

“I feel a little bit like they don’t understand me”

by **Rabia Nasimi (@RabiaNasimi)**, taken from a research project she recently conducted as part of her MSc



The LSE ‘has been ranked second in the world for social sciences for the third year in a row’ and is often referred to as a ‘global’, ‘elite’, ‘leading’ university due to its high-ranking position. It is claimed that such universities are occupied by high-scoring school-leaver students carefully selected from among the many well-qualified applicants who come disproportionately from the upper end of the socio-economic scale. However, this is not always the case. The LSE is also home to students not from professional or elite family backgrounds. I thought it would be interesting to understand a bit more about what students attending an ‘elite’ university, such as the LSE, feel about the relationship between their class, gender, race and ability to succeed. To help me answer these questions, I spoke to a current LSE student and heard what she had to say.

The student said that the ‘LSE has got a very good reputation’ and is a ‘prestigious university’, and this made her feel ‘more confident’. She also mentioned that as an individual from a ‘minority ethnic background’, attending the LSE gains greater significance among her family and friends. However, she also felt that people ‘assume straight away that you’re really smart’. When approaching teachers, she also felt like she didn’t quite connect; when asked to elaborate, she went on to say that ‘I feel a little bit like they don’t understand me as well’, and that she feels ‘a bit embarrassed’ if she does not understand something; she would prefer not to say anything at all. Through this example, we can begin to sense the lack of confidence instilled in this student’s perception of herself and her intellectual abilities. This lack of confidence means that she is not able to voice any concerns or questions as she fears that those around her may assume she is not able. It would be interesting to understand, in more depth, why approachability is difficult for her, as a student.

This response has shed light on possible viewpoints. There is a need for further research to ascertain why these feelings of inadequacy exist and how other variables, such as age, could affect the meanings students give to their experience at an educational institution. Looking at this response from Bourdieu’s perspective, the education system is one that is structured to legitimise class inequalities. He argues that success in education is facilitated by the possession of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘higher-class habitus’: as its traits are less common among lower-class pupils, their failure in the system is inevitable. Another interpretation of these statements relates to Heidi Mirza’s comment that ‘young black women, who identify with the notion of credentialism, meritocracy and female autonomy, strategically employ every means at their disposal in the

educational system and classroom to achieve a modicum of mobility in the world of limited opportunities’.

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