (on scholarships), and an additional four students obtained M.A. degrees from other universities in Eastern or Southern Europe. All remaining students received their education entirely in their home countries, most often in their hometowns.

Throughout this paper, I consider EE students as 'nonelite,' in accordance with Lee and Kramer's (2013) definition, which refers to individuals from working-class, low-, or lower-middle-income backgrounds. Although some EE students may originate from households classified as 'middle-class' by Western standards, they often perceive themselves as relatively 'poor' compared to their peers from Western and Northern Europe. In EE countries teachers and university lecturers earn such modest salaries (see e.g. Szopkó 2021; Yanatma 2023) that they cannot be equated with their Western counterparts. While having university-educated parents may confer a certain level of privilege, particularly in terms of access to cultural capital and higher levels of education, it is important to note that in Eastern Europe, this does not necessarily imply wealth or high income. In other words, these parents do not earn sufficient amounts to support their children financially, especially when it comes to subsidizing the costs of elite education abroad. These initial disparities in family incomes are compounded by differences in stipend amounts, thereby exacerbating the gap.

Results

While Paradise is frequently portrayed as a melting pot of talented young individuals from across Europe, handpicked to pursue doctoral studies at this highly prestigious graduate school, the reality is more nuanced. The idyllic images of rolling hills and smiling student faces depicted in glossy prospectuses conceal the individual struggles of fitting in. The voices of EE interviewees echo a sentiment of a significant divide among the student body:

I don't know what I expected, but I had a huge culture shock. I thought I was used to international environments, but it is terribly different, it is like two Europes here, the West and the East. It is a very different cultural background, a very different social and economic background, and a different experience of life in general.

There is a noticeable mismatch between the class culture of the elite university, which is Western and upper-middle class, and that of a minority of students whose EE cultural heritage and nonelite educational credentials weigh heavily in an environment that devalues non-Western cultural capital. Despite being small in numbers, EE students are far from a uniform mass, with some members more endowed than others with cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital. As one interviewee noted, ‘I have met people from Poland, who are basically aristocracy, and I am pretty sure that in the West, not everyone is rich and posh.’ However, EE doctoral students tend to be disproportionately over-represented at the less privileged end of the social divide and often face stigmatization based on their ethnic and/or class background. This leads to a struggle over fitting in on a campus that is overwhelmingly unaccommodating toward anyone who does not fit the dominant group’s image of a Ph.D. student at Paradise (Torres 2009).

Higher education institutions are not socially neutral places; instead, they mirror the culture of the dominant class (Bourdieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin 1994). Educators tend to favor students equipped with middle-class interactional styles – those who instinctively comprehend faculty expectations and conform to the ‘culturally appropriate’ conception of a ‘college student’ (see, e.g. Jack 2016). Early exposure to an elite environment becomes pivotal as individuals rely on cultural competencies developed prior to university. WE students, especially those educated in elite environments before coming to Paradise, possess the ease and propensity for engaging with authority figures – a skill set that many EE students lacked (Jack and Black 2022).

I am very shy when it comes to socialising with professors. In my country you simply do not approach professors. Also, the fact that in my family ... in my immediate circle – I never had any academics, I never got in touch with anyone who is super smart and super interesting ... So, for me it was something new, and I didn’t know how to relate.

EE students’ prior experiences of university culture closely align with what Bourdieu, Passeron and St Martin (1994) describe as ‘distancing’ wherein power dynamics and barriers are firmly established. This stands in stark contrast with the more participatory styles of teaching and learning that students in Western Europe are subjected to. As one student observed, ‘I noticed that about many Eastern European students, there is a much higher distance; when professors say something, they take it like a prophecy from Heaven, it cannot be questioned.’ This cultural distinction in professor-student interactions can contribute to misunderstandings in the supervisor-student dynamic and hinder the learning process.

My relationship with my supervisor was constructed in time. Somehow, you always have the expectation that the interaction should come from the other end, rather than you badgering the professor. Therefore, whenever I have a difficulty, I just deal with it on my own ... But then he tells me, ‘You never ask anything. You never send any work.’

The interactions between students and supervisors often begin with tension, as each party operates from distinct ‘rulebooks.’ Supervisors, typically educated at prestigious universities in Western Europe, adhere to standardized approaches rooted in Western norms of faculty–student interaction. Many EE students had no prior exposure to these norms before entering Paradise, resulting in a failure to decode the unwritten rules of the institution. This ability hinges on students’ prior education and the level of support provided by their supervisors. In cases where tutors fail to address misunderstandings, students might internalize their lack of comprehension without seeking clarification.

Disruptions in the supervisor-student dynamic can have adverse effects on students’ integration. For example, Lyuda vividly recounted how her initial admiration for Western culture diminished upon closer interaction:

I always thought that people from the West are better than we are, they know more, they are more progressive, they are more open, they have more skills. And then, when I started interacting with Western colleagues, I realised that it’s not like that at all. We have so many skills, we know so many things, we have so much experience. Plus, we had to learn to fight the system, so we are more resistant.

Resistance is indeed needed in Paradise. For instance, Eva, in her final year, felt compelled to apply for jobs, a decision met with incredulity from her supervisor who dismissively remarked, 'Don't waste your time, just write your thesis.' The ensuing conversation proved stressful for Eva, who had to justify her standpoint to her supervisor: 'But you know how it works in academia; you must apply months before, otherwise, you don't have money to eat,' she pleaded. This discussion escalated to the point where she emphasized, 'Do you know my background? I can make it.' The explicit reference to Eva's 'background' during her communication with her supervisor served to emphasize her strong work ethic. However, Eva's experience also exposes the supervisor's ignorance, as they assumed that all students could rely on the 'bank of mum and dad.' This assumption of a financial safety net overlooks the diverse backgrounds and financial constraints faced by EE students, revealing a gap in understanding the distinctive challenges encountered by this group.

Throughout the narratives, there were frequent references to one's 'background.' Over time, this term evolved into a comprehensive expression encompassing various elements that distinguished EE students from their more privileged peers at Paradise. It appeared to denote not only one's EE origin and shared post-socialist upbringing but also hinted at a nonelite educational trajectory and/or a nonelite home environment. Crucially, this characterization wasn't exclusively negative. EE students, in fact, drew strength from their background, which encapsulates an appreciation for hard work, perseverance, and resistance. These qualities were actively leveraged by EE students to navigate and overcome challenges encountered throughout their lives. In this way, their background, while setting them apart, also became a source of resilience and determination in facing the distinct hurdles posed by the elite academic environment at Paradise.

I come from this environment thinking that whatever you do, you work for it. Everything depends on you; you cannot count on someone else. So, if you can get a scholarship or Erasmus, that is an opportunity that you must take advantage of, because you never know whether another chance will come. And if you want a position and because of politics or nepotism, you cannot get it, then you work harder, not sitting at home and complaining about it, you just work hard and don't give up.

As EE students endeavor to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the elite graduate school, they confront challenges in establishing connections and finding allies. Violeta eloquently articulates this difficulty, stating, 'There are very few people, at least this is my feeling, who share the same background.' This underscores the struggle of being a numerical minority on a campus predominantly occupied by the Western (upper-) middle class. Olga candidly points out the stark reality, stating, 'In my first year, it was only me and the cleaning and kitchen staff.' The observation underscores the isolation experienced by EE students, highlighting their numerical insignificance within the broader campus community. Interestingly, it was primarily those who had not been exposed to elite settings before coming to Paradise who found, in Serena's words, this 'posh, high society, bourgeois' environment extremely strange and unfamiliar.

I thought the idea of Paradise was to bring diversity together and to show how people from different places can work together as equals, but they are not. There is a big difference even in our stipend. People from western and northern countries receive close to 3000 euros, while people from Eastern Europe receive like 1000 euros. This is not fair.

The elite campus environment accentuates the absence of economic capital for EE students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. Rita's account encapsulates this reality: 'We were having lunch together, and I don't know how, but suddenly the conversation turned to the salaries of our parents. When they heard that my father's salary is 400 euros, they seemed stunned.' This incident vividly illustrates how class differences become conspicuous in elite academic settings, where such disparities are either not anticipated or considered inconsequential (Lee 2017). In elite campuses, seemingly casual conversations about parental occupations, attendance at prestigious fee-paying schools, and foreign travels, shared regularly among students, serve to normalize Western, upper-middle-class life experiences while simultaneously erasing or devaluing those of the

working class (Jack and Black 2022). Kata's quote below further illustrates the emotional labor involved in reshaping classist incidents into positive narratives:

You can interpret things from different angles. You can say, 'Okay, because I come from a family background, which is not very ... how to put it nicely ... like higher class. Then there are people here who say, 'I'm hearing the lower class of people'; which sounds really bad. But if I consider how much I've already accomplished, it can shift my perspective.

Scholars have previously underscored the stigma associated with being low income, working class, and lacking elite educational credentials (Lee and Kramer 2013). Notably, class, unlike race or gender, is more concealable; consequently, upwardly mobile EE students may opt to keep their backgrounds hidden from their peers as a strategy to 'pass.' This phenomenon is reminiscent of observations among elite law school students in the United States who, in an effort to gain friends, jobs, and experiences, mimicked their peers' dress sense and vocabulary. Granfield's (1991) work captured how working-class students, initially entering an Ivy League law school with pride, became socialized into downplaying their social status in pursuit of a lucrative career thereafter. However, in contrast to this observed pattern, my interviewees spoke openly about their working-class roots with a sense of pride.

I really take pride in what my parents are, you know. I'm not hiding it or anything, especially not in these kinds of environment, where people actually come from, like, academic families. I'm really proud to say that my parents are working class, and they actually struggle, even now, through life.

Inga's quote underscores a positive affirmation of identity rather than a tendency to conceal one's background, showcasing the resilience of EE students as they navigate the elite academic landscape. However, openly discussing one's socioeconomic background, a form of 'coming out,' is not without risks. Students who share details about their home situations may expose themselves to potential devaluation, stigmatization, or enduring pity. Erika shares a specific incident during lunch when she and her friend faced mockery from their peers for prioritizing thesis work over indulging in lengthy breaks for lunch:

We were having lunch at the cafeteria and stayed to work until late. But then we realised, it is so much easier to just bring a Tupperware, get some more food at lunch, and have a shorter lunch break. Then we heard our colleagues: 'Oh, poor Eastern Europeans who don't have enough money, and bring their Tupperware to get extra food, and they are too ashamed.' For me, it was not even about money, I don't have time to spend hours at lunch, you know?

Classism is the manifestation of power and class privilege in which lower-class individuals are treated in ways that exclude, discount, devalue, and separate them (Langhout, Rosselli, and Feinstein 2007; Lott 2002). Ferguson and Lareau (2021) employ the term 'hostile ignorance' to portray the challenges faced by working-class students from their peers with higher social class backgrounds. Similar to microaggressions (see also Smith, Mao, and Deshpande 2016), the term is defined to encompass all sorts of hostile and critical comments, questions, or reactions that reference the other party's social class background. Such acts have the potential to undermine not only the quality but also the quantity of social ties and may significantly hinder feelings of belonging at Paradise.

Incidents like these shed light on why many students believe that 'there is a problem with being Eastern European and fitting in at Paradise.' The challenge arises from the struggle to reconcile with the upper-class lifestyle of leisure, exemplified by the leisurely enjoyment of three-course lunches on the sun-drenched terrace of the cafeteria. This incongruity becomes a focal point of contention in the eyes of their peers. Furthermore, such comments appear aimed at undermining the image of Eastern Europeans as hardworking individuals who prioritize work over frivolities, potentially unsettling the sensibilities of the upper class. The consequence is not only that EE students feel exposed in public places, but their home environment is also far from a safe haven where they can unwind and relax:

At [my former EE university] we were all walking in the dorm in our tracksuits, you know, in something leisurely that you wear at home. When I moved here to Paradise, in my first year I lived with Italian, German, and Dutch. And they were all day in jeans and shirts and shoes. They were wearing shoes in the house. I was gobsmacked [laughter].

The disparities in cultural styles, evident in the eating habits, attire, and leisure pursuits of EE students, serve as persistent reminders of their social status. This positions them as outsiders in an elite campus environment where upper-class norms are upheld as the golden standard (Stuber 2011). Consequently, there is a palpable urge among these students to distance themselves from the enchanted world of Paradise. Monika articulates this sentiment, expressing a desire for a 'bit of normal life, like talking to people who have real jobs,' which leads her to move out of the dormitory in an attempt to escape the gilded confines of Paradise. The quest for a sense of 'normalcy' emerges as a recurring theme in interviews with working-class EE students, highlighting the particularly challenging nature of their struggle to fit in:

When I came to Paradise, I realised what a great difference it is – since most people at my former uni actually came from what I would call *normal* families. You know, people who are first generation ... or maybe even second generation, but their parents have *normal* jobs. They are not academics, intellectuals, or filthy rich. I think this was a really big difference, it was a culture shock for me. If I just had more connections with those people, especially when it comes to life experiences and future expectations.

Scholars, such as Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), have meticulously documented how upper-class and upper-middle-class students maintain a certain distance from upwardly mobile students who are not part of their inner circle, compelling the latter to rely on the company of their coethnics. The divergence in prior life experiences, particularly in terms of upbringing and the distinct pathways taken to arrive at Paradise, serves as evident demarcation lines, dividing students across class lines. As Ingrid astutely points out, 'It was natural for them to do a Ph.D., while for us, kind of ... we developed it through university.' Consequently, it is unsurprising that EE students themselves feel inclined to surround themselves with like-minded peers with whom they can share meaningful experiences. Gabriela, like many other interviewees, candidly admits to having only a small circle of friends in Paradise: 'Close friends? I have had the same two friends since my arrival.' Similarly, Iveta provides a compelling rationale for opting out of the social life of upper-class students:

I hang out more with the Eastern crowd because I think we do things differently. If you want to socialise with the rich crowd, you have to organise this big event and it needs to have a central part, like 'Let's go to the opera and have canapes before that' and you cannot invite just one or two, you have to invite like twenty of them and you have to announce it like months in advance and send a lot of empty emails and they will all make it so dramatic. With the Eastern crowd, people would be more spontaneous, you just call each other and go to someone's place for drinks, there is no need for drama.

Veronika contends that 'people place a very large emphasis on the way they present themselves and their sub-presentation; this is something truly murderous.' While asserting that such factors should not carry significant weight, she cannot help but observe the serious consequences they have on one's social life: 'If you invest in self-presentation, people immediately react to it. If you don't, people immediately stop talking to you and think you are strange.'

The way you act, the way you socialise, the way you speak, everything is fake. But you must learn to fake it with them otherwise it will not work. And I don't think I am the best at it. I have a lot of empty conversations and pretend to be very interested in the weather, stuff like that. I figured you just ask them a lot of questions about themselves, and they will be happy ... Nobody wants to know about you, they just want you to confirm their grandness, and if you can do that, you can slide by.

EE students adeptly honed the skills essential for navigating the sophisticated landscape of graduate school, allowing them to blend in or 'pass.' Simultaneously, they established boundaries and refrained from forming close connections with their elite peers. In a deliberate refusal to emulate their counterparts, the interviewed students purposefully distanced themselves from the prevailing elite culture of Paradise. Crucially, this distancing wasn't solely a reactionary response to exclusion; it also epitomized a proactive effort to resist assimilation and sidestep shedding aspects of their heritage and personal identity, as they perceived assimilation to be too high a price.

The rich narratives of EE students explored in this paper aim to offer a nuanced insight into how perceived class and ethnic disparities influenced their sense of belonging and fitting in at Paradise.

Through an analysis of their lived experiences and perceptions, it's important to acknowledge that these findings may not be universally applicable to individuals beyond the study cohort. Nonetheless, the diverse perspectives shared by the interviewees provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of class and ethnic dynamics within elite academic environments. By shedding light on these complexities, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions can both perpetuate and challenge systems of disadvantage and privilege.

Discussion

The objective of this paper has been to delve into the experiences of EE students as 'newcomers' within the elite setting of Paradise. Employing Tinto's framework, social integration has been examined by exploring personal contacts with academics, the formation of friendships, and overall feelings of fitting in and belonging. Through the analysis of narratives from EE students, this study aimed to unravel the social adaptation of EE students on a campus historically dominated by the Western elite for generations, ultimately revealing the prevalent sentiment of EE students feeling like 'strangers in paradise.'

The practice of distancing the 'poor' pervades elite circles, evident both institutionally and interpersonally. Bullock (1995, 119) defines this as the 'oppression of the poor through a network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules'. Institutional classism, as outlined by Lott (2002, 104), perpetuates and reinforces low-income status by 'erecting barriers to full societal participation' within social institutions. Reflecting the interests of powerful majority groups, institutional discrimination serves to uphold the status quo. This dynamic is often exacerbated by face-to-face, or interpersonal distancing, marked by prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination based on individuals' socio-economic status (Lott 2002).

At the institutional level, there exists a notable dissonance between the professed values of diversity and inclusivity at Paradise and the lived experiences of EE students. Despite the institution's efforts to promote diversity, the inclusion of EE students remains segregated and fails to dissolve the existing boundaries within the student cohort. This discrepancy is glaringly apparent in the significant gap in scholarships between EE students and their Western and Northern European counterparts. The financial challenges faced by EE students, coupled with comparatively lower stipends, deepen their economic marginalization within Paradise and reinforce a hierarchical relationship where privileged peers have greater access to material resources, both within the university and in their personal lives.

Attending an elite university presents a unique opportunity for students to cultivate networks and interact with high-status peers and mentors, thereby gaining access to elite social and cultural capital. However, EE students often find themselves grappling with strained interactions with both professors and peers, a stark departure from the experiences of their Western-educated counterparts. Archer, Hutchings, and Ross (2002, 176) posit that this discrepancy arises from the prevailing expectation that newcomers must conform to the unchanged institutional culture of higher education. While Western-educated students exhibit proactivity in engaging with authority figures and reap tangible benefits from these relationships, EE students frequently recount feeling unwelcome, uncomfortable, and misunderstood by their peers and faculty. Consequently, they actively seek out social connections with individuals who share similar backgrounds, fostering an insular dynamic in response to their perceived exclusion. However, it's essential to recognize that this self-segregation isn't inherently preferred but rather a response to the challenges encountered when navigating a new environment where newcomers often feel like outsiders.

Embodying the sentiment of being 'strangers in paradise' (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), EE students challenge the notion that mere access guarantees genuine inclusion and equality. The gap between access and meaningful participation highlights the intricate social dynamics within the elite academic realm, where adeptly navigating interpersonal relationships is just as crucial as academic competence. Hindered by a lack of the necessary skills to effectively engage with

faculty and experiencing discomfort when interacting with their upper-class peers, EE students often find themselves excluded from the manifold advantages offered by the elite academic environment at Paradise.

While elite higher education institutions have made efforts toward inclusivity, the persistence of inequalities suggests that segregation has merely evolved within universities, leading to instances of segregated inclusion. Tinto's assertion (1975; 1993) that integration depends on the interaction between individuals and institutions remains relevant: 'An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life' (Tinto 1993, 204–5).

The dynamics observed at Paradise closely align with Accominotti's concept of 'segregated inclusion.' This concept posits that while elite institutions may open up to new social groups, they often adopt new mechanisms to distinguish themselves from newcomers, thereby preserving their exclusivity and distinctiveness (Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018, 1779). In a parallel to the inclusion of new subscribers at the New York Philharmonic, the integration of new, nonelite students at Paradise remains segregated. Eastern European and Western European students find themselves circulating in separate and stratified spaces, thereby upholding the 'distinctiveness' of the elite culture at Paradise. This perpetuates a nuanced form of inclusion that, instead of breaking down barriers, reinforces social boundaries within the institution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Adél Pásztor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2752-3429>

References

- Accominotti, F., S. R. Khan, and A. Storer. 2018. "How Cultural Capital Emerged in Gilded Age America: Musical Purification and Cross-Class Inclusion at the New York Philharmonic." *American Journal of Sociology* 123 (6): 1743–83. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696938>.
- Archer, L., M. Hutchings, and A. Ross. 2002. *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Armstrong, E. A., and L. T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Binder, A. J., D. B. Davis, and N. Bloom. 2016. "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs." *Sociology of Education* 89 (1): 20–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040715610883>.
- Bourdieu, P., J. C. Passeron, and M. de Saint Martin. 1994. *Academic Discourse*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BSA. 2017. *Statement of Ethical Practice*. British Sociological Association. https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf.
- Bullock, H. E. 1995. "Class acts: Middle class responses to the poor." In *The social psychology of interpersonal discrimination*, edited by B. Lott and D. Maluso, 118–159. New York: Guilford Press.
- Chankseliani, M. 2017. "Four Rationales of HE Internationalization: Perspectives of U.K. Universities on Attracting Students from Former Soviet Countries." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 22 (1): 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315317725806>.
- Crozier, G., D. Reay, J. Clayton, L. Colliander, and J. Grinstead. 2008. "Different Strokes for Different Folks: Diverse Students in Diverse Institutions – Experiences of Higher Education." *Research Papers in Education* 23 (2): 167–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802048703>.
- Ferguson, S., and A. Lareau. 2021. "Hostile Ignorance, Class, and Same-Race Friendships: Perspectives of Working-Class College Students." *Socius* 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211048305>.
- Friedman, S., and D. Laurison. 2019. *The Class Ceiling. Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Friedman, S., D. Laurison, and A. Miles. 2015. "Breaking the 'Class' Ceiling? Social Mobility into Britain's Elite Occupations." *The Sociological Review* 63 (2): 259–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12283>.

- Genova, E. 2016. "To Have Both Roots and Wings: Nested Identities in the Case of Bulgarian Students in the UK." *Identities* 23 (4): 392–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1024125>.
- Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M. 2021. *Student Migration from Eastern to Western Europe*. New York: Routledge.
- Granfield, R. 1991. "Making it by Faking it: Working-Class Students in an Elite Academic Environment." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20 (3): 331–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124191020003005>.
- Jack, A. A. 2016. "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University." *Sociology of Education* 89 (1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040715614913>.
- Jack, A. A., and Z. Black. 2022. "Belonging and Boundaries at an Elite University." *Social Problems*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac051>.
- Langhout, R. D., F. Rosselli, and J. Feinstein. 2007. "Assessing Classism in Academic Settings." *The Review of Higher Education* 30 (2): 145–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2006.0073>.
- Lee, E. M. 2017. "'Where People Like Me Don't Belong': Faculty Members from Low-Socioeconomic-Status Backgrounds." *Sociology of Education* 90 (3): 197–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040717710495>.
- Lee, E. M., and R. Kramer. 2013. "Out With The Old, In With The New? Habitus and Social Mobility At Selective Colleges." *Sociology of Education* 86 (1): 18–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040712445519>.
- Lott, B. 2002. "Cognitive and Behavioral Distancing from the Poor." *American Psychologist* 57 (2): 100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.57.2.100>.
- Marcu, S. 2015. "Uneven Mobility Experiences: Life-Strategy Expectations among Eastern European Undergraduate Students in the UK and Spain." *Geoforum* 58: 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.017>.
- Pásztor, A. 2014. "'Most Challenging? To Fit in with People While Remaining Myself.' Social Integration of Second Generation Turks within the Dutch Higher Education Setting." *Sociological Research Online* 19 (4): 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3459>.
- Pásztor, A., and P. Wakeling. 2018. "All PhDs are Equal but Some are More Equal than Others: Institutional and Social Stratification in Access to the Doctorate." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (7): 982–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1434407>.
- Posselt, J. R. 2018. *Inside Graduate Admissions. Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reay, D., G. Crozier, and J. Clayton. 2009. "'Strangers in Paradise?': Working-Class Students in Elite Universities." *Sociology* 43 (6): 1103–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700>.
- Rodriguez Anaiz, P. 2022. "Segregated Inclusion: An Intersectional analysis of Working-Class Women's Experiences at an Elite University." PhD diss., UCL. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10168745/>.
- Shavit, Y., and H. P. Blossfeld. 1993. *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.
- Smith, L., S. Mao, and A. Deshpande. 2016. "Talking Across Worlds: Classist Microaggressions and Higher Education." *Journal of Poverty* 20 (2): 127–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2015.1094764>.
- Stuber, J. 2011. *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Sugimoto, C. R. 2022. "Narrow Hiring Practices at US Universities Revealed." *Nature* 610 (7930): 37–38. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-03065-0>.
- Szopkó, Z. 2021. "Hungarian University Professors Earn Extremely Low Salaries by International Standards." *Atlatzo*. <https://english.atlatzo.hu/2021/10/28/hungarian-university-professors-earn-extremely-low-salaries-by-international-standards/>.
- Tinto, V. 1975. "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." *Review of Educational Research* 45 (1): 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>.
- Tinto, V. 1993. *Leaving College Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Torres, K. 2009. "'Culture Shock': 'Black Students Account for Their Distinctiveness at an Elite College.'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32 (5): 883–905. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701710914>.
- Wapman, K. H., S. Zhang, A. Clauset, and D. B. Larremore. 2022. "Quantifying Hierarchy and Dynamics in US Faculty Hiring and Retention." *Nature* 610 (7930): 120–7. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-05222-x>.
- Xie, A., and D. Reay. 2020. "Successful Rural Students in China's Elite Universities: Habitus Transformation and Inevitable Hidden Injuries?" *Higher Education* 80: 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00462-9>.
- Yanatma, S. 2023. "Real Teacher Salaries in Europe are Down. Which Countries Pay the Highest and Lowest Wages?" *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/12/06/real-teacher-salaries-in-europe-are-down-which-countries-pay-the-highest-and-lowest-wages>.