

Academic finds top firms are discriminating against bright working class applicants

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Dr Louise Ashley from the School of Management has found that elite firms are systematically excluding bright working class applicants from their workforce.

Dr Ashley and her team carried out extensive interviews with staff from 13 elite law, accountancy and financial services firms, who together are responsible for 45,000 of the best jobs in the country. Her findings were published in a report by The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, this week.

They found that as much as 70 percent of job offers in 2014 were to graduates who had been educated at a selective state or fee-paying

school, compared to four percent and seven percent of the population as a whole.

Firms also admitted to looking for talent in a small number of highly selective universities which have very high proportions of middle-class and privately-educated students.

The study also found that the criteria used to identify 'talented' applicants is skewed towards wealthy applicants because it includes non-meritocratic factors like experiences while travelling or accent. One employer commented, "I'm very interested in people who've gone travelling," another talked of the importance of "holidays that you've been on, places you've visited," another revealed that, "accents make a difference, [the] things people talk about."

Firms admitted that their recruitment processes discriminated but said recruiting the brightest in the country, regardless of class would be 'too costly.' One employer remarked, "how much mud do I have to sift through in that population to find that diamond?" The problem has got so bad that many of the firms' most senior leaders would not have gained entry to the firm according to their current definitions of talent.

Disadvantaged graduates also face barriers to promotion even if recruited. Patterns of low [social mobility](#), 'can result from the tendency of more senior professionals to promote in their own image and thus 'misrecognise' merit.

Where firms have identified and prioritised this issue there has been a step change. Some firms have recognised that A-levels are not a good predictor of future job performance and have stopped screening on them. Because of this, over ten percent of the intake for one case study firm got through the first stage who otherwise would have been rejected – and around a third of new trainees came from universities the firm had

not previously engaged with.

Dr Louise Ashley, said: "Our research finds that recruitment and selection processes which advantage students from more privileged backgrounds remain firmly in place at most elite law and accountancy firms. As such, despite their focus on specific social mobility initiatives, the rate and pace of change is limited.

We make three key recommendations for [firms](#) wishing to access the widest range of talent to benefit their business and their clients in future; first, amend attraction strategies to encourage higher numbers of applications from students with a wider range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds; second, ensure that these diverse students have access to similar levels of support enjoyed by their more traditional peers, in order to navigate the selection process effectively; third, interrogate current definitions of talent, including how potential is identified and assessed, to ensure that disadvantaged students are not ruled out for reasons of background rather than aptitude and skill."

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

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