

From *Normal*, to *Here*

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Abstract: In this personal narrative, David Hicks recounts his journey as a first-generation student into the unknown world of academia. Coming from a working-class background, he found his feet and thrived at a non-elite university, before being given the opportunity to study for a PhD at one of England's most prestigious universities. There, in the realm of the elite, he feels like an imposter. The experience has left him yearning for normal, but there's no going back.

I can't really describe my *normal*. There are infinite things that shape what *normal* is to me, as I'm sure is the same for everyone. But, as a first-generation university student, pursuing a career in academia certainly wasn't part of it.

Both of my parents come from working-class backgrounds. They grew up in a time when, for working-class children, the thought of university was not even a consideration, nor was it a possibility. They both left education as early as possible and have spent their entire adult lives in working-class jobs. We weren't *poor* when I was growing up, but we weren't *rich* either. To me, we were just a *normal* working-class family. For example, we always had food on the table—but our steaks were from the frozen aisle of the supermarket, and beans-on-toast was a *normal* meal. Sadly, for a lot of working-class people today, having food on the table every evening isn't *normal*. So, I was certainly dealt a good hand—one that I could not in good faith possibly ever complain about. I was happy with my *normal*.

I was lucky to be able to attend university. Firstly, because I just so happen to have been born in a country, and at a time, where a combination of student loans and a few days of part-time work meant that I could afford the privilege of a university education. And secondly, because I spent more time having fun in school than I did trying to gain an education. I wasn't a bad kid, and I was well-liked by my teachers (well, most of them), but my effort levels were certainly not matched with the luck I was born into.

My grades at school were, unsurprisingly, not all that great, so my first university was by no means an elite institution. But that, for me, turned out to be a good thing. It felt like home almost immediately. I found a job working 2-3 days a week during term time and took on extra hours between semesters. It didn't really bother me having to work, I had been working part-time since I was 14 so it was already part of my *normal*. And I was surrounded by a diverse population of students, many of whom were in a similar situation. Take Jordan, for example, now a very good friend of mine who I met in the first few weeks of starting university. He, like me, comes from a working-class background and had to work full-time on building sites between semesters in order to afford to live a university lifestyle. Me and Jordan, we're from different parts of the country, but we shared that common struggle that so many first-generation students have, having to juggle our work lives and social lives on top of what is meant to be a "full-time" degree.

Sure, there were those students who came from backgrounds whereby they didn't have to work on top of their studies, and sure, I was envious of that. But the key point is that I never felt alone in my position. I never felt sorry for myself either. I was just one of many and I never forgot how lucky I was, in the grand scheme of things.

I did encounter some aspects of the hidden curriculum that hindered my education. I remember one lecturer growing tired of answering questions that, in her opinion, didn't warrant

her time—telling a group of us that we were the “luckiest generation ever” because we had the internet, and should use it instead of asking her wasteful questions. I suppose she had a point, in some ways. But there are aspects of the hidden curriculum that you can’t really search for online. I mean, how can you search for something that you don’t know exists? It didn’t matter too much, in the long run. I worked hard and found my way through the university maze. I started getting good grades and slowly (and to my own surprise) began developing a passion for academic inquiry.

In my final year, some well-meaning lecturers encouraged me to take my university education beyond an undergraduate degree and to pursue a career in academia. The university even gave me a scholarship so that, when I returned for my master’s degree, I could afford to work less often. I owe them a great deal of gratitude for that; I would have had real money problems without that scholarship.

My first-generation status may have hindered me in some ways, but I did not see it in that way. It filled me with pride that I had managed to overcome the difficulties that come with being a first-generation student. This new academic world had been good *to* me and good *for* me. It still felt *normal*. I still felt *normal*.

I then moved on from my non-elite university, the place that had become my home away from home. I was offered a place on a PhD course at one of England’s most historic and prestigious universities. I was sad to leave the place that I had come to love and to which I owed so many thanks, but coming *here* was an opportunity I could not say no to. With its reputation and status, getting a PhD from *here* will greatly enhance my future career prospects in academia. However, what I did not foresee was quite how elitist this historic university remains. I did not expect it to be quite so different from my *normal*. I didn’t expect to struggle to find people like me. But *here* is strange.

Here, students walk the streets in long gowns on their way to formal dinners. They talk with accents that would not seem out-of-place in any prestigious British private school. And they live in a castle (this is not a metaphor, some of them actually live in a castle!). Of course, not all of the students here are as I’ve described. But a lot of them are, and people like me seem to be the minority.

Here is the elite. And in my position as a PhD student, I’ve got one foot firmly placed in it. But I don’t feel that I belong or that I ever will. I feel like an imposter, really.

I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into before I came here. I just wanted to do my research and get my qualification. But there’s a lot more to it than that. There’s a hidden curriculum that so many of my new peers seem to float through so effortlessly. I mean, for example, what even *is* ‘networking’? From what I can see, it’s a middle-class term for meeting someone new and having a conversation, but with a strange hidden agenda—where you’re only being polite and talking to the other person as it may well benefit your career, not because you actually *want* to talk to them. That’s not for me, I’ve struggled with that.

When people seem surprised that I was offered a place *here*, or when they question the relevance of my class-based research, or patronisingly tell me how well I’ve done to make it *here*, I have to respond politely, otherwise, I’d only confirm to them what they already think of me, that I don’t belong *here*.

I suppose you could say that my first university experience, at my non-elite university, was me taking the step into the place I am now. And being at the place I am now, being *here*, is me planting my foot, completing that step, away from my *normal*. It happened so quickly and came as such a surprise. I really could not have imagined how *different* I would feel *here*.

The saddest thing is, there's no going back. It's peculiar, really, because that is the saddest thing, but I wouldn't, even if I could. The elite dominate this academic world and playing by their rules is the only way I can gain a PhD. But I would love to go back to *normal*.

I'm proud that I made it this far, but I don't like it *here*. I am not *normal, here*.