Manuscript

The Transnational Track: State Sponsorship and Singapore's Oxbridge Elite

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When citing this work, cite the original article:

Ye, Rebecca, and Erik Nylander. "The Transnational Track: State Sponsorship and Singapore's Oxbridge Elite." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36, no. 1: 11–33.
doi:10.1080/01425692.2014.967837.

Abstract

This paper explores the process of transnational institutional matching between elite institutions in Singapore and Great Britain, and the role of state-sponsored scholarships in enabling this process as political and administrative elites are selected and groomed. Using data gathered from in-depth interviews conducted with Singaporean undergraduates studying at Oxbridge and a dataset compiled of the institutional origins of 580 Singaporean government scholars, the analysis illustrates how students are being matched from two Singaporean junior colleges to Oxbridge and back to the higher strata of the Singaporean Public Service. We show that the educational trajectories of these government scholars need to be addressed in relation to the informational capital acquired in specific elite schools as well as the governing roles these individuals are meant to obtain within the state upon graduation.

Keywords: elite schools; Singapore; Oxbridge; transnational education; institutional matching; scholarships

Singapore is currently the third-largest source of international undergraduates at Oxford, a remarkable achievement for a city-state with the world's 115th largest population. There is a greater proportion of the Singaporean population studying at Oxford than any country outside the British Isles.

University of Oxford website, 2013

The hallmarks and history of Singapore's competitive education system have been documented (Tan, Gopinathan and Ho 1997, 2001; Sharpe and Gopinathan 2002; Choy and Tan 2011) and it should come as little surprise that the city-state has trained its students to perform well in scholastic assessments. For instance, in the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that evaluates competencies in mathematics, science and reading among 15-year-olds in 65 countries, Singapore was ranked third place in reading and literacy skills and finished runner-up in the math component (OECD 2013). Notwithstanding these achievements¹, selection into overseas elite Universities is surely more than just about students obtaining high-test scores.

This study seeks to understand how students in one country (Singapore) are being prepared for elite educational admission in another country (Great Britain). What compels such "remarkable" admission rates and how are Singaporean students being prepared for selection into Oxbridge? In seeking to answer these overarching research questions, we use data gathered from in-depth interviews conducted with

¹ Or recent criticisms from educators and researchers regarding PISA's measurement procedures and test validity, as documented in this open letter: <http://oecdписаletter.org/>

Singaporean undergraduates studying at Oxbridge and a dataset compiled of the institutional origins of 580 Singaporean government scholars over the last decade. Our results emphasise the preparatory function of two Singaporean elite junior colleges, Hwa Chong Institution and Raffles Institution and informational capital obtained by studying there. We also highlight how the student mobility arrangements to Oxbridge need to be related to the reproductive functions of the Singapore state that sponsor overseas education through government scholarships.

Elite schooling and the transnational tendency

Earlier works on the selection and preparation of elites are extensive (cf. Bottomore 1966; Wilkinson 1969; Cookson and Persell 1985; Bourdieu 1996). Renewed interest in this topic, particularly within the sociology of education, has been observed in recent years, possibly due to the widening inequalities of wealth and capital in most developed countries (Piketty 2014), the emergence of mass consumption of higher education and the heightened importance of access to elite institutions (Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009). Undergraduate admissions procedures and outcomes for elite Universities like Oxford and Cambridge and the Ivy League colleges have also been exposed to a great deal of public controversy, with particular interest in the question of who gains entry (cf. Karabel 2006; Zimdars 2007, 2010). In the case of Oxbridge, much of the debate centres on the open secret that its colleges have strong connections with particular private schools

in the UK and that admissions tutors have retained a role as gatekeepers to the elite (Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

Besides pathways connecting elite high schools to Universities, Norris and Lovenduski (1995) have examined pathways beyond Oxbridge into political careers. They have established through their research that the British Parliament has far more graduates from Oxford, Cambridge and certain public schools (Etonians and Harrovians) than the general electorate. Examining gatekeeper attitudes, who gets selected and why, and scrutinising the representation of the highest offices of the state, their analysis underscores the impact of social biases among UK politicians and top administrators on the legislative rationality of the state. Although this body of research concerned with the career trajectories of Oxbridge alumni augments our understanding of elite schooling in Britain, less attention has been directed towards the increasingly transnational character of Oxbridge's student recruitment. The issue's salience is amplified given that British universities are increasingly under pressure to show that they are "widening access" domestically as recent studies demonstrate social group disparities in application and admission (see for example Boliver 2013). Yet, overseas applicants appear to fall outside the monitoring of these issues of access.

Studying abroad can be viewed as a means of amassing different forms of capital. Apart from the opportunity to accrue educational capital – albeit differentiated in accordance with the value subscribed to specific institutions and programmes –

transnational schooling can also lead to secondary effects such as the build-up of linguistic, social and “cosmopolitical” assets. Against the backdrop of mass higher education and crowding out within domestic markets, the push for transnationalism and “going global” might be thought of as a strategy of the local elite who are particularly eager to renew means of social differentiation. With the emergence of neo-liberalism from the 1980s, the educational realm in many countries has also undergone a rapid commodification process that has led agents of education to become more aggressive in participating in the international arena (Altbach and Knight 2007). For instance, in a study concerned with Swedish-French and Swedish-American educational connections, Börjesson (2005) writes that a range of strategies that transcend national boundaries have and are being developed by groups of politicians, administrators, teachers, researchers and students to cope with this new state of affairs. In schools and universities, there is increasing pressure to synchronize and benchmark actions in the global education market.

At the same time, the development of global educational markets has its limits and is structured around national borders as well as interests. Transnational institutional arrangements within higher education and student mobility flows are geopolitically skewed, with the US and the UK leading as receiving countries of foreign tertiary students and Asian students forming the largest group of international students enrolled in countries reporting data to OECD or the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (OECD 2011). Within this assemblage and movement of students is a strong historical connection between former colonies and the ex-empires, which have been

interpreted by some scholars as a form of lingering colonial impact on higher education (cf. Altbach 1989). Yet, contemporary student flows from former colonies to their former “rulers” have not been limited to second-tier educational streams, nor do they fall squarely into a simplistic dichotomy of coloniser and colonised. In the case of admissions into the University of Oxford, for example and as of 2013, ex-British territories Hong Kong and Singapore have had 1,636 and 1,162 of their young people enrol in the University, respectively – what can be considered relatively large alumni populations (University of Oxford 2013). Though the historical and contemporary linkages between British universities and these East Asian cities undoubtedly differ, little has been written about these newer transnational educational connexions and their sociological dynamics.

A small city-state that has experienced rapid economic development and mounting aspirations for coveted educational qualifications, Singapore presents itself as an interesting site for exploring the new realities of transnational higher education, in particular the education strategies adopted by elite students, prestigious schools and the Singaporean state. For such a research endeavour, conventional forms of sociological analyses that evaluate educational performances and attainment need to be complemented with explorations that uncover where students are heading and what mechanisms enable these journeys.

Sponsored mobility: enabling the transnational, preparing state elites

An important cog in the machinery that enables Singaporean students to move out to global elite Universities is the scholarship system designed by the Singapore government. The scholarship serves as a form of sponsorship for an otherwise unaffordable overseas education for a proportion of its recipients. In exchange, the recipient is obliged to work for the Singapore government upon graduation. How individuals are selected to be ‘a scholar’ is thence worthy of careful exploration, both in relation to scholastic and governing institutions.

Following Ralph Turner, the role of the Singaporean government in promoting elite student migration can be seen as a kind of sponsored mobility. Turner (1960) characterises sponsored mobility as one which favours a controlled selection process where the elite (or their agents) are seen to be best qualified to judge merit and choose individuals for elite status. He contrasts the sponsored ideal type with ‘contest mobility’ which he describes as a system of mobility where elite status is won, or battled over, through individualized means. What Turner asserts as the goal of sponsored mobility – making the best use of the talents in society by sorting persons into their proper niches – is arguably a key function of the Singapore government scholarship system. Individuals are prepared early within the formal education system and then officially selected into a “scholar-pool” at the age of 18 (pre-University). As our analysis will reveal in greater detail, these nominations then afford the students with a highly privileged route into the civil service, with many

more opportunities for accelerated career progression into leadership roles than their counterparts.

Understanding transnational institutional matching, in the case of Singapore, thus involves not only just the examination of the practices of elite schools but also that of the state. In order to further our analysis of Singaporean elite students' mobility and the function of the scholarship system, we also draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in particular from the book he wrote in collaboration with Monique de Saint-Martin under the title of *La noblesse d'État* (1989).² In this publication, Bourdieu and his colleague report from an extensive body of research that began in the 1960s. They explore the social bases of technocratic domination within the French educational and political systems, while distinguishing between the mental and social structures of individuals and institutions. Bourdieu was particularly keen in situating the grandes écoles in relation to the national field of power. In so doing, the two universes – school and the state – are seen to share homologous structures, signifying their intimate yet intricate relationship.

This article relies, in particular, on two tenets of Bourdieu's exposition. First, we are inspired by the methodology employed in *La noblesse d'État* where the analysis is conducted along two levels – individuals and institutions – in order to capture mental and social structures. The analysis also focuses on the relationship between educational programmes and vocational fields that the students aspire toward. As a

² Later translated into English as *The State Nobility* (1996).

research praxis, this approach is allied with other researchers who draw on Bourdieu's work, particularly within Scandinavian educational sociology (Broady, Börjesson and Palme 1998; Börjesson 2005; Palme 2008; Munk 2009; Nylander and Ahn, 2013).

Second, we build on Bourdieu's conceptualization of educational capital as an important symbolic asset and elite schools as institutions capable of consecrating future elites for the highest echelons of a state's bureaucracy. Contrary to those who have suggested that states have withdrawn completely from educational fields or have limited their regulative functions to the manufacturing of commodified markets (cf. Ball 2004), we build on Bourdieu's idea that the state can be seen as a "great reservoir of symbolic power, the central bank of symbolic credit which vouchsafes acts of consecration, such as the granting of an academic title, an identity card or a certificate" (Bourdieu 1996, 39). As this paper develops, it should become apparent that a similar technocratic style of selecting, training and instituting elites from educational to political systems is found in contemporary Singapore.

Ideally, and especially if following the Bourdieusian tradition, our analysis should include information on the social origins of the students as this would allow us to better analyse if and how families' cultural and economic capital can place students in beneficial positions for educational performance and attainment. However, disaggregated, micro-level datasets on the Singaporean population (or even samples)

are unattainable, thence limiting the possibilities of exploring the potential influence of social origins and “cultural dispositions” of students, in this case. Nevertheless, the study’s aim of strengthening our understanding of how institutions prepare students in Singapore for elite educational admission in Great Britain is still achievable via the research approach employed, and which will be detailed below.

The Singaporean context

Private elite schools were only formally established in Singapore during the later part of the twentieth century. In 1986, twelve school principals and the Education Minister travelled to the UK and US to study the management of twenty-five private schools to gather ideas as Singapore set up its own ‘independent schools’.

Independent schools, as compared to regular schools in Singapore, enjoy autonomy in management, teacher recruitment, curriculum planning and student admission, while still benefitting from substantial government financial support (see Tan [1993] for background to the establishment of these schools).

Two independent schools are of particular importance to our analysis. The first is Raffles Institution (Junior College). It offers the Raffles Programme, their version of the Singapore Ministry of Education's Integrated Programme, whereby students undertake a six-year “through-train” education and bypass the GCE ‘O’ Levels (sat by a majority of Singaporean students at age 16) to sit for the ‘A’ Levels directly (at age 18). The second is Hwa Chong Institution, an independent school in Singapore that covers both secondary and pre-university levels. It also offers an Integrated

Programme that gives the students six whole years to study for the ‘A’ Levels instead of sitting for two key exams (‘O’s and ‘A’s) over the same period. Both Raffles and Hwa Chong were selected by the Ministry of Education to be centres for the Humanities Scholarship Programme and these programmes pride themselves to prepare students for applications to top universities around the world.

Research approach

The main question addressed in this analysis is how Singaporean students are being selected into and prepared for overseas elite institutions. Its motivation is, simply, the large number of Singaporean undergraduate students in prestigious schools like Oxford and Cambridge. Viewed more broadly, our query is also concerned with the role and function of state-sponsored scholarships in enabling students to travel overseas for an elite education and to acquire certain symbolic assets and knowledge that they can use when entering the labour market, in particular, the Civil Service.

As we endeavour to uncover both the mental and social structures of elite admission and the corresponding career trajectories of scholars, the data used to explore these two themes have been collected via mixed methods. For instance, the statistical material deployed in this analysis is based on a dataset³ of educational backgrounds of Singapore government scholarship recipients who were awarded between 2002

³ The database was gathered out of information retrieved, in December 2012, from the website (www.psc.gov.sg) of the governmental agency that is responsible for disbursing government scholarships.

and 2011. We have been particularly interested in the Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarships as these are considered the acme of scholarships in Singapore, with recipients selected from every cohort's pool of top 'A'-Levels or International Baccalaureate (IB) performers.⁴ Once chosen, recipients have all tuition fees and living expenses for higher education financed, and in exchange, sign a contractual bond that obliges them to five or six years in the public service upon graduation. These recipients – colloquially known as 'scholars' – are promised rewarding careers especially in the elite Administrative Service where they may be fast-tracked to leadership positions.

The data used in this paper's analysis pertains to the secondary school and junior college attended by the scholarship recipient as well as the university and subject (to be) enrolled into. All in all, the dataset covers all 580 scholars awarded between 2002 and 2011. Through a simple descriptive analysis, we find that the most popular destination in the past decade for government scholars is the United Kingdom.⁵ In addition, a majority of the 270 Singaporean government scholars who studied in the UK went to Oxford and Cambridge⁶, thence motivating further qualitative inquiry into the experiences of this subgroup.

⁴ Sitting for the 'A'-Levels or IB examinations is the common route to take for students in Singapore if they intend to pursue a University education. Note that the PSC scholarships are not the only types of scholarships for higher education available in Singapore. Other sources of sponsorship can come from statutory boards, banks or private institutions. This paper only focuses on PSC scholarships as they are deemed to be the pinnacle of scholarships in Singapore.

⁵ 47% of the 580 scholars studied in the UK over the last 10 years. The next popular destination is the US at 34%.

⁶ 10% of the 580 scholars went to Oxford and 11% to Cambridge in the last decade.

In 2012, the first author of this article conducted a total of 24 in-depth interviews with 16 government scholars, six non-government scholars (who were then studying in Oxford or Cambridge) and two former government scholarship recipients (who had earlier studied in Oxbridge). Recruitment of interviewees was done through contacting the agency that disburses these scholarships, attending student events and snowballing from interviewees. Although the interviewer ensured to sample for range – gender, institutional origins, colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, disciplines – the main interview strategy adopted was that of sequential interviewing using case, rather than sampling, logic (cf. Small 2009). An interview schedule was worked from and every interview impelled the researcher to re-evaluate her understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Our analytical approach strives to weave together data from a gamut of sources to provide a descriptive research piece.⁷ That is, marshalling the secondary data (from the database) to uncover the educational and disciplinary patterns of state-sponsored scholarship, and the primary data (interviews) to gain deeper understanding, through the scholars' verbalizations, of the conditions and ideologies that have shaped their educational trajectories. In the findings section to follow, we first sketch out the educational backgrounds of the most recent generation of PSC scholars. Then with the use of interview data, we interpret and discuss how their educational trajectories are conceived of, from the point-of-view of the students.

⁷ Besides the qualitative observations and quantitative analysis of the dataset compiled, other secondary sources drawn from include the analysis of documents used by elite schools to prepare students for Oxbridge admissions, information on scholarship selection processes and speeches made by Singapore's administrative and political elite on the topic of scholarships.

Enabling the transnational: Getting the scholarship

As early as 1885, the Higher Scholarships were awarded to outstanding students in Singapore, a former British colony, to study at British universities (Sutherland 2010). Through an evolution of scholarship arrangements and governing bodies, an independent organ of state, the Public Service Commission (PSC), was constituted in 1951 with a function of attracting and developing ‘talent’ for the civil service through the PSC scholarships.

Figure 1. Pre-University Institutions attended by PSC scholars from 2002 to 2011

Source: Author's own compilation from PSC data (N=580)

Over the past decade from 2002 to 2011, 70% of PSC scholars have come from two elite schools in Singapore: Raffles and Hwa Chong Institutions. Figure 1 shows that

year-on-year, more students from these two institutions secure scholarships than any other school.⁸ Within the same timeframe, 78% of the government scholars who were enrolled in Oxford were from Raffles and Hwa Chong, and in Cambridge, the dominance was even greater at 88%. The feeder phenomenon, in this case, goes well beyond pathways from elite Singapore schools to elite British colleges. Students from the two elite institutions are, too, being fed into the government scholar pool.

To further illustrate the “preparatory power” these two institutions wield: in the year of 2011 alone, 72 students from Raffles Institution secured a place in Oxbridge (Raffles Institution 2012). That equates to 1.2% of the approximately 6,000 places annually available in Oxford and Cambridge obtained by students from one single school in Singapore. For Hwa Chong, 70 students received offers from universities including Oxbridge, the Ivy League colleges and top universities in China that same year (Hwa Chong Institution 2012). Together, these two institutions in Singapore are unmistakably conduits to elite schools elsewhere.

Institutional matching: Getting into Oxbridge

As the data presented above suggests, Raffles and Hwa Chong Institutions have over the years been able to prepare their students to face the complexity of

⁸ There is no fixed quota for the number of scholars selected every year. But to give a sense of success rates: out of the approximately 15,000 students in the graduating A-level and IB cohorts annually, 2,000 to 3,000 students apply for the scholarships and less than a hundred scholarships are eventually awarded (<0.7% of each cohort).

Oxbridge and Ivy League colleges' admissions processes. Oxbridge students from Raffles Institution who were interviewed spoke unanimously about the kinds of resources they had access to for University applications: there is a tutor dedicated to Oxbridge admissions, a career and college advisory centre that organises preparatory activities and offers advice, talks delivered by Raffles-Oxbridge alumni and Oxbridge faculty members – to name just a few of these preparatory affordances. Besides obtaining high academic scores necessary for entry, it is therefore important to stress the role that informational capital play in the process of institutional enrolment. Being acquainted with the tricks-of-the-trade of the admission process is the first crucial step of the “rite of passage” (Bourdieu 1996; Cookson and Persell 1985, 20).⁹

The preparatory experiences of students from Hwa Chong resemble their counterparts in Raffles. However, while students acknowledged the range and quality of resources available to them, some were reflexive of the underlying processes and politics in such preparation. As one student from the elite Humanities Programme elaborates:

I think in the Humanities (Programme), there is very strong guidance... And, slightly paternalistic... there is a system where the tutors allocate (Oxbridge) colleges to you. So you don't actually choose your colleges. This happens school-wide... And the school does that to ensure that we don't compete with each other. Because if they get two similar candidates from the same school

⁹ Bourdieu came to use the concept of ‘informational capital’ as synonymous to the embodied, objectified and institutionalized dynamics of cultural capital, at times preferring the wider generality of the former notion (see especially Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 199).

and same background, it's unlikely they take both. So they try to split us up.¹⁰

Students also described how they did not need to devise many University admission tactics on their own because their schools devised those tactics on their behalf. A pattern emerged as students explained how a well-trodden path was laid out for them to traverse:

I was from the Humanities Programme in Hwa Chong, so the application process is pretty much set in stone, you know, all the mechanisms are there... There was a lot of handholding; they looked through your personal statement and everything... I just remember that I didn't really say I wanted to come to Oxford? But the tutors just kind of assume... they literally just write down a list of names of who is going to apply where, for what.¹¹

The students interviewed exuded a vital trait for being successful Oxbridge applicants: that is, being au fait with the tricks-of-the-trade to deal with the complexity of admissions processes. Structural features of the complicated admissions process in Oxbridge – such as meeting an application deadline three months prior to the encouraged deadline operated by other British universities; face-to-face interviews with Oxbridge academic faculty; submitting several documents and taking necessary written tests to support the application – proffer an advantage to students from schools with years of experience in sending applicants to Oxbridge (Zimdars 2010, 310).

Based on the students' recollection of the various events as well as clarification with the relevant institutions, a timeline of the deadlines and activities for applying to

¹⁰ Interview with Hwa Chong alumnus, 2 May 2012, Oxford.

¹¹ Interview with Hwa Chong alumnus, 24 April 2012, Oxford.

elite institutions in the US and the UK as well as Singaporean government scholarships is summarised at Figure 2.

		SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL
University Applications	UK	UCAS and COPA application begins Complete UCAS for Cambridge	Complete UCAS for Oxford	Major test dates for Oxford applicants	Interviews in Oxford/Cambridge	Oxbridge results						
	US			Early Action Application	Early Action Results Regular Decision (RD) Application	→			(RD) Results			
Exams / events in SG		←	A Levels	→ International Baccalaureate (IB)	1 st intake military training (males)	IB Results		A Level Results				
Scholarship Applications		PSC Scholarship Application opens				Selection begins	→	Application closes 10 days after A Level results	→	→	→	Results

Figure 2. Timeline of decision-making points for a Singaporean student applying to UK and US universities

What is telling from this labyrinth of actions-to-take and decision-making points is that if a student is not acquainted with this timeline, it can be an intimidating process to know what to do, when. Missing one key step or deadline could potentially throw the entire application process off the rails, resulting in a missed opportunity to apply to Oxbridge that very year. Students from elite institutions are thus synchronised in their actions, with the schools and their teachers greatly assisting in smoothening out the thorny process.

Turner writes that elite recruits are generally observed to be inducted into a homogeneous stratum “within which there is consensus regarding the rules and within which they succeed socially by mastering these rules” (1960, 864). For students from ‘non-elite’ institutions who did not receive such forms of preparation, there was clearly less consensus in their almae matres about what these application rules were and how to address them most effectively.¹² These students recalled being left to their own devices to seek out information and were less confident of their chances of selection. A contrasting scenario, one where little help was made available by their institution, was articulated through interviews with them:

... they were actually quite terrible, at that point. I wish they could give more help actually...In fact, I can’t think of at any point they helped me with my app[lication]s.¹³

... the only information I could find was online... I just picked one [college] based on number of students, college size, how nice the college looked in the prospectus... I think the general attitude for whoever applied in my year was like, ‘you get in, whatever college, even if it’s the furthest one, the louisiest one, it doesn’t matter’... Very few of us thought we would get in.¹⁴

Unlike their counterparts in elite schools, there were far fewer mechanisms in place to prepare them and “warm up” their ambitions (Amano 1982). Yet, as we learn from the interviews, the disparity in preparation does not only rely on the informational and educational capital accrued by the students from their previous schools; internal differentiation within elite schools, too, exists. As stated in a briefing document on University applications prepared by Hwa Chong, “only

¹² Barr and Skrbis (2008, 197) similarly point out the lack of information and resources available within non-elite schools in Singapore about government scholarship applications.

¹³ Interview with non-Raffles/Hwa Chong alumnus, 26 March 2012, Oxford.

¹⁴ Interview with non-Raffles/Hwa Chong alumnus, 1 May 2012, Oxford.

students who are in the top 40% of their cohort for Block Tests 2 SHOULD apply to Oxbridge” and “only those who have tutors comfortable with predicting 3 ‘A’s for you (at least) should consider applying”.¹⁵ Some students shared that if they were deemed by the school or their teachers to not be academically strong, they were excluded from the preparations that others were receiving. The heavy emphasis and value subscribed to being a high academic achiever in the elite schools also meant that those students who did not meet the high criteria of previous achievement had their aspirations ‘cooled’ down.

... I wasn’t one of these star students who like constantly push to the fore, and people will be like, ‘why don’t you apply to Oxford?’ I will be one of the slightly more quiet people... my teachers were... I suppose they weren’t very optimistic that I would definitely get into Oxford? And that really put a lot of doubts into my head at the application stage.¹⁶

The practice of filtering out unsuccessful leads by elite schools gels with Turner’s (1960) proposition that early selection in sponsored mobility regimes is necessary to prevent the brewing of discontentment. The inclusion and exclusion of students thence alters the way students from Raffles and Hwa Chong approach the application process and highlight cleavages that exist within elite schools. As one student recounts:

The [Oxbridge] application process doesn’t start from the University; it starts from [Raffles]. Because what happens is that (name of teacher) basically grabs everybody into a Lecture Theatre, and he tells them all about Oxbridge, things like that. And because he knows that a lot of people will

¹⁵ Capitalization in original text. Source: [http://tertiaryeducation.wiki.hci.edu.sg/file/view/Oxbridge+applications+2011+\(July+2011+smb+upload\).pdf](http://tertiaryeducation.wiki.hci.edu.sg/file/view/Oxbridge+applications+2011+(July+2011+smb+upload).pdf) (accessed May 21, 2013).

¹⁶ Interview with Raffles alumnus, 28 April 2012, Oxford.

apply for it and few will get in, what he tries to do is to scare off the people who are not serious about applying.¹⁷

Although interviewees did not always agree with the arrangements that included and excluded students from the preparatory process, compelled by this form of “paternalistic prep power”, most were fairly acquiescent in following through with the measures recommended by their tutors if they wanted to achieve their educational aims of getting into Oxbridge. Furthermore, for close to half of those interviewed in this study, getting a scholarship was crucial as it was the only way they said they could finance this particular education. Not receiving a scholarship would have meant the worst-case scenario: remaining in Singapore and pursuing a “socially-acceptable” “locally-prestigious” course.¹⁸ Thus, on top of undergoing preparation for selection into Oxbridge, students from these elite institutions were also being primed for selection into the Singapore government scholarship system.

On the (trans)national scholarship track

The charismatic ideology of the bright and gifted – what Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) once referred to as ‘the ideology of the gift’ – is also cherished by the governmental agency that distributes these scholarships. For instance, as stated on the PSC scholarship’s website:

¹⁷ Interview with Raffles alumnus, 14 April 2012, Cambridge.

¹⁸ A very common back-up plan or worst-case scenario for these students was to stay on in Singapore and pursue a degree in a well-established programme like Law at the National University of Singapore. This could be likened to what Abbott (2007) described as the “subterranean, lurking rationality, embodied in the historically ancient satisficing concept of the ‘safe school’” (ibid, 16).

“...beyond academic excellence, leadership and community involvement, PSC is looking for someone original, different and refreshing. Scholarship candidates should be well read, have a quick mind and offer sensible, well-conceived views. They should also be sincere in wanting to serve the Public Service and Singapore”. (Public Service Commission 2012)

The scholarship website goes on to say that applicants are assessed through academic results, co-curricular activities participation, school assessment, national service reports, psychometric test results and interviews. However, despite such advertised criteria for selection, several students found the selection of government scholars to be an enigma. They described the selection as “opaque”, with “hidden criteria” and a lot of uncertainty about what the selection panel was looking out for.

I must say I don't think that the PSC process was super transparent. Apparently there's a round of interviews before the one-on-one interviews. But schools like Hwa Chong and Raffles, they have a list of people they give to PSC, and they're like, 'these people can go through to the second round'.¹⁹

Vagueness around evaluation, whilst not often anticipated, is not surprising. Turner (1960, 859) writes that “a sense of mystery about the elite is a common device for supporting in the masses the illusion of a much greater hiatus of competence than in fact exists”. Similarly, Bourdieu's accounts of the charismatic consecration of elite schooling stresses how real world effects of economic, cultural and scholastic capital are bound to be misrecognized internally as the qualification regimes hide behind informal notions of “personality” and “originality” (Bourdieu 1996, 106ff; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979, Chapter 2).

¹⁹ Interview with Hwa Chong alumnus, 24 April 2012, Oxford.

In addition to having to manage the ambiguity of formal and informal evaluation criteria, these students, then mostly around 18 years of age, were also expected to articulate and express certainty about and commitment to their educational pathway and future vocation:

... the scholarship process was a lot more difficult. Because the Cambridge thing, if you had it, you had it... Scholarship interviews, well firstly, you have to be at peace with yourself. You need to know that you want to do it... The whole point of training for scholarship interviews might not be appropriate in the first place. Is it something you train, or do you get it only if you deserve it?²⁰

Reflecting on the difficulty of applying for a government scholarship, this student points out an interesting conundrum: can one prepare to perform for a scholarship interview or is one bestowed a scholarship because s/he deserves it? The student's uncertainty about the criteria of the scholarship selection is intriguing. If the "ideology of the gift" would be fully valid, then no preparation for selection would be needed. At the same time, our account so far displays evidence of the extensive labour – both institutionalized and embodied – that lies behind a heavy concentration of PSC scholars from two particular prep schools. These findings dilute or complicate the romantic discourse of being individually "called upon" as an Oxbridge scholar.

Sketches of a State's Rationality

With its longstanding one-party government, the Singaporean state has managed to build an extremely centralised, albeit contentious, talent management system

²⁰ Interview with Raffles alumnus, 13 April 2012, Cambridge.

alongside an education system that sorts its students early into streams and pathways. As we have discussed, the function of the PSC government scholarship goes beyond providing financial support for higher education as it also guarantees the student a job and access to sought-after positions within the Singaporean civil service. Once they enter the civil service, the scholars' performances will continue to be annually reviewed. If noted to be of "high potential", the PSC scholar may be invited to join the People's Action Party, Singapore's ruling party since independence, and when elected into Parliament, may be picked to serve in the Cabinet (Tan 2010, 279). A profile analysis of the 18 Singapore Cabinet ministers (as of time of writing) reveals that nine of them, or half, were Singapore government scholars – a manifestation of the efficacy of the scholarship, over time, in charting out pathways for its recipients (see Appendix 1).²¹

Because this scholarship is taken to be a significant government investment in a section of its future workforce, and potentially the future political elite, selection does not end at who gets chosen. What this student intends to do with his or her education and how that can be beneficial to the state's wider priorities are also considered in the evaluation process. Table 1 summarises the most favoured disciplines that government scholars had been enrolled in or were going to enrol in at the time of being awarded the scholarship, over the last decade. The pattern in

²¹ From this analysis, we also learn that a third of Cabinet ministers went to Raffles or Hwa Chong, and a third went to Cambridge for undergraduate studies. Two others were Colombo Plan Scholars (these scholarships were disbursed by UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand to students from 'developing' countries, pre-1990s). See Appendix 1 for full descriptive table of their educational trajectories.

the distribution of academic disciplines could be seen to reflect the state's aim to train its scholars to take up the vocation of "problem-solving" within public governance, finance, business, and legal systems.

Table 1. Most favoured disciplines supported by PSC (2002 – 2011)²²

Rank	Discipline	N	%
1	Economics	127	22
2	Engineering	92	16
3	Interdisciplinary degrees within Social Sciences ²³	66	11
4	Law	60	10
5	Mathematics ²⁴	33	6
<i>Dominating disciplines as a percentage of total (N=580)</i>			65

Source: Author's own compilation from PSC data

When exploring the disciplinary backgrounds of PSC scholars, it is important to bear in mind the connection between the scholarship system and the career trajectory it produces within the Singaporean state apparatus. This analysis responds to the question of what kind of subjects the Singaporean state is inclined to sponsor, and what kind of knowledge will inform its public policies in the future. As the figures in the table show, economists and engineers dominate the pool of PSC scholarship recipients. The number of scholars studying Economics alone doubles the number in Law and interdisciplinary degrees within social sciences, combined. If we can take these results to be co-constructing a governmentality of the Singaporean state in a wider sense, these findings can be seen as illustrating the hegemonic

²² Refer to Appendix 2 for full breakdown of disciplinary composition of PSC scholars.

²³ Philosophy, Politics & Economics (PPE); Economics, Politics & Ethics; International Relations.

²⁴ Here inclusive of "Statistics".

position that Economics obtains within decision-making organs, as well as the promotion of political priorities intrinsic to the dominating disciplines.²⁵

Concluding remarks

Building on Bourdieu's (1996) exposition of the consecration and legitimation of elites through prestigious high schools as well as the concept of sponsored mobility (Turner 1960), we have outlined a case study about Singaporean scholars studying at Oxbridge colleges. We began this exposition by mapping out the transnational matching processes involved between two "feeding" institutions in Singapore – Raffles and Hwa Chong – and the highly desired academic accreditation available from Oxbridge programmes. We observed how through the admission into elite Universities and the scholarship selection processes the ideology of the gift is propagated, transmission of scholastic and informational capital is overt and not necessarily disguised, and economistic policymaking and technocratic leadership is groomed early through the types of disciplinary training a Singaporean scholar may receive.

Bourdieu (1996, 379), referring to the noblesse de robe of France, once emphasized a similar relationship between the top academic nobility and the state nobility, insisting that the discourses of "public service", honour and devotion to the

²⁵ Governmentality (or 'la gouvernementalité' as introduced by Foucault) can be read here as simultaneously addressing a body of government and certain modes of thought that are dominant in administrating any given population. See also Appendix 1.

common good were to be seen as a legitimation strategy of the elite, a well-founded myth that masks their own efforts of reconstituting themselves as an elite. The Singapore case bears a striking semblance. However, the selection and grooming practices of Singapore's academic-to-state elite also differ in important regards from Bourdieu's seminal account. One obvious difference lies in the observation that the Singaporean scholars receive an 'elite' higher education in another country than their country of origin. This could partly be explained by the long history of institutional links between Singapore and Great Britain, established during the colonial era, a time that founded institutions such as Raffles. Yet, coupled with other research findings that have mapped out the increasing importance of transnational educational strategies of elites in many other developed economies (cf. Broady, Börjesson and Palme 1998; Börjesson 2005; Munk 2009; Weenink 2014) another possible interpretation is that the elites are gradually becoming more dependent on symbolic investments in transnational or globalized space. In other words, whilst built on former colonial relations, this pattern of institutional matching can be said to be a strategic play devised by key Singaporean institutions, to their advantage.

Viewed as a transnational investment in education, this relatively high outflow of Singaporeans studying in Oxbridge is nevertheless still a national characteristic as the Singaporean state plays a part in sponsoring this elite mobility (both financially and institutionally) and does so in exchange for highly specialized professional expertise designed to uphold key functions within the state. We have argued that

our investigation of the disciplinary composition of PSC scholarship recipients facilitates the mapping of the Singaporean state's rationality as this is one means of cultivating certain types of knowledge and problem-solving capabilities akin to the general tropes of modern day governmentality.²⁶

Also interesting in relation to Bourdieu's (1996) seminal account is to highlight the internal cleavages and demarcations within the elite classes. Throughout our interviews it became evident that – despite the sharpest and most violent line of educational stratification drawn between elite and non-elite schools – there are also substantial differences within the dominating institutions, Raffles and Hwa Chong. At times, such elite demarcation was made explicit, such as availability of preparatory resources for university applications to only students who were doing well academically and obtaining certain pre-requisite test scores, but more commonly, students' aspirations were managed by more subtle means such as informal encouragement/discouragement and expectations raised by teachers, counsellors or alumni. Whilst this paper has endeavoured to discuss a segment of elite trajectories in Singapore and the way institutions partake in the reproduction of relatively uncontested power and privilege, we also argue, here, that no elite is completely monolithic. If the subtle internal differentiation observed within elite schools in Singapore can be generalised to other settings, it is important to note that

²⁶ To be sure, there are numerous questions still to be explored in the case of Singapore. One being the degree of selection power of the scholarship system itself: Do scholars stay in the state administrative service after serving their bonds? Do they take on leadership titles within other policymaking organs and what are their more exact positions within the administrative, political and legislative bodies of the state? Also, how do the experiences of students studying in the UK differ from say those who studied in elite colleges in the US?

even within resource-wealthy and culturally privileged groups, there are important dynamics to symbolic differentiation. Thus, and on a methodological note, in order to trace both the objective dominance of any given elite and their sometimes fine-tuned internal cleavages, a combination of institutional cartographies and in-depth ethnographies seem to offer one fruitful way forward.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of BJSE as well as Vincent Chua, Terence Chong, Mikael Börjesson, Takehiko Kariya, Andrew Brown and Robert Aman for comments and advice on earlier drafts.

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Appendix 1. Educational background of Singapore Cabinet Ministers (as of August 2013)

	Name	Designation	Junior College/ Pre-University	University	Government Scholar	President Scholar	Subject
1	Mr Chan Chun Sing	Minister	Raffles	Cambridge	✓	✓	Economics
2	Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien	Minister	Hwa Chong	Nat'l Uni of S'pore			Accountancy
3	Mr Gan Kim Yong	Minister	National	Cambridge	✓		Engineering
4	Mr Heng Swee Keat	Minister	Raffles	Cambridge			Economics
5	Mr S Iswaran	Minister	National	Uni of Adelaide	Colombo Plan		Economics
6	Mr Khaw Boon Wan	Minister	Studied in Malaysia	Uni of Newcastle	Colombo Plan		Engineering & Commerce
7	Mr Lee Hsien Loong	Prime Minister	National	Cambridge	✓	✓	Mathematics
8	Mr Lim Hng Kiang	Minister	Raffles	Cambridge	✓	✓	Engineering
9	Mr Lim Swee Say	Minister	National	Loughborough Uni	✓		Engineering
10	Mr Lui Tuck Yew	Minister	Anglo-Chinese	Cambridge	✓		Chemistry
11	Dr Ng Eng Hen	Minister	National	Nat'l Uni of S'pore			Medicine
12	Mr K Shanmugam	Minister	Raffles	Nat'l Uni of S'pore			Law

13	Mr Tan Chuan-Jin	Minister	Raffles	LSE	✓		Economics
14	Mr Teo Chee Hean	Deputy Prime Minister	St. Joseph's Institution	Uni of Manchester	✓	✓	Engineering & Management Science
15	Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam	Deputy Prime Minister	Anglo-Chinese	LSE (and later Cambridge)			Economics
16	Dr Vivian Balakrishnan	Minister	National	Nat'l Uni of S'pore	✓	✓	Medicine
17	Mr Lawrence Wong	Minister	Victoria	Wisconsin-Madison			Economics
18	Dr Yaacob Ibrahim	Minister	Tanjong Katong Technical School	Nat'l Uni of S'pore			Engineering

Sources: CVs from Singapore Cabinet website (<http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/content/cabinet/appointments.html>) & Who's Who in Singapore 2006 by Low Kar Tiang. Singapore: Who's Who Publishing.

Appendix 2. Full list of disciplines studied by PSC scholars from 2002-2011

DISCIPLINES & SUBJECTS	TOTAL
Humanities	36
History	20
Literature	13
Other subjects within Humanities	3
Social Sciences	235
Economics	127
Interdisciplinary degrees (PPE, EPE, IR)	66
Other subjects within Social Sciences	42
Natural Sciences	69
Chemistry	23
Life sciences	21
Other subjects within Natural Sciences	25
Formal Sciences	38
Mathematics	31
Computer sciences	5
Other subjects within Formal Sciences	2
Professions and Applied Sciences	197
Engineering	92
Law	60
Other subjects within Professions and Applied Sciences	45
Others and Not stated	5
Liberal Arts degree	2
TOTAL	580

Source: Author's own compilation from PSC data