International Students as 'Privileged': Challenging the Narrative

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International students are typically described as a privileged and affluent group. This study challenges this narrative, and examines the experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged international students, through an exploratory mixed-methods study. To date, there has been limited empirical work recognising heterogeneity in the socioeconomic backgrounds of international students. This paper reports on the quantitative scoping exercise of a self-report questionnaire undertaken by 102 international students studying at UK universities, with 37 per cent identifying as 'working-class'. The findings indicated that international students identifying as 'working-class' were more likely to be undertaking paid employment with longer hours in comparison to their middle-class counterparts. Moreover, 'satisfaction with life' and 'support networks' were considerably lower for those reporting socio-economic disadvantage. This study has highlighted a lacuna in the international student research literature. Furthermore, the findings indicate universities need to revisit the nexus of research on disadvantaged 'home' students and cultural adjustment models to ensure suitable support structures are offered to this under-researched group of international students.

Keywords: international students, privilege, socioeconomic background, social class

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility (ISM) has long been linked to notions of privilege and conceptualised as a tool employed by socially advantaged groups to reproduce their social standing (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Holloway et al., 2012). Similarly, international students are commonly perceived as belonging to an affluent elite group of migrants that is 'invariably privileged' (Waters, 2012: 128). This paper challenges these preconceptions by examining the experiences of international students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, an under-researched group about whom there is limited published academic literature (Phan, 2016). In the higher education (HE) context of the United Kingdom (UK), there is a fairly well-established literature on the experiences of 'home' students from 'working-class' backgrounds (e.g., Reay et al., 2009), and there is robust evidence that individuals from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds continue to be under-represented in HE both in the UK and other Anglophone countries (Gale & Tranter, 2011). However, few studies have explored how international students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds experience and negotiate university life. This paper reports on an exploratory study investigating the experiences of international students who self-identify as 'working-class' and were

undertaking degree programmes at UK universities in the academic year 2022-23. The specific research questions were: (1) How do less privileged international students experience university life? and (2) How does socioeconomic background affect satisfaction with life, social support, academic adjustment, and sense of belonging at university for these students? Conceptually, this project sits at the nexus of research on 'adjustment' (Schartner & Young, 2020) and 'social class' (Shields, 2021) and draws on both concepts to understand the experiences of international students from less affluent backgrounds. We begin below with a brief overview of the historical trajectory of ISM in the United Kingdom and globally, before reviewing relevant literature underpinning our study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global International Student Mobility

International students are typically described as sojourners who stay in their host country for a specific period of time to obtain academic qualifications (Ward et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2010). Another common definition refers to international students as 'those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study' (OECD, 2023). ISM has been expanding consistently over the past two decades, and in 2019 more than 6 million HE students globally had crossed an international border to study (OECD, 2021). Despite the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global HE, international student numbers have stabilised and are forecast to grow to 8 million by 2023 (ICEF, 2022).

On average, international students account for 5% of bachelor's students, 14% of master's students, and 24% of doctoral students in countries part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In 2020, students from Asia were the largest group of international students enrolled in HE programmes at all levels, representing 58% of all internationally mobile students across the OECD, with China and India being the dominant countries of origin (OECD, 2022). Motivations for overseas study are various and may include the desire to attend a prestigious, world-class university, improving one's employability in a globalised labour market, or having a transformative experience (King & Sondhi, 2018). Experiencing different cultures and improving language skills, especially English (Wu, 2014), as well as future immigration prospects (Wintre et al., 2015) may also play a role in deciding to study abroad.

International Student Mobility in the UK

The UK is currently the third most popular destination country for international students worldwide, behind the United States and Australia, and hosts about 7% of the global international student population (OECD, 2022). In 2020-21, more than 600,000 international students studied at British universities, constituting around 22% of the total student population, with the top sending countries being China, India, Nigeria, the US, and Hong Kong (UUKI, 2022). Historically, the UK has had a higher rate of inward mobility than outward mobility and in 2020 it hosted 10 international students for each British student studying abroad, with the OECD average ratio being 4 to 1 (OECD, 2022).

International Student Mobility and Privilege

ISM continues to be largely viewed as 'a strategy used by relatively privileged social actors in rationalistic and calculative ways to convert different capitals across borders for the ultimate purpose of maintaining and maximizing social advantages' (Yang, 2018: 698). Given the considerable financial resources typically needed for study abroad (Brooks & Waters 2013), it is understandable that an assumption of ISM as being 'overwhelmingly pursued by privileged individuals' (Waters, Brooks, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011: 460) continues to persist.

However, there is an emerging literature framing ISM as a catalyst for upward mobility that extends to individuals from less affluent backgrounds (e.g., Tsang, 2013, Pásztor, 2015, Zhai & Gao, 2021). For example, Iorio & Pereira (2018) found that ISM was perceived as an opportunity for social class mobility by Brazilian students undertaking overseas study in Portugal. Similarly, Sánchez et al. (2006) found that improving social status was a key motivator for Chinese students choosing to study abroad. In an interview-

based study of international PhD students in the UK, Pásztor (2015) found evidence for ISM as a vehicle of social mobility with several interviewees being the first in their families to pursue higher or postgraduate education. In sum, there is emerging research evidence that 'for the less financially privileged group, acquiring the cultural capital through transnational mobility is not the way they seek to re-produce their social class but to upscale their class status and gain economic capital in the country of migration' (Tran, 2016: 1285).

Portrayals of International Students

Despite a growing recognition that ISM is not just for the privileged few, international students continue to be portrayed as an 'elitist caste of young adults' (Ploner, 2017: 438) that belong to a homogenous category of 'global elite migrants' (Bauder, 2012; Favell et al., 2007). A case in point is a research paper published by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) stating conclusively that 'most international students in the UK are self-funded and thus are from more wealthy sections of society in their home countries' (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013: 92). This resonates with Butcher & McGrath (2004: 540) who state that 'there is a perception that all international students are wealthy (or at least their parents, as feepayers, are wealthy) and cannot but help themselves to flaunt this wealth to all and sundry'. More recent studies have also continued to find evidence for these prevailing perceptions. For example, in a study of first-year Chinese international undergraduates at US universities, Xie et al. (2020) found that stereotypes about their financial background were common with labels such as 'extravagant' and 'nouveau riche' frequently used to describe this group. Similarly, a thematic analysis of Twitter data showed that posts about international students' perceived affluence were common and included references to assumed spending habits and ownership of luxury possessions (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022).

However, many international students opt for overseas study because HE is inaccessible to them locally (Raghuram et al., 2020), and although many come from middle-class families with financial capital (Xie et al., 2020) this is not the case for all. Pásztor (2015: 840) contends that many international students 'have little or no capital to start with, or do not come with the full package', and families often make considerable financial sacrifices to send their children abroad (Butcher & McGrath, 2004). An interview-based study of professionals working with international students at an Australian university reported cases where parents had borrowed money to enable their children to study overseas, or communities pooling resources which caused students pressure to perform (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2019).

International Students From Less Privileged Backgrounds

Statistics on the socioeconomic background of international students in the UK are difficult to obtain as these data are not routinely collected and student-experience surveys (e.g., International Student Barometer) tend to categorise students by national origin (Jones, 2017). There is, however, growing recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the international student population (e.g., Jones, 2017; Ploner, 2017) and that socioeconomic background may shape how international students experience university life (Baxter, 2019). Studies show that international students from less privileged backgrounds face unique challenges such as expectations to contribute financially to family and community needs while abroad (Irungu, 2013), for example through remittances (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). In a study of US-based international scholarship recipients from Rwanda, Baxter (2019) found evidence that family members saw overseas study as an opportunity to contribute to family livelihoods resulting in considerable financial pressure for these students.

Disparities in financial resources available to international students are currently not sufficiently acknowledged in the literature, and although international students are often stereotyped as wealthy, many experience considerable financial stress (Lee & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019). Some international students receive scholarships from their governments or philanthropic organisations, whilst others rely on finances pooled together by family and community members (Arthur, 2003). Research suggests that financial difficulties are a frequent worry among international students, and that 'lack of sufficient funds is one of their most commonly expressed concerns' (Mori, 2011: 138). For example, in a study of East and South Asian international students in Canada, Houshmand et al. (2014) found that several students were struggling

financially and felt they were burdening their families whilst simultaneously being viewed as wealthy by the host community. Similarly, a study of Chinese international students from socioeconomically average or below average backgrounds showed that they struggled financially, and many undertook low-skilled and low-wage work to support themselves (Fong, 2011). This chimes with Roy et al. (2021:831) who found that international doctoral students in New Zealand often take on precarious employment and rely on local compatriot communities for support. As such, they may simultaneously play the roles of 'elite knowledge workers' and 'low-skilled migrant labourers'.

In sum, the financial sources international students draw on are diverse and include government or employer-sponsored scholarships (Gillespie & Leong, 2017), aid-grants, as well as parents and siblings as fee-payers (Butcher & McGrath, 2004). Contrary to the 'wealthy international student' stereotype, financial difficulties are not uncommon amongst this group (Forbes-Hewett et al., 2009) yet the narrative of international students as a 'migratory elite' continues to prevail (Pásztor, 2015: 840). This study contributes to a small but burgeoning number of studies that attempt to deconstruct this narrative.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study was part of a larger mixed-methods project on the experiences of international students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds undertaking degree programmes at UK universities (Schartner & Shields, 2022). This paper reports on a quantitative scoping exercise conducted as part of the project. A self-report questionnaire, a widely used instrument for collecting numerical data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018), was designed using Jisc Online Surveys and distributed via the researchers' academic networks between August and October 2022. The aim of the questionnaire was to (1) ascertain what proportion of a sample of international students self-identify as being from less privileged socioeconomic 'working-class' backgrounds, and (2) whether socioeconomic background affects outcome variables linked to university life. The questionnaire included both multiple and single-choice questions, as well as Likert/rating scales.

Survey Measures and Scales
Demographics
The first part of the questionnaire asked a range of demographic questions about participants' age, gender, country of origin, name of UK host institution[1], academic discipline[2], level of study, length of time spent in the UK, and type of accommodation they were residing in. Respondents were also asked whether they were working alongside their studies and, if so, why and for how many hours. A final question asked how they were funding their studies. As a proxy for socioeconomic background respondents were asked about their parents' occupation and educational attainment. Both are considered relatively accurate and accessible measures of socioeconomic background (Rubin et al. 2014; UK Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

The parental educational attainment measure was adapted from the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) developed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011). Respondents chose from the following options: (a) Less than high school/secondary school, (b) High school/secondary school graduate, (c) Trade/vocational diploma or certificate, (c) Bachelor's degree, (d) Master's degree, (e) Doctoral degree (f) Other. Parental occupation was gauged using a measure recommended by the UK Social Mobility Commission (2021) which maps onto a classification of socioeconomic background: (a) Modern professional and traditional professional occupations [professional background], (b) Senior, middle or junior managers or administrators [professional background], (c) Clerical and intermediate occupations [intermediate background], (d) Technical and craft occupations [lower socioeconomic background], (e) Routine, semi-routine manual and service occupations [lower socioeconomic background], (f) Long-term unemployed [lower socioeconomic background], (g) Small business owners [intermediate background].

Following calls for more 'subjective' measures of socioeconomic background (e.g., Rubin et al., 2014), the questionnaire also asked respondents 'Which social class do you see yourself belonging to?' with the

following response options: (a) The upper-class of society, (b) The middle-class of society, (c) The working-class of society, (d) Precariat (e.g., unemployed, homeless), (e) I do not identify with any social class, (f) I don't know (Psaki et al., 2014). Although we acknowledge the limited transferability of the concept of 'social class' across national and cultural contexts (Schneider, 2019), it was important to go beyond traditional 'objective' measures.

Outcome Measures

To gauge the impact of socioeconomic background on international students' experiences of university life, the questionnaire included five outcome measures. As a well-established measure of cognitive judgment of one's life satisfaction, respondents completed the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 1985). Two self-report measures of social support were included in the questionnaire: (1) the 3-item Oslo Social Support Scale (Kocalevent et al., 2018), used to measure general social support, and (2) the 3-item Social Support at University Scale (Hughes, 2007). The 9-item Academic Adjustment Scale (Anderson, Guan & Koc, 2016) was used to assess how well the respondents felt they had adjusted to academic life. Finally, a measure of sense of belonging at university (Imperial College London, 2023) was included. In a final open-response box, participants were invited to comment on any other aspect of their university experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were initially analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies of responses, means) to ascertain what proportion of the sample self-identified as 'working-class' or as being from a lower socioeconomic background. In a second analytic step, independent-samples t-tests (with a 95% confidence interval for the mean difference) were computed to compare the outcome measures of respondents who had identified as 'working-class' with those from relatively more privileged backgrounds.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Demographics

The survey yielded 102 valid responses from international students studying across 16 UK universities, with a majority (10) being research-intensive 'Russell Group' institutions[3]. Degree programme levels were fairly evenly distributed with around one third studying at undergraduate (32.3%), postgraduate taught[4] (34.3%), and postgraduate research level (33.3%) respectively. Most students were studying for degrees in the social sciences (44.4%), followed by degrees in the humanities (28.3%), engineering and technology (12.1%), and medical and health sciences (6.1%). The respondents came from 43 different countries or territories[5] with around forty percent selecting China (PRC) as their country of origin. This is not surprising given recent statistics showing that students from the PRC are the largest group of overseas students in the UK, with 143,820 studying at UK universities in 2020-21 (UUK, 2022). Most respondents identified as female (74.7%), and more than half were living in privately rented accommodation at the time of data collection. The sample overall was relatively young with a large proportion (43.4%) in the '21-25' age bracket.

Over one third of respondents self-identified as coming from a 'working-class' background, while the largest proportion in the sample self-identified with the label 'middle-class'[6] (Figure 1).

Using data on parental occupation as an indicator, more than one quarter of respondents can be classed as coming from a lower socioeconomic background. Specifically, thirty percent of mothers and more than a quarter (28.5%) of fathers were reportedly working in routine and manual occupations, or were unemployed (Table 1).

FIGURE 1
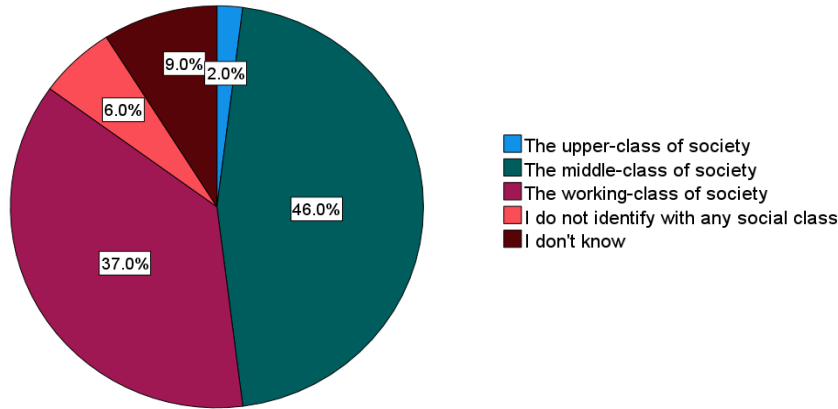**WHAT SOCIAL CLASS DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH? (N=102)**

TABLE 1
PARENTAL OCCUPATION (N=102)

	Mothers	Fathers
Professional occupation	36.3%	25.5%
Managers or administrators	13.7%	26.5%
Clerical and intermediate occupations	13.7%	9.8%
Manual and service occupations*	8.8%	5.9%
Small business owners	10.8%	8.8%
Technical and craft occupations*	3.9%	16.7%
Unemployed or never worked*	17.6%	5.9%

*Social Mobility Commission (2021) classification of socioeconomic background categorises these occupations as 'working-class or lower socio-economic background'

Of the total sample, more than half of respondents reported parental educational attainment levels to be below the tertiary level. Parental educational qualifications at secondary level or below were noticeably higher among respondents who self-identified as 'working-class' while a smaller proportion of parents in this group reportedly had higher education degrees (Table 2).

TABLE 2
PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LEVELS

	Total sample (N=102)		'Working-class' respondents (N=37)		'Middle' and 'upper' class respondents (N=48)	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Less than high school/secondary school	13.1%	10.2%	18.9%	18.9%	8.5%	6.5%
High school/secondary school graduate	20.2%	22.4%	27.0%	29.7%	17.0%	15.2%
Trade/vocational diploma or certificate	22.2%	22.4%	27.0%	24.3%	17.0%	21.7%
Bachelor's degree	31.3%	26.5%	18.9%	16.2%	44.7%	34.8%
Master's degree	12.1%	13.3%	8.1%	5.4%	12.8%	17.4%
Doctoral degree	1.0%	4.1%	0.0%	2.7%	0.0%	4.3%

Group Differences

Of the total sample, most respondents were financing their studies either with the financial support of family or friends (68.7%) or from personal savings (41.4%) although those who self-identified as 'working-class' reported slightly less access to these sources and were slightly more likely to be recipients of bursaries and scholarships and to work alongside their studies (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
FROM WHICH SOURCES ARE YOU CURRENTLY FUNDING YOUR STUDIES?
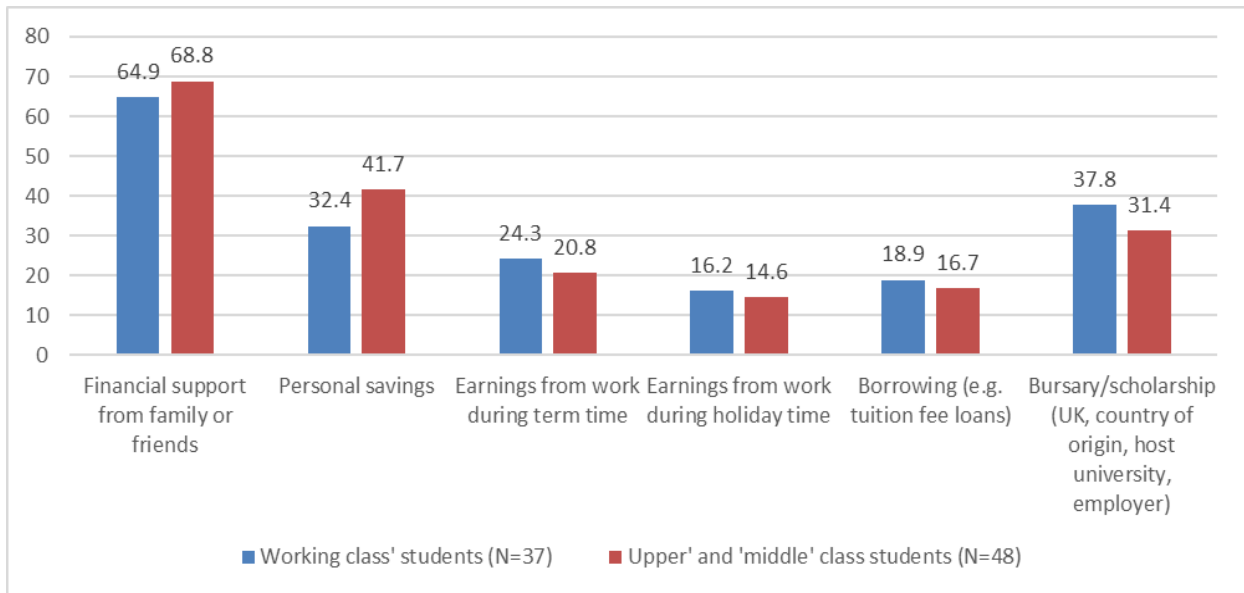
Just under half of the total sample (48.6%) reported that they were undertaking paid employment alongside their studies. There were noticeable differences in the working patterns of 'working-class' students relative to those from socioeconomically more privileged backgrounds. Amongst those self-identifying as 'working class', a slightly larger proportion reported undertaking paid employment alongside their studies, and they also reported working more hours (Figure 3).

There were some marked group differences regarding reasons for undertaking paid work, with living costs and study expenses more frequently stated by respondents who self-identified as 'working-class'. The latter were also more likely to support family in their countries of origin while a slightly larger proportion of those self-identifying as 'middle' or 'upper' class stated they were working to save for a specific purpose (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3
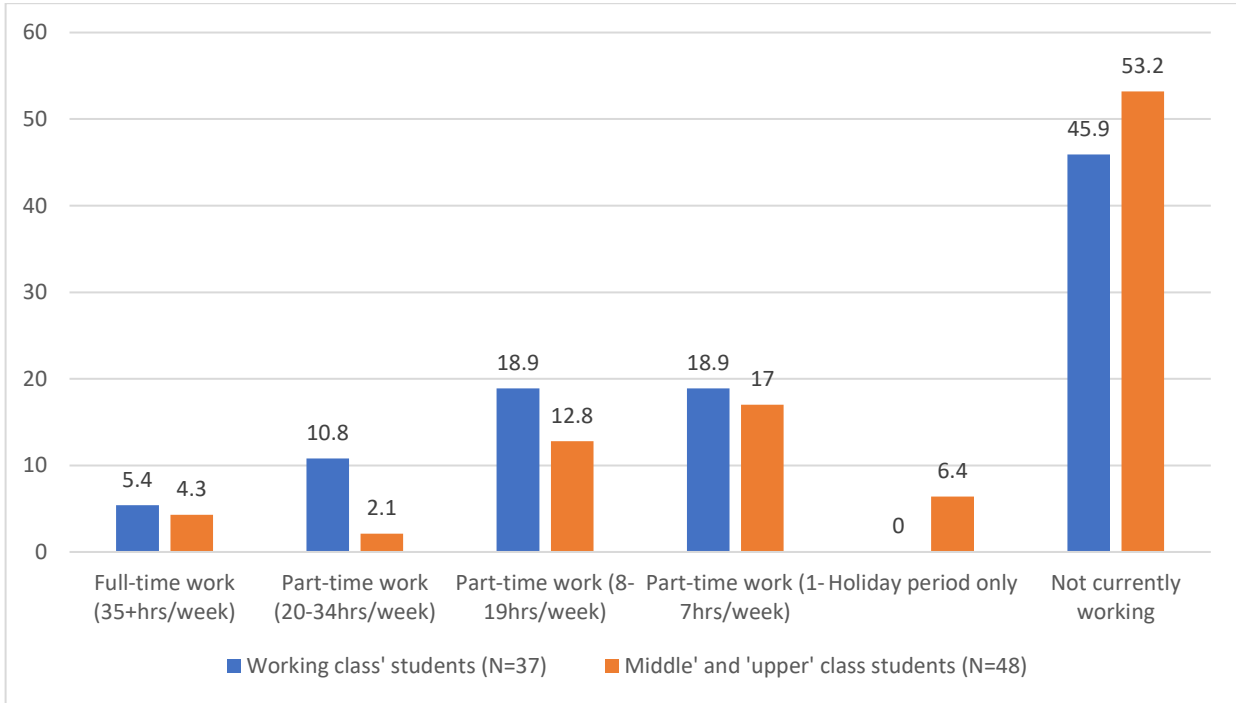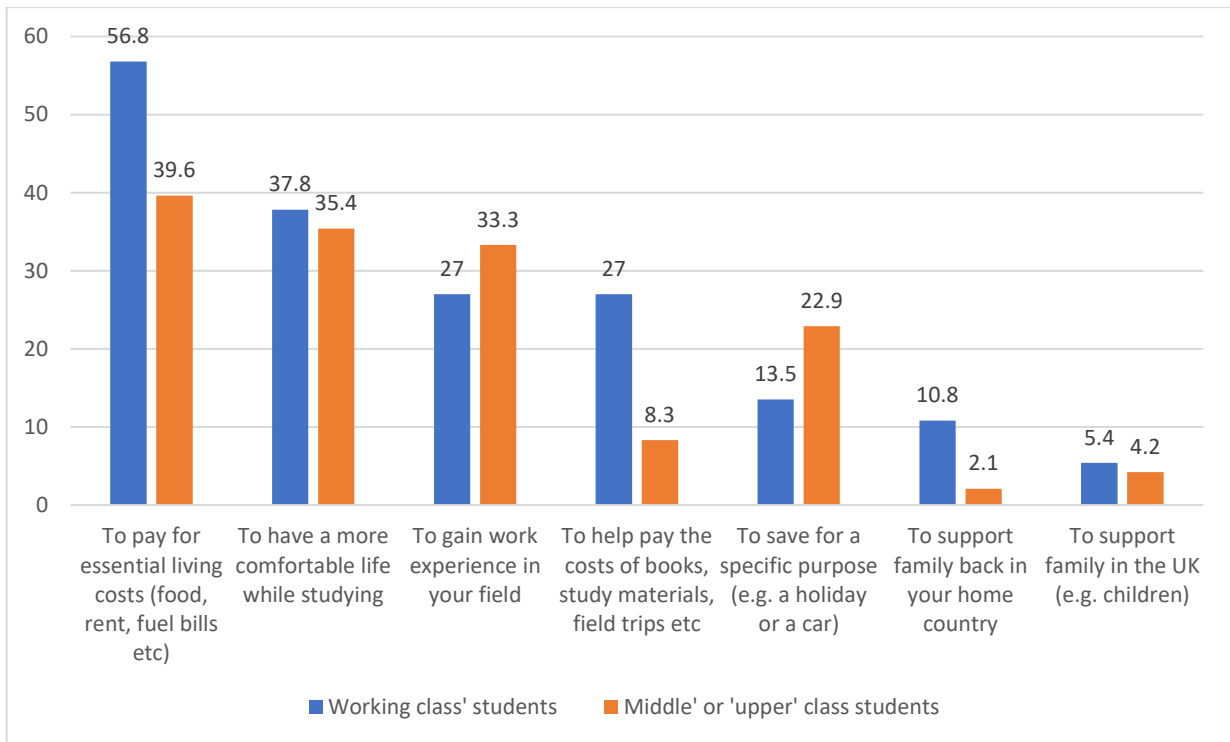**DO YOU CURRENTLY WORK ALONGSIDE YOUR STUDIES?**

■ Working class' students (N=37)   ■ Middle' and 'upper' class students (N=48)

FIGURE 4
WHAT ARE YOUR REASONS FOR UNDERTAKING PAID WORK?

■ Working class' students   ■ Middle' or 'upper' class students

The open-response item yielded few comments. Three comments were provided regarding the struggles that international students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might face. One male PhD student from Germany felt that *'part-time, working students are most often overlooked or forgotten about.'* A female undergraduate student from China explained that *'everything would be better if the tuition fee could be lower. £22k a year is the biggest burden'*. Finally, a female undergraduate student from Poland highlighted barriers and opportunities for less privileged international students, including university support and access to funding:

'I think university/cohort should be more understanding of international students that need to work to support themselves. Not every international student is from a wealthy family. I've heard few times, especially in first year, that I'm here to study not work. Yes, that is true. Although, I wouldn't be able to do one without the other and the statement was unthoughtful. I'd also say that scholarships/bursaries are quite hard to get and there's is very little that you could get after 1st year. Additionally, in a lot of them there is a requirement that the recipient has to be a UK home based student, which in my opinion is a bit discriminative. Overall, I'd say studying in UK is amazing but being financially independent (especially if one is an international student from low-income family) can be tough and university could be more supportive.' The open-responses capture the financial burdens experienced by socio-economically disadvantaged international students and furthermore identify that these are experiences that are not widely recognised by higher education institutions. These financial pressures are likely to impact on outcome measures evaluating the social and academic aspects of the 'university experience'.

Outcome Measures

Students who self-identified as 'working-class' had slightly lower mean scores in all outcome measures than those from more privileged backgrounds (Figure 5). These differences were statistically significant for three of the measures.

Firstly, students who self-identified as 'working-class' reported significantly lower satisfaction with life mean scores compared to those self-identifying as 'middle' or 'upper' class, $t(83) = -3.08$, $p = .003$. Looking at Satisfaction with Life Scale sum scores, respondents who self-identified as 'working-class' scored on average in the 'neutral' band of the scale[7] ($SD=7.02$, $Min=5.00$, $Max=30.00$) while respondents in the 'middle' and 'upper' class group scored on average on the upper end of the 'slightly satisfied' band ($SD=5.89$, $Min=10.00$, $Max=35.00$).

Secondly, students who self-identified as 'working-class' reported significantly lower general social support mean scores than those who identified as 'middle' or 'upper' class, $t(83) = -2.70$, $p = .008$. On average, respondents in the 'working-class' group scored at the upper end of the 'poor social support' band of the general social support scale while the 'middle' and 'upper' class group scored at the lower end of the 'moderate social support' band (Bøen, Dalgard & Bjertness, 2012)[8]. Students who self-identified as 'working-class' reported to have fewer people in their lives that they could rely on than their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds (Figure 5), and a larger proportion of 'working-class' students reported that people showed little or no interest in them (Figure 6).

Thirdly, students who self-identified as 'working-class' reported significantly lower social support at university mean scores ($SD=4.05$, $Min=5.00$, $Max=25.00$) compared to those self-identifying as 'middle' or 'upper-class' ($SD=2.99$, $Min=14.00$, $Max=25.00$), $t(83) = -2.01$, $p = .048$.

Respondents in the 'working-class' group reported slightly lower academic adjustment scores ($SD=6.01$, $Min=20.00$, $Max=43.00$) than respondents from more privileged backgrounds ($SD=6.36$, $Min=16.00$, $Max=45.00$), but this difference was not statistically significant. Regarding sense of belonging, respondents who identified as 'working-class' reported slightly lower mean scores ($SD=4.44$, $Min=13.00$, $Max=31.00$) than those from more privileged backgrounds ($SD=4.58$, $Min=15.00$, $Max=34.00$), but this difference was also not statistically significant.

FIGURE 5
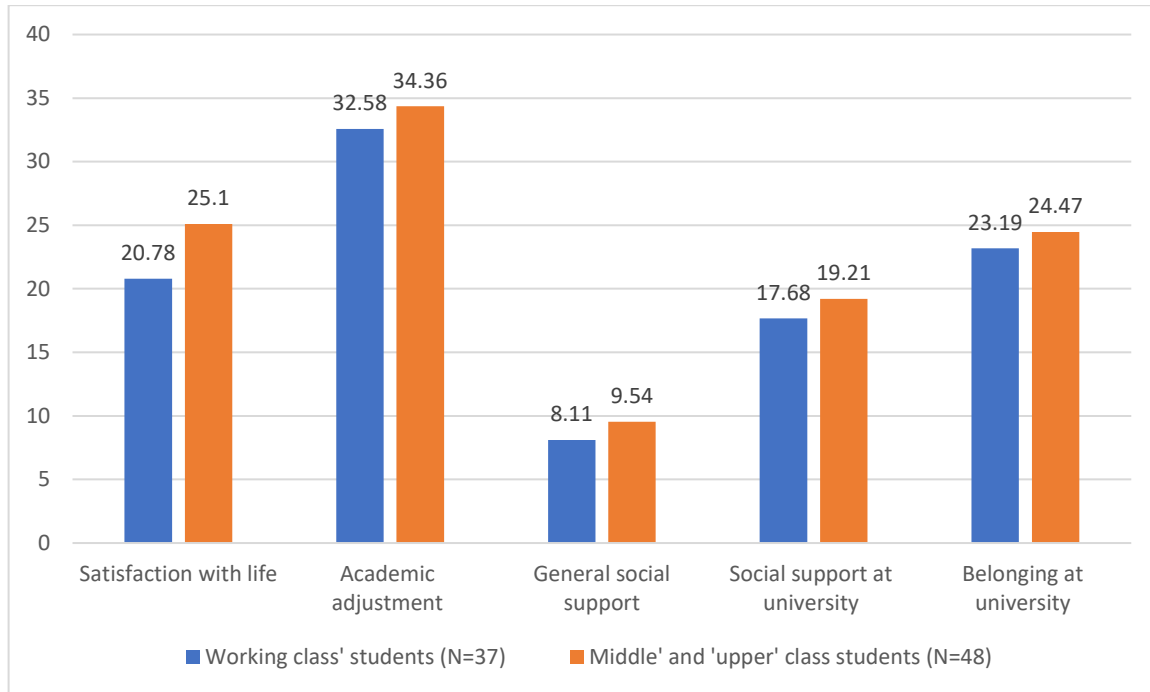**MEAN SCORES FOR THE OUTCOME MEASURES**

FIGURE 6
HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE SO CLOSE TO YOU THAT YOU CAN COUNT ON THEM IF YOU HAVE GREAT PERSONAL PROBLEMS?
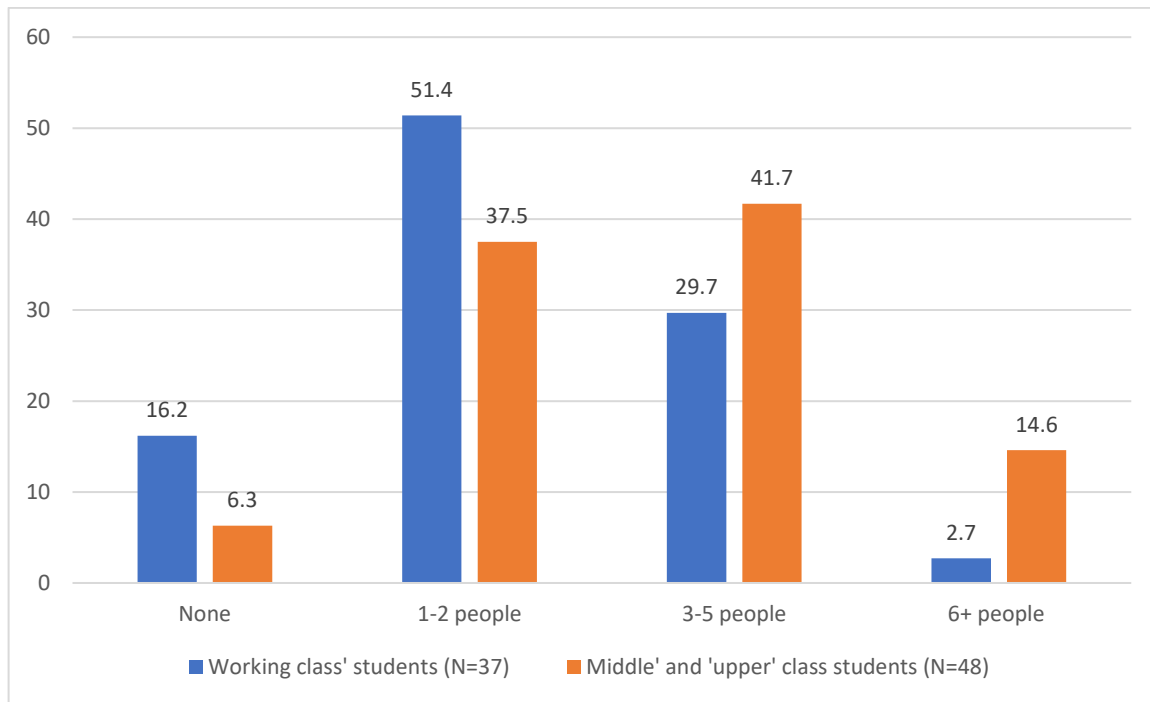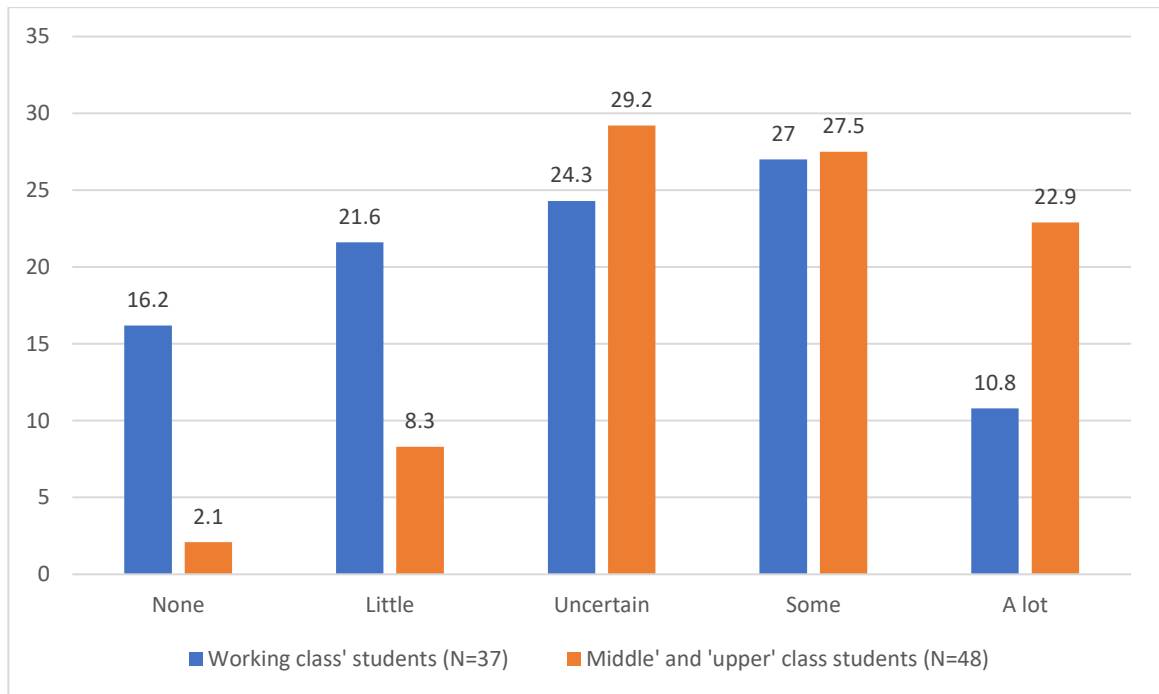
FIGURE 7
HOW MUCH INTEREST AND CONCERN DO PEOPLE SHOW IN WHAT YOU DO?

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this exploratory scoping study suggest that a significant segment of the international student population come from socioeconomically less privileged backgrounds. While much of the academic literature treats international students as one single entity without considering the diversity of this group (Irungu, 2013), our results contribute to a growing body of research that demonstrates that international students are a highly diverse and socioeconomically stratified group (HESA, 2021; Xu, 2021). In this study we used subjective understanding of social standing as a proxy measure for socioeconomic background in our comparative analysis, an approach increasingly being called for (e.g., Rubin et al., 2014). 'Objective' measures that consider occupation or level of education (Trappmann, et al., 2021) can be challenging for a multinational and multilingual international student sample given complexities around the development of cross-culturally meaningful terminology and measures, alongside accurate language translations that can be understood by participants across countries. Research shows that cross-national comparisons of social class can vary by country as occupational and educational opportunities may differ, be coded in different ways or be misreported (Avvisati, 2020). Some studies have tried to capture household income levels as a metric for social class (Hertela & Groh-Samberg, 2019; Bublitz, 2022), however valid comparisons can be difficult across countries with varying levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic inequalities.

Consequently, a key challenge for researching socioeconomically less advantaged international students is the transferability of social class as a concept that is easily understood or recognised in a range of different cultures and countries. A fundamental concern when trying to make sense of individuals' perceptions of their socioeconomic background is that people miscalculate objective levels of inequality and typically indicate that they are in the middle strata of society (Asahina, 2022; Lindemann & Saar, 2014). A further challenge is that subjective understandings of inequality do not necessarily correlate with objective measures, such as income. Hence similar levels of inequality can be identified by participants as tolerable or intolerable in diverse cultural contexts, thereby making cross-national comparisons problematic (Asahina, 2022; Evans & Kelley, 2004). The trial of effectively capturing objective measures of social class

cross-nationally has led to an increased interest in understandings of subjective social positioning by participants (Schneider, 2019; Anderson & Curtis, 2012). Furthermore, income inequalities escalate the role of subjective social positioning in individuals' perceptions of satisfaction with life (Schneider, 2019; Andersen & Curtis, 2012). Arguably, as income inequalities have widened in the twenty-first century (Nolan & Weisstanner, 2022) subjective social positioning accrues greater relevance in the analysis of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although the sample size was modest, this study offers rare quantitative evidence that international students who self-identify as being from 'working-class' backgrounds may experience university life differently to those from relatively more privileged backgrounds.

Firstly, this study suggests that international students' subjective socioeconomic background may have implications for the degree of social support they are able to access, both at university-level and in life more generally. In our sample, those who self-identified as being from a 'working-class' background reported significantly lower general social support and social support at university scores. More specifically, our data suggests that students from 'working-class' backgrounds had access to fewer people who could offer social support and were more likely to feel that the people around them showed little interest in them. This ties in with evidence that low social support and poor social networks are more common amongst socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (Weyers et al., 2008). It also links to research with domestic students suggesting that those from 'working-class' backgrounds have less social capital than their 'middle-class' peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), and that social capital influences how students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds experience university life (Attridge, 2021).

Secondly, the findings show that international students who self-identified as 'working-class' reported lower satisfaction with life scores than their relatively more privileged counterparts. This finding is not surprising given evidence of the association between socioeconomic background and life satisfaction in the general population with a number of recent studies confirming a correlation between subjective socioeconomic status and life satisfaction (Ren at el., 2022; Tan et al., 2020). It seems plausible that international students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to be able to access personal savings or financial support from family, as is indeed suggested in our data. This may mean that they are more likely to have to work alongside their studies, a juggle that could result in lower life satisfaction.

Finally, our findings suggest that employment rates among international students are relatively high. Just over half of the respondents in this study reported that they undertook some form of paid employment alongside their studies, and this was slightly higher amongst those respondents who self-identified as 'working-class'. This is similar to a 2004 UKCISA (formerly UKCOSA) report (UKCISA, 2004) and chimes with an emerging number of more recent studies reporting that the numbers of international student-workers are high across Anglophone host countries (see Nyland et al., 2009). It is imperative that host universities put structures in place that can support international students who work as this group is particularly vulnerable to poor working conditions and underpayment (Choudhury & McIntosh, 2013; Reilly, 2013; Clibborn, 2021). Little is known about how host universities support international students who work alongside their studies, but support is likely to be sporadic given broader evidence that international students lack career support (Brown, 2021).

A number of implications for host universities arise from this scoping study. Firstly, it is important that international students are recognised as a socioeconomically stratified group and not lumped together under a 'wealthy international student' umbrella. Student wellbeing teams and academic tutors in particular need an awareness of the diversity of international students in order to offer appropriate and effective support. An 'equity-minded' approach to international student support that recognises inequalities in opportunities and financial barriers (see Glass, Godwin & Helms, 2022) is imperative if international students in the UK are to be supported towards a successful international mobility experience. For example, support available to domestic students such as hardship funds should be routinely offered to international students as was the case in some institutions during the coronavirus pandemic which brought to light the vulnerabilities of international students (OfS, 2020).

The tentative findings from this study offer further evidence that there are variations in how international student mobility is experienced by individuals (Baxter, 2019). Further research into the varied and intersectional nature of international students' experiences is needed if we are to re-conceive the 'international student experience' as heterogeneous in nature (Heng, 2019). More broadly, it is important to deconstruct the 'elite' international student narrative given that public perception can be susceptible to grand narratives about specific immigrant groups, including international students (see Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2021).

This research contributes to a small but burgeoning number of studies that investigate the heterogeneity of international students' experiences through categories beyond nationality or ethnicity (cf. Heng, 2019). It is part of an increasingly critical line of enquiry that problematises and reimagines the notion of 'international student experience' (e.g., Jones, 2017). Research of this kind can go some way towards achieving a more holistic understanding of international students' experiences and can also help to deconstruct a 'home-international' dichotomy that continues to pervade UK HE. In future, qualitative research in particular can offer more nuanced understandings of international students' lived experiences.

ENDNOTES

[1.] For ethical reasons, UK universities were grouped into (a) research-intensive 'Russell Group' and (b) newer 'post-1992' institutions.
[2.] We used Eurostat's Field of Science and Technology Classification (FOS 2007).
[3.] 24 UK universities are member of the 'Russell Group' of world leading, research-intensive HE institutions.
[4.] In the UK, a postgraduate taught programme is typically a one-year master's programme with a taught element running from September to May, and a student-led research-component running from June to August.
[5.] Some respondents indicated that their country of origin was a region/territory not universally recognised as a nation state (e.g., Taiwan, West Bank & Gaza)
[6.] In the analysis that follows, respondents who self-identified as 'middle' and 'upper' class were grouped together.
[7.] Cut-off points for the SWLS reported by Diener et al. (1985): 31-35 Extremely satisfied; 26-30 Satisfied; 21-25 Slightly satisfied; 20 Neutral; 15-19 Slightly dissatisfied; 10-14 Dissatisfied; 5-9 Extremely dissatisfied
[8.] Cut-off points for the OSSS-3 reported by Bøen, Dalgard & Bjertness (2012): 3-8 poor social support; 9-11 moderate social support; 12-14 strong social support.

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