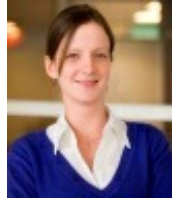


Graduates who attended a private school have additional advantage in the labour market

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Research by **Lindsey Macmillan** and **Anna Vignoles** indicates that even when comparing similarly high achieving graduates, those who are privately educated are still more likely to secure a high status occupation than state educated graduates. Investigating what role networks play in this story, they found that although networks cannot account for the private school effect, the use of networks provides an additional advantage over and above family background and this varies by the type of top occupation that the graduate enters.



Who gets society's top jobs and whether there is genuinely "fair" access to them is a highly controversial issue, with former prime minister, Sir John Major commenting in November 2013:

In every single sphere of British influence, the upper echelons of power in 2013 are held overwhelmingly by the privately educated or the affluent middle class.



In [a recent study](#), we investigated who manages to secure these top occupations and in particular whether graduates from more affluent families are more likely to work in these top jobs, regardless of their education. Access to these jobs matters because these are the very occupations that provide their incumbents with the higher earnings, longer term income stability and, for some at least, the influence and power that Sir Major refers to. In an equal society, those who hold that influence and power should be representative of society as a whole. Not just a select few.

In our analysis, we use the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) longitudinal surveys carried out by the UK Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA). These data sets track graduates leaving higher education in 2006/07 and follow them up until three and a half years after graduation in 2010, so we are investigating graduates relatively early in their careers. We observe their occupation and can determine whether or not it is a top job. There are of course many ways that we might define what constitutes a high status top job. We count jobs in the top NS-SEC category ([National Statistics Socio-economic Classification](#)) as high status, though we do also consider differences within this group. Specifically we explore differences between higher managerial jobs, those entering into business, legal or life-science professions and those working in other professions including scientists, educational occupations and built environment jobs (architecture, surveyors).

We can also determine the family background of the graduate. We measure this in a number of different ways, including whether they were state or privately educated in secondary school, their parents' social class (NS-SEC) and whether they lived in a neighbourhood that has a low or high proportion of people who have gone to university (POLAR3).

A strength of these data is that they provide us with a wealth of information on the higher education of the graduates, including their degree classification, the subject they chose to study at university, their UCAS tariff point score (A-level grades) and the university they studied at. It is often argued by firms when challenged about their recruitment practices that they only pick the most qualified people for the job. Controlling for this wealth of information about the graduates' attainment helps us to distinguish whether entry into these top occupations is primarily based on graduates' academic achievements and their choice of university, or whether their social background has an influence over and above their academic achievement. We can also allow for other factors that might affect their

access to these jobs such as gender, ethnicity, the region that they studied in and whether or not they went on to acquire a postgraduate qualification.

Our research indicates that privately educated graduates are one third more likely to secure a high status occupation than state educated graduates. Controlling for if they come from similarly affluent families and neighbourhoods, privately educated graduates are 9.5 percentage points more likely to work in a high status occupation than state school graduates. (30% of all graduates in our sample work in a high status occupation.)

A modest part of this difference is driven by educational attainment (A-level performance, degree subject and degree classification). A larger part of the story is what university the graduate attended. This may reflect the recruitment strategies of employers who focus on a limited range of universities and the fact that privately educated children are more likely to access elite universities. Staying on to do a higher degree is also a (smaller) part of the picture. However, even when accounting for all of these other observed potential differences between graduates, a privately educated graduate is still 2.5 percentage points more likely to secure a high status occupation than a state school graduate from a similar family and neighbourhood, with the same educational qualifications, who went to the same university and who studied the same subject.

The situation does vary across different jobs within this top NS-SEC group. For those entering into higher managerial occupations for example, the private-state school gap is relatively small. After accounting for differences in their A level grades, their degree subject, the university they attended and whether they have post-graduate qualifications, a privately educated graduate is 1 percentage point more likely to work in a higher managerial occupation than a state school graduate. To put this in context, 6.1% of all graduates in our sample work in these higher managerial occupations.

Privately educated graduates are also far more likely than state graduates to work in top professional jobs in business, legal and life-sciences. 10.5% of all graduates work in these particular top professional jobs and privately educated graduates are 6 percentage points more likely than state school graduates to do so. The main explanation for this however, is that privately educated graduates have higher A level grades and attend more selective universities. Over and above this though, there does remain a small statistically significant advantage to attending a private school in terms of the likelihood of working in one of these top professions.

One potential mechanism which is often posited as a route to accessing top jobs is the use of personal and family networks. We investigated what role networks play in this story. We found that although networks cannot account for the private school effect, the use of networks provides an additional advantage over and above family background and this varies by the type of top occupation that the graduate enters. Comparing two similar graduates, a graduate who used a personal network to find a job had a 0.5 percentage point advantage in accessing a higher managerial job (baseline 6.1%) compared to a graduate who used an alternative means of finding a job.

So in summary, our research indicates that the main driver of whether or not a graduate secures a top job is their educational achievement, in particular their university and to a lesser extent their A level grades and degree subject. However, our work does also suggest that graduates who attended a private school have some additional advantage in the labour market. This latter finding is striking since we are comparing the private school graduate to a more a-typical state school graduate, in that they would have already selected into a particular group of A-levels, a particular degree subject and a particular institution to make them comparable with the privately educated student. So why does the private school advantage persist? Networks do not account for this difference in our data and unfortunately our research cannot yet provide definitive answers. Possible explanations may include differences in the skills and attributes of private school graduates, for example conversational skills at interview or inter-personal skills, and perhaps differences in financial support, allowing the privately educated graduate a longer period of job search and hence increasing their chances of finding a higher status job.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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