


Barriers to entry: social exclusion is rife in elite professions in the UK

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Research by [Louise Ashley](#), [Hilary Sommerlad](#) and [Jo Duberley](#) highlights the structural nature of social exclusion and its connections to unequal access to educational opportunities.

In 2009 long-standing concerns about professional exclusivity in the UK were accentuated by publication of the [Milburn Review](#). This report noted, for example, that lawyers born in 1970 grew up in households that are better off than five out of six of all UK households, while the families of accountants born in 1970 had an income 40 per cent above the national average. Social exclusion is especially marked in the most prestigious, global professional service firms (PSFs).



The exclusivity of these elite professions is particularly important not only because of the key socio-economic roles they play, but also because their claims to be meritocratic, socially detached occupations grounds their authority and lends a spurious legitimacy to wider social inequalities.



In practice, their embeddedness in macro-level social stratification is revealed by the resilience of their exclusive character despite the expansion and apparent democratization of higher education and the move, following deregulation of financial markets in the mid-1980s, from an era where jobs were often secured on the basis of informal social networks, to one of intense competition between multinational organizations. In theory, these changes, which included the development of formal recruitment and selection techniques, should have led to a diversification of these professions.



The wide range of empirical evidence showing that this has not occurred prompted the [Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission](#) (SMCPC) to commission research into the barriers to entry to the elite professions. Our study had two main objectives: first, to unlock the 'black box' of recruitment decisions within elite law and accountancy firms; second, to understand how these firms identify and define 'talent'.

We focused on talent because its meaning is unclear and our own previous research suggests that this ambiguity facilitates a reliance on proxy measures of potential associated with middle-class status. We wanted to understand whether more precise definitions of talent might mitigate this pattern. In order to achieve these objectives, we interviewed fifty-five people at ten leading law and accountancy firms headquartered in the City, and ten general counsel (leading the in-house legal function) at FTSE100 companies. Interviewees either had responsibility for graduate recruitment and HR, and/or had come from non-traditional backgrounds themselves.

We also collected quantitative data in order to build up a profile of the current demographic composition of elite firms. This showed that, for example, close to 40 per cent of graduate trainees at elite law firms were educated at fee-paying schools (compared to seven per cent of the population), a figure which is only marginally lower than the profile for current partners. Within the accountancy sector, at certain firms fewer than 30 per cent of new trainees had been educated at a non-selective (comprehensive) state school. This compares to almost 90 per cent of the population.

These figures can be partially explained because elite firms focus their attraction strategies on a small number of Russell Group universities. Potential applicants at these institutions are not only actively encouraged to apply, they are also provided with coaching and support by firms, which helps them navigate the selection process. As a result, up to 50 per cent of applicants to a firm might be from 15 or fewer universities, and these applicants receive up to 70 per cent of all job offers.

This has a direct impact on the socio-economic profile of professionals at leading firms because students at Russell Group institutions are typically from relatively affluent backgrounds, and it appears likely that, as other research has shown, those from lower socio-economic groups tend to self-select out of the application process on the grounds that they will not 'fit-in.'

Our research therefore echoes the findings of other studies, and highlights the structural nature of social exclusion and its connections to unequal access to educational opportunities. It further suggests that while exclusion is not necessarily intentional, given the specific focus of attraction strategies, neither can it be described as entirely accidental.

The data showed that elite firms have developed a conceptualisation of talent which places an especially high value on individuals who display "polish," characterised by our respondents as a high level of confidence, strong communication skills, and clear 'cultural competence'. Interviewees acknowledged that these attributes are significantly more available to people who have been socialised in a middle-class environment. As one put it:

“. . . the people who will be the most confident are generally those who are from what people would see as a more stereotypical background for a City lawyer . . . They've been used to engaging with people in that way through their education system. They've probably been more likely to have gone to an Oxbridge university, and again, all those things build up a way of behaving that does project confidence.”

These findings are of course not new. Indeed, neo-Weberian theory has long underlined the role of exclusivity as a conscious 'professional project' in order to attain or maintain an occupation's high status and rewards. Appointing graduates with these markers of high status cultural capital is also considered within firms to act as proxies for quality, sending appropriate signals to clients and competitors, and compensating for the ambiguity of knowledge within professional work.

However, current debates around social mobility and access to the professions take place against a very specific economic, social, cultural and political backdrop. We suggest that this context is both cause and effect of multiple contradictions and inconsistencies in both debates around social background and access to the professions, and the specific actions taken by firms in response.

For example, elite firms are increasingly engaged in initiatives to improve social inclusion, which are motivated in part by fears of reputational damage and declining legitimacy, in part by a commitment to progressive change, and in part by a business case rationale in favour of attracting diverse talent. Yet the presentation and positioning of these initiatives leads to discursive manoeuvring, as firms balance their belief in the objectivity of current recruitment and selection practices within a 'perfect market' for graduate talent, whilst being forced to acknowledge that people from certain groups are systematically disadvantaged by these very same practices.

Social inclusion initiatives operate within these parameters and are arguably compromised as a result. Most aim to attract bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and equip them with the social and cultural capital they need to compete on a level playing field with more privileged peers. Until recently these initiatives could largely be characterised as add-ons to existing practice, based in a deficit model of diversity, such that the bright, but non-traditional aspirant professional is required to assimilate to existing norms, limiting the success of these initiatives. More recently, there has been a focus on fair selection techniques, such as CV blind interviews and the use of strengths based frameworks in assessment; it is, however, too early to gauge the full impact of these practices.

Our research also highlighted the dominance of the 'death of class' discourse (despite the evidence of the dramatic increases in inequality and slowing of social mobility over the last two decades). Interviewees described a general reluctance to discuss class. There was also a tendency for inherited privilege to be portrayed as unfortunate, but

also as natural and inevitable, leading many senior professionals who come from non-traditional backgrounds to seek to hide this fact. As one general counsel at a FTSE100 company told us: "...it's embarrassing, right, to say that you didn't come from a middle class background?"

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps salutary to consider the nature of the extensive press coverage our report received, and its focus on the so-called 'poshness test' to gain access to the elite professions. Whilst we welcomed the media attention devoted to this important issue, we do have some concerns that non-traditional aspirants to the professions may be still less likely to apply to elite firms if they absorb this particular message.

Further, although our report answers many questions, others remain unanswered, including how to balance pragmatism and idealism in this debate, and how to generate a conversation around social class and access to the professions, which is sensitive to the many nuances and subtleties involved.

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