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'This is how the game works': navigating access and choice in transnational higher education fields

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory the study describes access to transnational mobility as a contextual process to which transnational and location-specific capitals make joint contributions. In doing so, the paper responds to calls against methodological nationalism, i.e. confining research to national boundaries, which is becoming increasingly inadequate in a global world where capital may be produced and subsequently utilised in different countries (Weiss [2021]. "Re-thinking society: How can sociological theories help us understand global and crossborder social contexts?" *Current Sociology* 69 (3): 333–351.). Using in-depth interviews with international students the paper illustrates the complexities of 'choice' and the intricacies of 'playing the game' in transnational spaces while exposing how nations structure and (re)produce social inequality in access to educational opportunities.

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Introduction

Higher education access and choice are widely researched concepts among sociologists of higher education (HE), with scholars frequently using Bourdieu's framework to identify 'who goes where and why' (Ball et al. 2002). Social class has always been at the forefront of such explanations, implying that possession of economic, cultural, and social capital is necessary for success in the higher education field (e.g. Reay, David, and Ball 2005). But scholarship in this area is often reduced to the national scale, even though HE choice in a globalised world transcends national boundaries. Meanwhile, scholars of international student mobility (ISM) overwhelmingly focus on the privilege associated with being mobile and reduce research to specific points in time, while being preoccupied with push-and-pull analyses that focus on single movements between 'home' and 'destination' countries (Lipura and Collins 2020).

This article will draw on an interview-based study of international doctoral students at Oxford University in order to, first, challenge the narrative on international students being a homogenous group, i.e. overwhelmingly wealthy and self-funded individuals who experience ISM in similar ways (see e.g. Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). Second, rather than viewing ISM as 'a single relocation decision by an individual at a moment in time' (King et al. 2006, 259) the study will look at mobility as a contextual and dynamic process that permeates the life course of the individual (Carlson 2013; Leung 2017). Third, it will employ Bourdieu's field theory to describe how low-income students with diverse capital possessions and varied understanding of the 'rules of the game' go on to acquire

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and mobilise capital in transnational spaces that not only allows them access to a Ph.D. at a world-class university but does so on a full scholarship.

The research context

The study of under-represented groups in HE, namely students from less advantaged backgrounds, long dominates discussions of HE access and choice in the UK and beyond. Although the most recent Sutton Trust report (Montacute and Cullinane 2023) shows significant improvements, it also points to a relatively large number of students who ‘miss out’ on obtaining a top university degree despite having the grades. Higher education is expensive; therefore, finance is often a ‘key concern and constraint’ among students of lower-class origin (Ball et al. 2002) who often position themselves outside of the Ivory Tower, seeing that elite universities are ‘not for the likes of them’ (Archer and Hutchings 2000). But international students are now penetrating the very same elite institutions where decades of widening participation initiatives failed to improve the share of the nonprivileged student body (Montacute and Cullinane 2023). This raises the question: How do low-income international students get into elite universities, while local nonprivileged students do not?

International students are often viewed as part of the ‘migratory elite’ (King and Raghuram 2013). Characterised by parental wealth, private schooling, and privileged upbringing, they are seen to target prestigious universities in Anglophone countries to ensure the acquisition of cultural, social, and symbolic capital necessary for maintaining their privilege (Brooks and Waters 2010). Although low-income students appear to make substantially less use of ISM opportunities (Findlay et al. 2006) there is now a small but growing body of scholarship that shows how ISM can act as a vehicle for social mobility (e.g. Leung 2017; Tran 2016).

While variations of push-and-pull analysis dominate research on ISM (Raghuram 2013), sociologists of education have found Bourdieu ‘enormously good for thinking with’ (Jenkins 2002, 11). But Bourdieu’s field theory is generally employed in national contexts despite us living, working, and studying in an increasingly globalised world (Weiss 2021). Such a country-level focus can lead us to assume that similar type and amount of capital offers similar opportunities and produces similar outcomes even though the value of capital is decided by the geographical, social, and political fields in which they are put to work in (Therborn 2001). Employing the concept of transnational social fields recognises how individual experiences are shaped by ongoing interactions that are grounded in contexts of origin and various educational locales (Gargano 2009). By focussing on the interplay between national contexts, the transnational approach can bridge the gap between the ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, that is, the global and the local, thus offering an alternative to methodological nationalism (Ong 1999).

Scholars of ISM have long argued for a move away from the discussion of outward and return moves centred on a fixed notion of ‘home’ and ‘destination’ countries towards long-term and dynamic transnational networks that are embedded in mobility practices (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2015). But limited research on international students who operate within transnational social fields (Lipura and Collins 2020) continues to focus on self-funded students from middle- and high-income families, while the experiences of scholarship students are frequently neglected in scholarly discussions (Baxter 2019; Pásztor 2015). In addition to this, doctoral students tend to receive comparatively less attention in the scholarship than first-degree students (Tran and Gomes 2017, 8). Focusing on low-income students, who are Ph.D. scholarship recipients at a world-class university, the research will explore the resources and strategies used by transnationally mobile students who ultimately succeed in securing a funded doctoral place at Oxford University.

The research setting

Oxford, Britain’s ancient university, regularly makes the front pages. Accused of serving as finishing school for the world’s wealthy and branded as ‘fiefdom’ of entrenched privilege (Lammy 2017), the

university faces intense scrutiny over the social selectivity of its student body. Evidently, more than 80% of Oxford students come from the top two social classes (Elitist Britain 2019) – they are the offspring of barristers, medical doctors, and chief executives, while Etonians alone – pupils of an ancient boarding school for boys founded by King Henry (costing around £48,500 p.a.) – are offered more university places than disadvantaged students on free school meals across the whole of the UK. While less than 1% of the British adult population ever graduated from Oxford or Cambridge, the graduates of these two universities permeate the British public life, making up three-quarters of all British prime ministers, senior judges, about half of the cabinet, and the country's leading journalists (Elitist Britain 2019).

Oxford has a significant international student base, largely attributed to its prestige and top rankings in the world university league tables. Postgraduate students make up about half of the total student body (Facts and Figures n.d.) with almost two-thirds of graduate students coming from outside of the UK (cf. 23% of undergraduates). The proportion of international students is even more striking in some fields, such as the social sciences, where British students comprise a minority (around 20%). Due to its world-renowned name and the very high proportion of overseas students, Oxford provides an ideal setting for the study of transnational mobility on a world scale.

To achieve a diverse sample (20), personalised emails were used in addition to departmental and college mailing lists. Information on doctoral students has been obtained through (publicly accessible) university webpages. Informed consent has been sought from potential interviewees who showed an interest in participating. For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality, all student names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and some minor identification details were altered to protect their identity. The research followed the BSA's (2017) guidelines on ethical research and has been approved by the institutional ethics board.

The final sample of low-income students chosen for this study (i.e. Ph.D. students at Oxford University in receipt of scholarships) was gender-balanced, with international students representing a diverse set of countries (e.g. Spain, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Turkey, Israel, Australia, USA, Chile). In spite of pursuing Ph.D. at a world class university, the social makeup of interviewees has been far from 'elite'. More than a quarter of the interviewees were the first in their families to go to university, while none of the interviewed students would have been able to fund four years of a Ph.D. without the help of a scholarship.

In-depth interviews have been used to elicit information on the individuals' educational trajectories. While the sampled students all possessed capital that qualified them to compete for entry, they also needed to navigate the HE fields within local, national, and international settings in order to access a world class university. In the following, I will be illustrating the contextualised nature of their educational mobility through four case studies that successfully illuminate their movements in transnational social fields. The case study students were selected to capture the diversity of internationally mobile students in terms of socio-economic background, gender, prior education, founding sources, and country of origin, thus challenging the view on ISM being reserved solely for the elite. While the chosen students were equipped with a varying level of capital and know-how of their respective HE fields, what they all had in common was an apparent lack of economic resources, rendering them dependent on scholarships for most of their educational trajectories. Their detailed narratives seek to highlight the ways they negotiated the different HE fields, as well as the role their capital and field-specific know-how played in enabling them to strategically position themselves in transnational spaces.

The research findings

David [25, male, US → BA international relations, MA & Ph.D. (Oxf) education] has two highly educated parents (mother community college professor, father psychologist), for whom the education of their two sons has been paramount: "There was never any time when they said "No, that's not possible"" as they worried about the balance between our music lessons, sports practices,

and our academics. In the US system, if you want to get into one of the best US universities, you have to do a lot to be this well-rounded person’.

Going to university has always been assumed rather than stated explicitly. David’s parents were not afraid to put their disposable capital at work, including their in-depth knowledge of the HE field, to get their sons into the ‘right’ university. For them, only the ‘best’ would do: getting into a lower-tier university was unacceptable, even inconceivable. Hence, they went against the recommendation of the college advisor who saw applying to Ivy League schools as a ‘waste of time’ due to David’s comparatively low SATs.

Although it lacks the income to fund David’s studies, the family is able to mobilise several forms of readily available capital simultaneously; combining cultural capital in the form of ‘what they know’ with social capital in the form of ‘who they know’ to maximise David’s chances of getting in (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013, 726). Their extensive parental involvement provides a good example of opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998); showcasing how families can valorise their capital to secure the best educational outcomes for their offspring.

When we went to visit universities, my mom would always call ahead and make sure that I would meet with someone at the music department, the Chinese department, and the international relations; and I didn’t understand why. I’m like “You just take a tour. That’s all you need to do.” But when the time came, I always used the fact that “I had conversations with professor one, two, three, and these are the reasons why I think I would really enjoy coming here.” So, I think when you say research, I think in that sense we did a lot, but it did not really seem like research.

Their hard work pays off, as David not only gets into his first-choice university but does so on a ‘dream scholarship’. This means a lot to David, who doesn’t want to ‘financially bankrupt’ his parents by adding four years of tuition fees and maintenance costs to their existing debt: “My family cannot afford university. I know my parents would take out loans and they would do anything for us” – because they already took out loans for my [adoptive] brother – “But I don’t want them to”. After a year of volunteering in Africa, following graduation, David is well positioned to secure the Marshall scholarship, one of the most selective graduate scholarships in the United States.

David’s journey to Oxford appears fairly straightforward, reminding us of a linear trajectory (see e.g. Furlong and Cartmel 1997). But he is far from a passive agent reaping the benefits of his privileged upbringing. David himself sees the root of his ‘success’ in a one-month trip to Asia which he undertook at the age of 15: ‘Of course this was after September 11 so none of us wanted to travel, but I applied and received the \$5,000 scholarship’. He refers to it as ‘the pivotal moment’ of his life that opened up his horizons and determined his future career:

It was life changing. And whenever you put that on an application people want to know more about you, and so that leads to another gate, another gate, and another gate. That scholarship was the first time I ever applied for something, I ever had an interview, and I realised “This is how the game works. You have to just try for the things that are the craziest but excite you the most.” People usually tell you “Oh, you cannot do that.” “Yes, you can”.

The ‘you-can-do-it’ attitude is typical for Denisa [30, female, Romania -> BA journalism, MA & Ph.D. (Oxf) sociology] as well, who is not afraid to face life’s challenges: ‘I was very driven. So, naturally, in my whole school career, I don’t have a mark, that’s different from an excellent, which, shows the will and the ambition to try’. Her upbringing (mother mathematician, father engineer) strongly influences her attitude to education: ‘I think my parents would have gotten a heart attack if I didn’t get into university’.

But living in a post-socialist country after the regime change leaves its mark on young people’s life chances, significantly limiting Denisa’s and her sister’s educational opportunities. Economic uncertainty resulting in job insecurity, low pay, and the overall lack of financial capital, meant Denisa giving up her dream of pursuing a degree in medicine as her family struggled to cover the costs of one-on-one exam-preparatory tutoring for both of their daughters around the same time point.

It was a period of change, and everybody was feeling it. The fact that my Mum’s job was so much threatened, not really prevented me from doing the things that I wanted to do, but definitely questioned it a lot in terms of

money and resources. So, I had to make a tough decision not to go with the best tutors, who are also the most expensive. And since my Mum had lost her job and there was no prospect of gaining another one, it was clear that I have one chance to apply for a university degree, and then I just chose something I liked, but not medicine.

Following a semester abroad (through Erasmus exchange) during her journalism degree, she is inspired to apply for postgraduate study. But her dreams soon get into jeopardy as she is explicitly warned off from even considering Oxford:

Someone on the scholarship committee said that it would be very hard, that they would never choose me, but I was not ready to give up. I have always liked the challenge. I have been told at every stage of my educational career that I won't be able to achieve something and every time I've managed to prove them wrong.

In the end, she beats the competition and is offered a funded place at Oxford on a highly competitive international scholarship: 'I had an amazing opportunity working on a research project in my final year and all of a sudden this made Oxford a possibility'. From then on, her educational career is a real 'success story', as she remains at Oxford for Ph.D. securing a (college-based) scholarship followed by a (Leverhulme-funded) postdoctoral fellowship, until she settles down in a permanent academic post at a prominent British university.

Sofia [32, female, Chile -> BA sociology, MA (UCL), Ph.D. (Oxf) social policy], being raised by a single mother, grows up in different family circumstances from Denisa and David: 'In my family, I didn't have many people with university degree, so everyone was like, yeah, you should study, so you have more opportunities'. Sofia's good results put her on a path leading to university, but she is at a loss which subject to study. 'I didn't have a clue about what to study, and I was totally obsessed with filmmaking, but my mother said no, you need to do something serious'. Being good at maths and science leads her to opt for a degree in engineering, but she soon pays the price for making a rushed and uninformed choice. The oversubscribed and male-dominated degree course proves to be a rather poor fit, leading her to transfer to sociology: 'that was the moment in which my mum said you cannot make another mistake, you know, you cannot change your mind again'. But fitting in within the sociology cohort comes with its own challenges:

Sociology was small and very elite. Most of my classmates came from private schools, so all of them had computers and libraries at home, spoke languages, and spent their holidays in Europe ... and we were like four students who went to state school. At the beginning there was a gap, a *huge* gap in terms of social and cultural vocabulary.

Following her graduation (as one of only eight students from the starting cohort of 40), Sofia finally has the 'know-how' of how to proceed with her subsequent educational career. Inspired by a backpacking experience in Europe, she considers studying abroad rather than staying on. Aiming for prestigious universities in the UK's 'golden triangle', she eventually decides to apply to UCL following the recommendation of her professor.

Her (self-funded) study abroad proves to be a costly but thoroughly enjoyable experience, at the end of which she is advised to return home to pursue research (she has a research job awaiting her) as she is 'too young to do a PhD'. Over time, she becomes involved in both research and teaching, so the decision about the doctorate comes naturally: 'it was a natural step to come to do a PhD and it was a very very conscious decision, completely different to the former decisions I have made'. Her decision is made easier by the sudden availability of governmental scholarships for overseas study: 'It was so difficult to come [to the UK] the first time, but at the time of the PhD it was like raining scholarships'. Her choice of Oxford for PhD is now based on thorough research and careful consideration showing a newly developed 'feel for the game'. Having successfully completed her PhD at Oxford, Sofia is now back in her native Chile in compliance with the terms of her scholarship, where her prestigious doctoral degree affords her a faculty position at a Chilean university.

Manuel's [30, male, Spain -> BA (Harvard) physics, MA & Ph.D. (Oxf) economics] background is similarly modest, as he does not grow up in a rich and well-educated family. As the only son of

working-class parents with no tradition of HE in the family (father: salesman, with only five years of schooling; mother: care worker), there were no high expectations for Manuel's future education and career: 'It was important for them that I do well, but they certainly didn't expect me to just keep on studying'. But his life reaches a turning point at the same age as David's when he picks up a leaflet offering a scholarship to study in an international school locally. Putting in an application is an impulsive decision which changes his life for good, as it leads onto a successful international educational career with stopovers at Harvard (for undergraduate) and Oxford (for post-graduate studies).

I think what really shaped the rest of my life was the international school; my life would have been completely different without it. First, I learnt to speak decent English. Then I learnt to be in the same environment with people from different countries. It gave me the confidence and maturity to apply to university in the States afterwards and adapt to the American, and later to the UK environment, with relative ease. If it weren't for the school, it would never have occurred to me to apply to universities overseas, it wouldn't have been feasible.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. Although the lack of capital at home was somewhat counterbalanced by habitus honed by the international school, his first educational choices were still tentative and serendipitous. Contemplating studying abroad in the hope of a tuition-free degree, he intuitively decides to fill in an application but almost misses out on Harvard, due to his lack of knowledge of the HE field.

If you want to know a funny episode, when I was looking for the Harvard application form it turned out there was a place called Harvard and there was a place called Harvard and Radcliffe. So, I thought Harvard was Harvard and not Harvard and Radcliffe, until it turned out that Harvard was a community college in the middle of nowhere. So, I was very naive about the whole system, but eventually applied to the right one and got in.

In the end, Harvard proves to be an excellent fit, and not only because of the 95% scholarship: 'I liked my time in the US a lot. People are very driven; the rhythm of life and work is very high, and you are motivated to really explore your limits'. After graduation he does not rush to apply to graduate school, rather: 'I thought it might be a good time to try the professional world and see how it works and, help me decide whether I want to do research at all'. But having worked in management consulting for two years, he feels the time has come to return to his studies.

Taking on board what he learnt from previous experiences, his postgraduate study decision is far less ad hoc and much more thought through and strategic. He carefully considers his future direction and opts for a change of field while setting his sights on Oxford for a master's degree (his only choice). From there, staying on for a Ph.D. is a natural progression (with ESRC funding), which is followed by a junior research fellowship after which he decides to look for a permanent post: 'I was very lucky because I only submitted one application, I got it and that's it'. Summing up his educational journey he claims:

The one thing that made me successful is that I try things. Often, I don't try the easiest, safest, or most straightforward thing, but sometimes you just have to try things without thinking too much about the risks; you just have to find your own path and see what works for you.

Discussion

According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), the 'field' is the playground where players bring their own capital to the game. While each player has a stake in the game, their influence over its outcomes is not equal. Players in possession of capital are at a significant advantage as they are capable of exerting power, and even determining or changing the rules of the game. David's case provides an excellent depiction of how the higher education game is played from a strong position in the field. By capitalising on his parents' knowledge and understanding of the rules of the game, David maximises his chances of entering a top university, and he does so in spite of his relatively low SATs. By masterfully playing the HE game, David not only is offered a place at the university of his choosing, but he does so on a full scholarship. As the social position and the position within the

HE field reinforce each other, David subsequently gains access to unparalleled educational opportunities.

Whereas the American HE field rewards those with ‘well-rounded personality’ which those ‘in the know’ are able to nurture from early years, in post-socialist Romania, individual entrance exams requiring expensive one-on-one tutoring decide who gets into which university. Therefore, in spite of having similar capital composition to David, Denisa appears powerless to influence the game in any way, as she faces a HE field where money trumps everything; thus, knowing the rules is not enough for winning the game. So, while David succeeds in valorising his assets to fit his horizon, Denisa must adjust her horizon to fit her circumstances. While all types of capital are valid in all fields, their relative value as trump cards is determined by each field and each game (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98). As economic capital is the trump card that cannot be compensated for by any other type of capital available in Denisa’s family, she is eventually forced to opt for a less elite degree and ends up studying journalism instead of medicine.

Although the HE field closes some opportunities for Denisa, it opens Sofia’s horizon in the Chilean setting. Even though she lacks any disposable capital to play the HE game with, having passed the universal HE entrance-exam with flying colours allows her to enrol into a top university. In her case, the rules of the game are to her advantage since economic capital is no pre-requisite for entry. But not having a feel for the game puts her at risk of dropping out: as she makes a misguided first choice. Finally, Manuel is changing the game entirely when applying to a university in the United States instead of Spain. Being the most disadvantaged in terms of access to resources, he does not allow his social position to define him. Refusing to play a game in which he is set to lose, he steps out of the national HE field, for which he is rewarded with a fully funded degree at Harvard University. However, his story may have had a completely different ending, as his serendipitous application almost lands him at the wrong university, confirming the great importance of knowledge of the HE field(s) in shaping one’s career trajectory.

These examples successfully illustrate that family capital and habitus are by no means deterministic, as neither of these students set out to study abroad initially (nor to do a PhD). Although habitus is structured by our past and upbringing ‘habitus is not a destiny’ (cited in English and Bolton 2015, 31). Although we remain under the influence of the primary habitus we acquire in early childhood, the range of capital we accumulate during our life course plays an important role in shaping our future positions and careers. This is often referred to as ‘secondary habitus’ (Wacquant 2014), that is, habitus that gradually evolves through schooling and higher education, as well as various life experiences. A good example is the secondary socialisation through the international school for Manuel, where he is immersed in a new environment alien from his circumstances at home. Similarly, Sofia’s transfer to the more elite sociology course (albeit at a later point) exposes her to a new and thus far unfamiliar social setting. These environments are conducive to acquiring linguistic, cultural, and social capital but also to learning how the HE game works, which both utilise at subsequent educational choices as they gradually develop a better ‘feel for the game’.

The educational journeys of these young people underscore the vital importance of having a much needed ‘know-how’, a deeper understanding of the workings of the HE field(s), which gives them a competitive advantage in a high stakes game for prestigious educational opportunities. While some players are instinctive, others spend years to learn the rules of the game in different settings. While all four students are active agents in constructing their careers, Manuel is the first to set his sights on foreign universities. Attending the international school proves to be a radical turning point, a life-changing prospect which opens up his horizons to so far unthinkable opportunities. Even though he remains in Spain, he learns to speak English and becomes sensitised to the international environment so much that he eventually considers studying overseas. It has been argued that such combination of capital (in the form of language skills, intercultural competencies, field-specific know-how, etc.) and dispositions (openness; a ‘taste’ for mobility) manifest as a ‘transnational habitus’ allowing individuals to navigate the world beyond the confines of their country of origin (Carlson and Schneickert 2021).

Similar experiences are also present in the life stories of other students: David's trip to China at the age of 15, Denisa's Erasmus exchange, and Sofia's transfer to the most elite sociology degree are all transformative. They not only demonstrate the malleability of habitus through education and various life experiences, but seriously underscore the role of turning points in inducing dramatic changes in individual career trajectories, thus countering ideas of determinism.

Some choices are considered because they become available within the field. Serendipity plays a role too, occasionally, but it is influenced by positions and by the field (Hodkinson 2008). A relevant example is Manuel's application to Harvard, which is prompted by his roommate's interest in studying overseas. Had he stayed at a Spanish school, he may never have been tempted to put in the Harvard application which set him on a course to an exceptional academic career. Similarly, Denisa considers Oxford for future study following the suggestion of a classmate during her Erasmus exchange. Having not chosen to do Erasmus might have spared her the opportunity of even considering postgraduate studies overseas.

Still, as the popular saying goes: 'You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink', which means that you can present an opportunity to them, but you cannot force them to take advantage of it. Any of these students could have said 'no' instead of 'yes' to the opportunities offered. For example, it took courage for David to apply for the China trip right after 9/11 at a young age of 15 when all his classmates rejected the idea of an overseas trip. At the same time, applying to the international school was a big leap for Manuel, given his family background and no prior experience of living abroad or travelling internationally. But the students interviewed were 'as proactive in deciding not to do things as they were in finding, constructing, choosing or accepting opportunities that became available' (Hodkinson 2008, 6). While Sofia says a resounding no to engineering when moving onto sociology, she is not the only one modifying the direction of their studies. Manuel leaves physics for economics, David switches to education from international relations, and Denisa replaces journalism with sociology. In fact, all interviewed students have modified their original degree choices, which clearly demonstrates the active role they played in constructing their own biographies.

Still, not all of them go directly into a Ph.D., suggesting a class-dependent choice. Although both David and Denisa are recipients of prestigious international scholarships for postgraduate study, Sofia and Manuel use their work experience to rule a career in academia out or in. Whereas Manuel decides to do a Ph.D. after two years at a New York management consulting firm, Sofia sees academia as a suitable career option after her research job at a Chilean university. But by paying their way through postgraduate study at top British universities, they are strategically well positioned to maximise their chances of obtaining funding for doctoral studies. Hence, it is no surprise that Manuel secures ESRC funding once graduating from Oxford, while Sofia takes up the scholarship of the Chilean government offering overseas study to its qualified citizens at world ranking universities (in exchange for their return to their country of origin).

All in all, the strong reliance on external funding from all four interviewees underlines the vital role the structural dimension plays in shaping individual educational biographies, opening doors to (transnational) education opportunities to some, while closing them from others. Needless to say, structure both enables and restricts action. For example, the lack of scholarship opportunities delays Sofia's doctoral study, since the Chilean government's scheme is not yet in place at the point of her application for the MA (which she is forced to finance independently). While she is only delayed in enrolling for a PhD and does not miss out on the opportunity, give or take a few years, Denisa might not have qualified for that prestigious scholarship, the access to which has become limited to nationals from a different set of countries. Thus, as much as individual dispositions change through the life course, the environment in which they operate changes simultaneously, underlining that structure and agency work hand in hand, while neither dimension is static.

Global higher education is not a level playing field. The game is set to middle-class advantage; they are not only dealt the better cards, but they also internalise the rules of the game, through prolonged socialisation, so they can play it to their best advantage. Early 'gains' in the game have a

signalling effect that not only allow winners to accumulate more capital but also to secure more gains in subsequent games. Although unsuccessful individuals may give up and withdraw from the playing field entirely, those successful continue to seek out new opportunities leading onto new successes (Rigney 2010). As rewards pile on top of each other and the various gains multiply, they set in motion a ‘ripple effect’ that culminates in a Ph.D. funded at a world-class university. Although ISM has previously been accused of falling prey to the Matthew effect (Merton 1968), since it furthers the educational careers of already wealthy students (Cairns et al. 2017), the findings point to the great potential of scholarships in making ISM more socially inclusive.

Conclusion

To date, research on ISM has fixated on international students who are part of the ‘global elite’ (Lipura and Collins 2020). Challenging the narrative, the study set out to explore the educational mobility experiences of low-income students, who are often neglected in the scholarship. Considered ‘improbable’ for the position they have achieved, they closely resemble Bourdieu’s ‘lucky survivors’ as they succeed in gaining a (funded Ph.D.) place at a world-class university against the odds (Bourdieu 1984, 167).

Although overseas studies, or even a Ph.D., have not necessarily been part of the imagined futures of these young people to begin with, they all reached a point in life where they accumulated an abundance of capital (cultural, social, symbolic, mobility, career, etc.) and a range of prestigious awards and scholarships, eventually allowing them to secure a funded doctoral place at a world-class university. The various opportunities these young people have taken up relatively early in their educational careers frequently created resources that lead to new rewards and new opportunities, affording them a competitive advantage that ultimately won them a – funded – place at a world-class university. Thus, their educational biographies clearly demonstrate how success can breed success when it comes to securing some of the most highly coveted educational and career opportunities.

The findings clearly underline the need to look beyond the country-level when examining transnationally mobile groups, such as international students, who acquire and use capital in different contexts. Transnational social fields successfully illuminate the ways in which the capital accumulated by actors interacts with the different structures of the various HE fields that ultimately lead to the formation of a transnational habitus and the realisation of transnational mobility opportunities. Thus, they help us explain the longstanding differences in the take-up of ISM between countries.

The findings also support the view of transnational mobility as an ongoing process that is embedded in the life-course of the individual. For these young people, the decision to apply to Oxford does not come about at a single time point. Instead, they express it as a ‘natural’, ‘obvious’ and ‘self-explanatory’ choice. By focussing solely on the moment of application for doctoral studies, researchers would have overlooked the processes that actually made studying at Oxford possible.

Finally, focussing on the Ph.D., the ultimate qualification, not only allows us to view the educational career in its entirety but also shows how ISM can lead to individual social mobility. The findings may inform research on widening participation in access to HE by highlighting how scholarships can induce both short-range and long-range social mobility. The results also underscore the role scholarships play in widening participation to transnational mobility opportunities for segments of society who would have been locked out of such opportunities due to lack of funding. Finally, the paper calls for further research on the stratification of international mobility that is not confined by national or disciplinary boundaries.

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