

# **Cultural Capital and the Social Hierarchy: An Exploration of Student Experience**

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I hope that this report encompasses my drive and gratefulness for the academic opportunities that I receive.

## Abstract

This study considers the impact of prior cultural capital (lived experience) on students' social mobility and experience at the University of Warwick. Based on literature from the fields of sociology, psychology and education, this report highlights the importance of cultural capital in higher education. It is documented that widening participation (WP) students struggle to connect with students from other social classes due to the cultural differences offered by a privileged upbringing. Two semi-structured group interviews were conducted, with both WP and non-WP students, to investigate how they perceive the impact of their upbringing on their social connections. The research finds that students from less privileged backgrounds are likely to feel 'left behind' at university, as they feel that students with similar cultures tend to 'stick together' socially. A lack of cultural capital causes a divide between WP and non-WP students, creating a barrier to both social mobility and, ultimately, the further development of their cultural capital. The study undeniably finds that the British education system has a duty to reduce the impact of a privileged upbringing in the quality of university life, and that more resources should be dedicated to improving disadvantaged students' cultural capital in a variety of ways.

## Introduction

Every student that goes to university is immediately and continuously exposed to people from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds. Each individual presents a different perspective on life, different ideas, and different behaviours. The mixing and spreading of these ideas, and broadening one's mind to them, is arguably one of the primary motivations for going to university; to develop one's sense of self and the world around them through meeting new people. (Cardiff University, 2022)

The other, of course, is to receive higher education and obtain a degree. However, this cannot be separated from social interaction, as study often involves group projects, seminar discussions and other acts of class participation. Alongside this, it is important, as is stressed by many academics at university, that a balance between study and a social life is key to thriving at university.

However, the nature of socialising at university is made difficult for many widening participation (WP) students as they may struggle to find common ground with other more privileged students. WP students are often defined via the following characteristics:

- Have previously qualified for free school meals
- Come from a household with income below £35,000
- Come from an area with low progression rates to higher education (using POLAR or TUNDRA data)
- Currently in receipt of means tested financial support from their university (e.g. bursary)
- Have spent time in local authority care such as foster care
- Are young carers or disabled themselves
- Mature students entering education over age 21

(University of Warwick, 2023)

As well as estranged students, refugees and asylum seekers, and other underrepresented and marginalised groups as included by various sources (University of Edinburgh, 2024).

At Warwick University, the proportion of students in receipt of a means-tested bursary stands at around 10% (University of Warwick, 2022). To use this as a marker of a WP background, this shows that disadvantaged students lie in the minority of students at Warwick.

This gap makes it more difficult for WP students to relate to their peers at University, contributing to reduced satisfaction and, as this report finds, boundaries to socialisation due to their socioeconomic and cultural background, compared to peers with more privileged life experiences. The aim of this report is to highlight and raise awareness of the negative impact of cultural capital on the success and wellbeing of WP students, and to uncover ways in which education institutions can work to close this gap by fostering cultural capital within disadvantaged groups.

# Literature Review

## What Is Cultural Capital?

'Cultural Capital' is a term first coined in 1977 by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in the essay "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), to describe the intangible social assets of a person that society seems desirable; students are more likely to be respected by peers if they appear to have a wealth of cultural knowledge, if they dress or speak in a way deemed to be culturally acceptable, or own material goods that signify an elevated social status, such as luxury items or expensive technology. This is essential for social mobility and enabling the mixing of classes. Though its original application was in explaining the difference in attainment in French schoolchildren in the 1960s, the concept has spread, with wider applications worldwide, largely in the realm of education, though there have been studies done on the place of cultural capital in technology and the internet (Emmison & Frow, 1998) to show the relevance of internet access as a form of cultural capital, as well as social issues such as welfare (Emirbayer & Williams, 2005) and the value of different cultures in homeless shelters.

There are three defined types of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984); embodied cultural capital described knowledge and behaviours that are inherited over time by one's environment (Bourdieu, 1990). This may include language, hobbies and interests, personal connections and status, as well as personal presentation, such as style of dress and speech. Alongside this sits objectified cultural capital, which includes material goods such as wealth and possessions – for example expensive technology, arts and instruments (Bourdieu, 1990). While possession alone does not increase cultural capital, exposure to these tools and consumption of the culture around them improves one's social standing due to the increased knowledge of and access to other cultural experiences. Finally, institutionalised cultural capital outlines formal education and professional qualifications that are considered a formal recognition of cultural capital. They allow individuals to access the job market and therefore income, experience and connections, which further contributes to social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984).

## The Effects of Upbringing

It has since been researched that the current structure of education in the United Kingdom favours the middle classes and those with greater wealth or cultural capital. Diane Reay, Professor of Sociology of Education, found that institutional educational policy constructs success in pre-university education around the involvement of parents in a child's schooling (Reay, 2004). Cultural capital and economic capital go hand in hand as parents with this capital are better at selecting schools, dealing with teachers, and driving to raise standards through pushing their children into 'gifted and talented' programmes. This in turn develops the cultural capital of the child at a disproportionate rate to their working-class counterparts, creating an

imbalance and providing a further barrier to less privileged children when it comes to accessing and excelling in higher education (Gupta, 2023).

The vocation of one's parents also has a huge influence over the decisions of their children. Not only are parents who attended university more likely to discuss this as an option for their child, but the specific industries that they work in also have an impact. For example, students with a parent or carer who is a medical practitioner are eight times more likely to study medicine or dentistry (UCAS, 2021). More advantaged students see lucrative careers and university attendance as realistic choices more often than their WP counterparts.

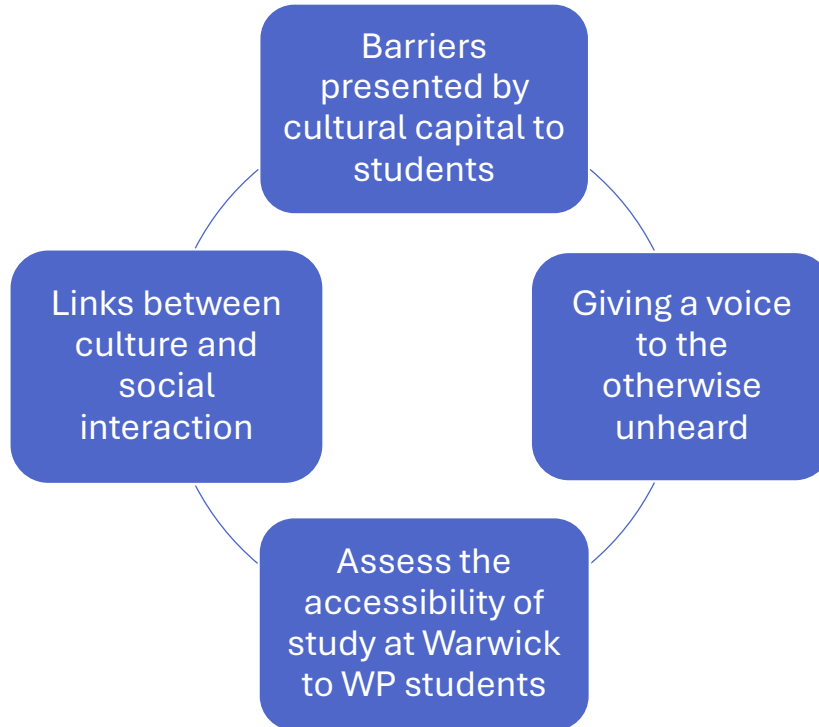
## Impact at University and Beyond

Cultural capital can also include one's personal network. More privileged students are made aware of the opportunities that are available to them, including going to university, and what this may involve. However, less fortunate students may be the first in their personal network to even dream of attending university, and must put in a lot of effort to understand the steps taken to get there. Perhaps the grades needed at GCSE or above to attend, or specific a-levels that will allow them to complete their desired degree – over 25% of students in a UCAS survey would make different GCSE/National 5 choices after researching what their desired degree involved, and around 1/3 would choose different post-16 subjects (UCAS, 2021). This is one of the reasons that 'communication before and during university' is a top 5 factor influencing a WP student's decision to go to a particular university, which is not even a top 10 consideration for non-WP applicants (Downie, 2023).

Cultural capital extends beyond wealth and other objective measures. A strong personal network, a stable future and enjoyment of culture have a huge impact on mental and physical health. It has even been recorded that subjective social status can better predict health status than objective measures such as finances and job position (Singh-Manoux, et al., 2005). Subjective social status can be measured in various ways, and can be strong predictors of current as well as forecasted health of a person. It can also influence students' perspective on privilege and advantage, contributing to impostor syndrome and how students perceive others in different social classes (Mulcahy & Martinussen, 2023). This indicates that cultural capital not only affects social connections, but that this in turn has a direct impact on health and therefore wider social issues such as mental health struggles. By improving cultural capital in the youth of all students, generational struggles and overall health can be improved, adding even more urgency to resolving this issue.

# Methodology

## Aims



The aims of this project were to understand, from a wide variety of students' perspectives, the perceived impact of cultural capital on their university experience.

The data collected via interview and secondary research aims to investigate whether the University of Warwick is made accessible to all students regardless of their cultural and socioeconomic background, and whether an atmosphere has been cultivated there that alienates students with limited cultural capital.

## Interview Structure

### Interview Setting

Two face-to-face group interviews were conducted in June 2024, each consisting of three undergraduate participants (six interviewed in total) and myself. The breakdown of participants was as follows:

- 1 international student
- 5 home-fee students
- 1 widening participation student
- 5 first-year students



- 1 final-year student
- Subjects studied: (including joint honours)
  - o 2 Mathematical Sciences
  - o 1 Life Sciences
  - o 4 Faculty of Arts
  - o 1 Faculty of Social Sciences

### **Pre-Interview Assessment**

Interviews each lasted one hour and were semi-structured, comprised of a consistent set of framing questions (See Appendix A) followed by variable follow-up questions to dig deeper and reflect on the responses given. Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone, and then transcribed and pseudonymised directly after the interviews were conducted. Recordings were then deleted to ensure the privacy of participants. Interviews were conducted with a largely informal air, to allow participants to feel comfortable when discussing subjects that may be seen as sensitive and personal. These included discussions of their childhood, family and wealth background, experience in education and struggles faced at university. Participants were also reminded several times via the Participant Information Leaflet and within the group interviews themselves that they were free to decline to respond or to take themselves out of the room for a break during the interview. Questions asked aimed to understand the participants' backgrounds and encourage them to think about their own cultural capital and how this impacts their life at university. Two-thirds of participants stated that they had never considered these concepts previously, which reiterated the value of these framing questions in bringing ideas of cultural capital to the forefront of participants' minds to allow these themes to be discussed thoroughly.

### **MacArthur Scale Activity**

Also conducted within the interviews was a self-assessment by all participants in line with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler, 2000). This is a scientific measure devised to allow participants to self assess their own social standing in context – within their country and community, however they define this. It is well documented that one's subjective social status has a huge impact on mental and physical health (Ostrove, et al., 2000) and that this can be an even better predictor of health than objective measures of socioeconomic status (Singh-Manoux, et al., 2005) as it is important that one's perception of themselves in the context of those that they are surrounded by can differ from that of an objective outside perspective.

For this implementation, the original material of Adler was adapted, changing the country from the United States to the United Kingdom (as this is the location and focus of the report) and changing 'their community' to be the University of Warwick (as this is also the focus of the report, and is the home university of all participants). Participants were given the instruction sheets as seen in Appendix B.

## Data Analysis

Data taken from the interviews was analysed using a thematic analytical approach. This was done by using Otter AI to assist in transcribing the audio from an audio file to a Word Document. I then adjusted the transcriptions by hand where any mistakes were made.

Thematic analysis was then done by hand following the guidance set out by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with this guidance, I tagged the discussions and responses of the participants in line with broad themes identified.

Descriptive quantitative analysis of the results of the MacArthur Scale activity were done by hand also, calculating the difference in students' perception of their own social status when placed in different hypothetical contexts.

## Justification of Methodology

The data collection method chosen – that being group interviews – is assessed to be a beneficial method of understanding students' views on cultural capital and their social relationships at university. By allowing a more intimate and personal way for students to discuss their background and experiences, group interviews provided unique insight and discussion around cultural capital and university life. Discussions exposed differences of opinion, personal insecurities and questions, and sparked conversations on topics students confessed that they had never paid attention to before.

The use of the MacArthur scale of subjective social status was a key data collection tool to 'break the ice' between participants and contextualise the themes of the study. Participants were able to focus their ideas of culture and community to the context of the University of Warwick, which allowed them to have more detailed discussions about their experience at university, whereas initial thoughts given before this activity were generic and broad. It also provided great insight into how participants perceived themselves, and comparing themselves and their own cultural capital to others allowed discussions to be more focused.

This activity also provided an element of quantitative data, which was analysed to give an objective overview of responses, complementing the subjective nature of the study. This adds a convincing, more factual dynamic to the report and strengthens the analysis of findings.

## Results - MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status

The results of this activity were as follows:

Participant Number	Score – Context: Country/Community	Score – Context: Warwick University	% decrease
1	6.2	6	3.23
2	7	5	28.6
3	7.2	6.5	9.72
4	6	4	33.3
5	6.5	2	69.2
6	8	7.5	18.8

Average Score: Country/Community	Average Score: Warwick University	Average Change (pts)	Average % decrease	Range of Score Change
6.82	5.17	1.23	27%	0.2 - 4.5pts / 3.23% - 69.2%

- 100% of students decreased their score from their country or community to their score in the context of the University of Warwick
- The highest value for both contexts came from the participant who identified themselves as an international student
- The lowest score given for both contexts came from a student in receipt of a means-tested bursary (identified as a WP student)

Generally, comments made about why participants scored as they did were as follows. P1 = Participant 1, and so on. Some comments have been shortened for clarity with [...].

P1: “The people I've interacted with are, like quite similar to people that I would interact with at home. But maybe that's because I went to quite a good school.”

- The link between going to a “good” school (a form of cultural capital) and largely interacting with people in a similar situation is interesting to note
  - o This is an indication that cultural capital is important to social interactions and groups
  - o This poses a barrier to WP students who may lack this network

P2: “A lot of people don't go to university [...] so everyone here has that opportunity to go to higher education, so they're always gonna be better off in that sense, I suppose.”

- Students recognise that university study is a form of cultural capital even if they do not explicitly label it as such
- This is extremely important to note, as it indicates that:
  - o students do recognise cultural capital in others even if they are not being introduced to the phrase itself
  - o they similarly recognise the value of this cultural capital in wider society

P3: “First of all the number of people I've met from a private school... well, I don't think I was expecting that many people and then also just, listening to the level of wealth from the international students is just like insane, [...] because of the such the large international community that Warwick has.”

- This is the first of many comments made surrounding wealth, another form of cultural capital, despite the question not alluding to the topic
- This encapsulates the **inextricable link between wealth and cultural capital**, as well as the presentation of wealth as a barrier to cultural capital – these themes appeared time and again throughout the interviews
  - o This is particularly pertinent to WP students as household income is one of the most well-used indicators of socioeconomic status

P4: “At home, I would say I'm generally considered middle class [...] but at university, I think you meet a lot more people from a much more well-off background, [...] people who are from more affluent areas in the country, and people who are from private schools, because they have better education, they're able to get to better universities like Warwick, and that's just something that you don't really experience, I think, just living your life normally. I think that's a type of culture you only really experience at university.”

- Once again, a **“good”** education as a form of cultural capital was discussed, as well as the perceived exclusivity of university
  - o This comment also suggests that cultural capital in some form is necessary to access better higher education and therefore more cultural capital, or is at least of a significant help: **“they're able to get to better universities”**
  - o WP students may lack this background so are at a disadvantage in terms of accessibility
- This comment follows the trend of cultural capital acting as a barrier to higher education experiences

P5: “I don't think that our university is very representative of the whole of the UK. I think that it's more well-off, and from the people I've met and seen living their life, they have more freedom to live their life how they want to than I would have considered people back home, let's say, to have such freedom.”

- This comment is indicative of the culture at the University of Warwick to be not “representative” of the nation, and that there are a higher concentration of more privileged individuals
  - o Students perceiving Warwick in this way indicates a barrier to WP students who may not choose to go to university as they do not feel that they will fit in
  - o If this perception is the reality, then WP students may find it hard to relate to peers with a more privileged upbringing, forming another barrier to higher education

P6: “I think my financial situation hasn't really changed, a good chunk of my university was through COVID [...] but from a financial situation, I think it's about the same.”

- Once again, wealth is mentioned despite not being related to the question, cementing the link between having money and having cultural capital.

## Analysis – MacArthur Scale Responses

Overall, responses to this activity indicated a perception from students that the University of Warwick, and university in general, is a place of privilege. This comes at a disadvantage to WP students as they may fear that they will not relate to their more privileged counterparts. Students also recognise cultural capital in themselves and others (educational experience, wealth and more), even if they do not use that phrase exactly. This indicates that cultural capital does have importance in how students view themselves and others, and may be seen as a barrier to forming social connections, as is explored in the interview question responses.

## Results - Interview Questions

Here are the main **results** from participants in relation to the predefined guiding questions laid out in Appendix A, followed by **descriptive analysis** of these responses. Both groups interviewed were asked the same guiding questions.

Not all responses from all participants are included. The most pertinent quotes have been selected to show the general themes and topics discussed in relation to each question. Furthermore, for some questions, some participants chose not to respond or to respond non-verbally, such as by nodding.

### ***“What is cultural capital to you?”***

P2: “It's like the things you have and experiences you have... having like, nice clothes and things like that.”

P4: “It's not really something I think about. I mean, obviously, you consider culture as a thing and how it affects you as a person, but cultural capital is not really something I've come across.”

P5: “It's new information to me. Never thought of it before [...] cultural capital comes under their sort of lived experience... how well-lived they are.”

P6: “It is very dependent on the location of the people. When it is approximately equivalent, it's not very noticeable, but when it's very different, it jumps out at you rather severely, and it's a way to figure, to find, quote-unquote, “your people”.”

- Most participants had never considered cultural capital as a topic or its impact in their lives – if people are not aware of the concept, then this makes the issue harder to address.
- **4 out of 6** participants focused here on location, with comments such as “Londoners stick together” and “when you meet people from like where you're from though, you're more likely to be friends”, also discussing accents

### ***“Do you wish you had more cultural capital? Where do you think this comes from?”***

P1: “There's like, connections from like your family as well that help you so it's not what you know, it's who you know. And exposure, exposure to different people as well. But I feel like it's easier to network if you already have a good image of who you know as well.”

P2: “That's what a lot of it comes from: money, right? [...] It's not all money, but, like, either you can pay to go to a private school or even if you're not.... If you can afford to live in a nicer area, the schools are gonna be better. Yeah, so that's quite a big... or it's gonna be the main factor. Money, it's got to be a good thing to have right? like I don't think more of it is ever something you wouldn't want.”

P3: "Just broadening your experiences, so that you have more of them and so that you are able to relate to people on an array of things. Yeah, of course money as well, like money funds those experiences. Yeah money and free time which again free time is in relation to how much money you're making."

P4: "I think it's the joint responsibility of parents, yourself, and education. Because I think there's only so much that each one of them can provide to you, and I think at a certain point it does become your own responsibility to experience different things, and put yourself in that position [...] But I would say it does become a personal responsibility, the older you get."

P5: "I think lived experience is where cultural capital comes from. I would like to live more, yes, so I don't see why I wouldn't, but I'm not going to spend a whole bunch of money to get there."

P6: "I think that generally, cultural capital is incredibly important, the way that I was raised [...] I used to be able to avoid a lot of social awkwardness by talking about things people considered interesting, or intelligent, or whatever. [...] And I think that it's mainly a parent thing, and it's not even that it should be, just how it is, sadly."

- This question elicited the most responses that surrounded wealth. **5 out of 6** participants mentioned money and wealth here.
  - o **80%** of these mentions presented finances as a barrier to cultural capital, using a negative tone.
- In both interviews, participants stated that going to university (Warwick and elsewhere) was a good opportunity to develop cultural capital
  - o Various reasons given included "**diversity**", "**exposure to different people**", "**community focus**", and "**everyone's in the same situation**".
- Participants had mixed opinions when follow-up questions asked who was responsible for developing their cultural capital
  - o **All 6** participants blamed one's upbringing or parents' influence at least partly
  - o School, wider society and yourself were also pointed to.

### ***"What is the social hierarchy to you?"***

P1: "I don't think I separate myself. Yeah, I think it's just depends on like the individual. Yes, everyone's got the opportunity, it just depends on your personality and how outgoing you are and stuff. It depends on how hard you're working for those opportunities, but different people have to work different amounts to get them. [...] I feel like subconsciously, when you're interacting with a group from a different culture you'll think in the back of your head 'Am I welcome here?' but in reality everyone is quite welcoming."

P2: "Lots of people from lots of different backgrounds are... sure, they're having different experiences, but there's a lot that's the same I mean, there's not much difference between the accommodations, right? There is but there's not like... not as extreme as the difference in the way where people are living beforehand [...] there's less of a difference than there is outside of uni."

P3: "I think in a political sense, like, socio-economic terms are largely used as well as like, ethnicity based, but that obviously comes into your socioeconomic background."

P4: "I would say 100% there's a sort of grouping together of people from similar backgrounds. I don't know how, but I think they tend to like find each other. I think it's just through shared connections, [...] just through like school, or like living in a similar area. I think people do tend to stick together, and I don't think that it means there's no like crossing of the boundaries, because there is, but I think it's probably slightly more difficult to relate to people who are not from a similar background, so people definitely do stick together."

P5: "I think that, yes, but some groups stick together based on not entirely cultural reasons, let's say hobbies."

P6: "University is one of the most interesting places, because this is, I believe, where the biggest shifts in one of those cultural capital can happen [...] all the things that go above, and a lot of times, it's not about money, it's not even, you know, it's not about money, it's not about, you know, because those things go away, it's about the people you know, and in university, there is the highest, in my opinion, amount of ability to get to know people from higher, lower, whatever, and make new connections."

- Students did not tend to describe the social hierarchy as some people deeming themselves better than others, but rather as a series of exclusive groups
  - o One participant discussed the idea of **"higher, lower, whatever"**, but the rest described **"grouping together"**
  - o The participant who discussed higher and lower rated themselves the highest in the MacArthur scale activity, perhaps indicating that those who are more privileged do see this hierarchy as vertical.
- Most participants stated that the people in the groups tend to have **"similar backgrounds"**
  - o The backgrounds described were **all** forms of cultural capital: **"shared connections", "hobbies", "socioeconomic background", "culture"**
  - o This leaved WP students, who have reduced access to cultural capital, unable to join these social groups as they cannot relate to the people in them, inhibiting social mobility.
    - **"there's no like crossing of the boundaries"**
- Furthermore, students recognise the difference in privilege between people in different areas of the social hierarchy
  - o **"...opportunities, but different people have to work different amounts to get them"**
  - o Also that this divide is worse outside of a university culture – **"there's less of a difference than there is outside of uni"**

***"How far do you agree with the following statement? "I relate to my peers at university"***

P1: "Yeah, we live, like, pretty similar lives on a day to day basis. Like living on campus, there's not much difference."



P3: "We're all pretty much the same age, so living with people who are 18, 19, 20, you're all basically going through the same thing. In that aspect of turning into an adult and figuring that out is a big part of growing up."

P4: "I think there's certain connotations and stereotypes that you have with a certain way of speaking, that is, I don't know, people kind of assign something to you, that's not necessarily true, with dialects and accents, like it's not necessarily true[...], I think the majority of people are respectful to others, and I think that, yeah, I feel like it's not really as important at university because everybody is so, like, from such a different background."

P5: "Considering that there's a lot of people from a lot of different places, you've got, like, the opposite of a monoculture, where it's just, there's so many different people that the sort of accepted standard is mellowed out for everyone, if that makes sense. I've never found any difficulty, like, finding common ground with someone, because everyone sort of adheres to new standards."

- Most of the discussion following this question surrounded relating to peers on a day-to-day basis, not necessarily based on background
  - o This is an optimistic note for WP students, as the aspects of student life – **“same age”, “living on campus”** and so on – stated as being relatable are accessible to all students
  - o Provided that they are given the same opportunities and experiences while at university.
- The focus on day-to-day life may, however, be of detriment to WP students when this idea is extended beyond university
  - o Regular activities such as extracurricular sports or cultural trips are a form of cultural capital and may not form day-to-day life for WP students, putting them at a disadvantage
  - o This shows that cultural capital is constantly relevant and is vital to bridge the gap between WP and more privileged students.

***“How far do you agree with the following statement? “I feel that I belong at university””***

P1: "I was more excited than anything to come, and my sister had gone to university so it was just, the path to take. [...] I think because I'd heard that good experience from her, I thought it wouldn't be a bad one here."

P3: "I always knew I was gonna go to uni. So that's why I feel like I belong. Because that was always my decision."

P4: "I don't think there's any one particular thing that has made me feel I don't belong at university, and I don't think there's anything that I've experienced where I've been like, I shouldn't be here, or this is the wrong decision."

P5: "I mean, you go for your own reasons. Maybe people want you to just go into research after university, but you can be here for your own personal reasons and ignore every other person's decisions for you."

- Most responses discussed the influence or experience of others affecting how they belong at university – **“I’d heard that good experience”, “people want you to go into research”**
- This personal network of knowing people who have gone to university is a form of cultural capital and WP students often come from areas of low progression to higher education so may not have this network and may therefore have a reduced sense of belonging.

# Analysis – Group Interview Responses

## Themes Identified

### **Theme 1: Perceptions**

- 1.1 Location and Accent
- 1.2 Stereotypes
- 1.3 University life and culture

### **Theme 2: Upbringing**

- 2.1 Money and wealth
- 2.2 Networking / personal connections
- 2.3 Parents (careers, encouragement)

### **Theme 3: Barriers**

- 3.1 Financial
- 3.2 Sense of belonging
- 3.3 Culture and respect

These are the core topics that came up most frequently during the discussions, with **Theme 3 being the most prevalent**, appearing **60 times** across both interviews. **Theme 2** was the next most discussed, at **44 mentions** across the two interviews, with **Theme 1 at just 35**. However, it is important to note that **wealth in general was the most discussed sub-theme**, as Theme 2.1 coded discussions of parents' wealth, or wealth in a general sense, whereas Theme 3.1 differentiated mentions of wealth and money specifically as a barrier to cultural capital. Combined, this amounted to **45 mentions**. Broadly, barriers – and cultural capital as a barrier to social networking – was the most discussed topic. More work could be done to **analyse the questions asked** to understand whether the framing of questions influenced participants to have ideas of barriers and struggle at the forefront of their minds.

## Specific Words and Phrases

Words/Phrases	No. Occasions Mentioned
money, wealth, best/worst off, finance, economic situation	45
different	25
parents, growing up, childhood	14
group/stick together	12

## Discussion – Interview Question Responses

The topics that were discussed most frequently were **money, parents, and education**. These were also, relatedly, the three that students described as the main contributing factors to gaining cultural capital. Interestingly, though none of the interview questions (See Appendix A) directed students towards discussions of money, **all 6** of the interviewees mentioned it at some point, largely in relation to the advantages offered to ‘cultured’ students.

As shown in the table above, keywords surrounding money and wealth were the most used vocabulary across both interviews. In total, students discussed wealth 8 times in relation to cultural capital. **5 out of 8** of these conversations presented wealth as a barrier to cultural capital rather than simply an influencing factor. “Money funds those experiences”, said one participant on cultural experiences in one’s youth. Others stated that money becomes more of an issue at university, where the socioeconomic backgrounds of students is more diverse – “[university] really has changed how I see money and wealth”, said another participant.

In one’s childhood, the source of wealth in a household is largely determined by one’s parents. A student’s fate was described as “determined by parents” by one participant, as participants discussed private education as an inherent advantage for some. Aside from financial assistance, participants also emphasised that the “effort” and “encouragement” of their parents played a role – including discussing career options early or sending them to good schools.

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*“you just experience a lot more wealth that you don't see elsewhere”*

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The school that a student attended is largely determined by a student’s parents, said participants; “certainly for, like, GCSEs, it’s not really your choice”, explained one. At the University of Warwick, over 20% of students are privately educated, compared to the 7% national average (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2022). On this, one participant commented that “you just experience a lot more wealth that you don't see elsewhere”, and another said that they felt “surrounded by so many people who were at private school” at Warwick. These private schools provide students with not only a quality education to allow them to get into good universities, but also “a lot of opportunities get funnelled that way”, as one interviewee noted. The networks built up by groups of students surrounded by other privileged people offer them an advantage that WP students do not experience.

The general tone of interviews was reflective and curious. **4 out of 6 participants** stated that they had never considered cultural capital as a concept prior to the topic, so the interviews presented an opportunity for introspection for most involved. Some appreciated the privilege they have in attending the University of Warwick - “this is, I believe, where the biggest shifts in one of those cultural capital can happen”, said one optimistic interviewee. Students appear motivated to engage in cultural capital and social mobility, perhaps suggesting that the problem lies outside students’ own determination.

## Discussion - Academic Opportunities and University Support

In one group interview, while discussing the prompt 'I relate to my peers at university', participants began to discuss whether they felt equal opportunity and support was provided to all students by the university. One participant noted that certain students are disadvantaged when it comes to academic opportunities due to having not had advice from their family or secondary school, or simply not being informed; "the responsibility is put on the student" said one participant, as they explained how their personal network made them more aware of these opportunities than the University does. Another agreed, noting that "different people have to work different amounts to get [the opportunities]".

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*"faceless"*

*"it's just not spoken about"*

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All participants in that session argued that there is a lack of support for all students in their departments with regards to making students aware of the opportunities available. "On my course we don't really talk about internships or those other opportunities, so I wouldn't know", one student said. "You're expected to read it yourself, there's no active being like 'Okay, look at this internship, look at this...'" agreed another.

Participants emphasised that Warwick University fails to offer personalised support and that trying to access this can be a daunting task; "the transition from school to university is hard", said one participant. "From being in the same building for like seven years of your life with the same structure like the same timetable, all of a sudden try to navigate so many new things at once. And on top of that you're expected to reach out for help". Students pointed out that students often do not have the time or resources to seek out further support with no direction, and that they may be discouraged to do so as it is not spoken about enough. "You never see it" said one, "I haven't spoken to any one of my friends who have said "yes I've reached out for help with internships"". This indicates an additional barrier to all students, as the knowledge that they need to seek out opportunities such as internships, and discovering that they 'should know' these things can create a stigma around these topics and prevent students from ever having the confidence to start.

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*"Our tutors..."*

*"Oh god..."*

*"Yeah, they don't do anything."*

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Another point made was that the little support that was provided by the University was not good enough. Personal tutors were unable to point students in the right direction for career and

support services, so students felt “distanced” from the departments that represent them – “maybe they do treat everybody equally because they don't really treat anyone”, joked one participant. This points to a distinct lack of support for students, WP or not. However, this is particularly harmful for WP students who do not have the personal network (family, friends, teachers) that are well-informed and motivated to alert students to the opportunities that are out there, and help them to access them. This can include interview support and practice for internships, CV writing skills for part time jobs, or providing industry contacts for placements and work experience. For many privileged students, they have this background network to ‘replace’ the lack of University support, leaving WP students scrambling to catch up.

## Conclusion

Overall, the study finds that the main barrier that a lack of cultural capital presents at university is one regarding social mobility. Students are comfortable with making friends – though their friends are often from a similar cultural background to themselves – but they feel that their cultural capital fails them when they look towards their professional network and future. Students recognise that going to university is a privilege and an opportunity to improve one's prospects; however, cultural capital makes it difficult for students to find common ground with those from higher social classes, therefore preventing them from making valuable social networks to promote social mobility. WP students are essentially 'trapped' by their cultural capital, as they feel that the knowledge provided to more privileged students by their network of friends, family and schooling, leaves WP students at a disadvantage. These students must work hard to 'catch up' and navigate the world of work, study and beyond.

Participants immediately make a connection between 'valued' cultural experiences and wealth, despite none of the interview questions discussing finances – this points to an undercurrent of prejudice and disparity between privileged and WP students. The costs involved with travelling, visiting the theatre or attending private school inextricably link the idea of 'being cultured' with wealth. Aside from this, the time that privileged students are able to invest in these cultural experiences is tied to their economic status; WP students may be in a position where they have to undertake part time work alongside their studies so they have little free time to engage in other activities or focus on their education, and this negatively impacts the amount of cultural capital they are able to accrue.

It is vitally important that students are free to engage in social mobility and the mixing of classes at university regardless of their socioeconomic status; all participants that were interviewed recognised that university is the best place to improve one's social standing via social mobility, and that the cultural diversity of the student body is an important contributing factor. It is also clear that a lack of cultural capital, particularly found in WP students, plays a huge role in the extent to which a student can improve their socioeconomic status. Therefore, by allowing WP students to have more cultural experiences (such as greater exposure to literature and the arts) and a stronger personal network (via properly funded career services and mentorship programs), their cultural capital will increase and develop, enabling them to succeed at university and beyond. Cultural capital equips students with the ability to flourish at university and build social networks that will serve them in their future; it is seen by both students and society as an essential, not a bonus offered to the privileged.

The outcome of this study is hoped to be greater awareness of cultural capital and its disproportionate impact on the livelihood of the most disadvantaged students. Alongside this, the awareness that it should be a priority within the University of Warwick and the United Kingdom as a whole, to close the gap in cultural capital between the most and least fortunate students to promote social mobility as a nation. Aside from the wealth of a student or their family, one way in which to do this is to alleviate the burden of time and a limited personal network. This can be achieved through advertising and employing careers services and outreach programs in the most deprived areas, funded cultural experiences such as museums, theatre and literature, and a greater awareness and responsibility of education providers to foster cultural capital within disadvantaged students.

In future research, it may be advisable to gain more constructive feedback on the questions asked, or to change the questions asked by building on discussions that these questions lead to in previous interviews. For example, in both interviews conducted, students digressed onto topics such as academic support and prejudice at university. It would be great to create further iterations of interview questions that allow topics such as these to be explored further as participants simply ran out of time in this current framework, or to get opinions from both groups on this, as the digression may have only come up in one session but not the other.



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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Cultural Capital and the Social Hierarchy: An Exploration of Student Experience

The following interview will be used to contribute a student perspective to my research report considering how students' culture and background impacts their social experience at university. I will ask questions about your lived experience both pre-university and during university. The session will be audio-recorded, and then transcribed and pseudonymised before it is deleted. It should last approximately one hour, and will consist of a series of guiding questions followed by unstructured discussions of your answers. You have the right to decline to answer any of the questions, to take yourself out of the room, or to withdraw from the study entirely. The process by which you may withdraw is outlined in the Participant Information Leaflet.

1. Ice breaker – introductions (name (redacted), fun fact) – not used in report.
2. Ask participants to share their degree programme, year of study
3. What is cultural capital to you?
  - What do you think it means?
  - Do you feel that you have had diverse cultural experiences?
  - **I will give the formal definition of cultural capital, pointing participants to the PIL for more information before they proceed.**
4. **Participants will be asked to self-score in line with the Macarthur scale of subjective social status. I will explain the Macarthur scale and how participants should self-score.**
5. Do you wish you had more cultural capital? Where do you think this comes from?
  - Parents? Schooling? Yourself?
6. What is the social hierarchy to you?
  - **For example, do you feel that students from a similar background stick together? Are there imbalances in respect? Opportunities?**
  - At warwick – are students segregated socially? By subject? Class? Background?
  - Do you feel there is one? Where do you sit?
7. How far do you agree with the following statement? “I relate to my peers at university”
  - Do you have a lot in common? Do you feel equal?
8. How far do you agree with the following statement? “I feel that I belong at university”
  - Have you ever felt singled out at university? How so?
  - This can include academic contexts such as speaking up in seminars
  - Or socially, within your flat or societies

## Appendix B: MacArthur Scale Instructions

**Instructions:** Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the **United Kingdom**. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, least education, the least respected jobs, or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder? Please place a large “X” on the rung where you think you stand at this time in your life relative to other people in the United Kingdom.



**Instructions:** Think of this ladder as representing where people stand at the **University of Warwick**. At the top of the ladder are people who have the highest standing. At the bottom are the people who have the lowest standing.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder? Please place a large “X” on the rung where you think you stand at this time in your life relative to other people in your community.

