

Paid work experience and 'sandwich degrees' help boost social mobility – new research

April 2 2019, by Ian Crawford And Zhiqi Wang



Credit: Antoni Shkraba from Pexels

The upper echelons of British society are filled with graduates [from elite universities](#). These universities are, in turn, disproportionately full of students from wealthier backgrounds, many of whom went to private

school. For these graduates, their top education and superior knowledge of the "rules of the game" regarding how institutions work gains them entry-level graduate jobs in elite professional firms.

It may seem that Britain has progressed little in the 130 years since Lord Fermor [reflected](#) in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "if a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him". Indeed, if you're from a working class background the odds are stacked against you if you want to make it into an elite profession. Going to university on its own does not guarantee a top professional job at the end of it.

This is a complex problem and there is considerable debate over how to improve [social mobility](#). Our [new research paper](#) shows the importance of work experience. Specifically, year-long placements in industry as part of a degree programme can effectively help working class students secure entry to top professional firms. This is significant considering the fact that social mobility into high-quality, high-status and high-reward professions like accountancy and financial services [has slowed down in recent decades](#).

[Research shows](#) that upper-middle-class students are more likely to take internships at university due to family social connections and greater financial resources. By looking at year-long paid internships, the so-called "sandwich placements" in some [student](#) degree programmes, we wanted to see how level the playing field really was for working class students.

We found that working class students were actually judged purely on their academic merits. In a victory for meritocracy, the sandwich placements overwhelmingly went to the brightest students from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds. There was also evidence that these kinds of placements, which are also well-paid, can facilitate the

social mobility of academically driven students who aspire to work for these kinds of companies.



Credit: Antoni Shkraba from Pexels

Foot in the door

This is significant because these were sandwich placements in accountancy, a top profession which has suffered the greatest decline in social mobility [over the past 30 years](#). Social exclusion in elite accountancy and investment banking firms [is evident](#) in the recruitment process for professionals at graduate entry level.

A 2017 [study](#) by Angus Duff, a professor at the University of the West of Scotland, revealed that unpaid work experience in accounting firms is used to maintain the status quo. Internships are often given to children of senior partners and important clients. As Duff notes, this is a recruitment process that is clearly "removed from notions of inclusivity and social equality". This gives young people from privileged backgrounds an important foot in the door, which can often lead to jobs in the future.

The students in our study all attended the same, well-regarded university. Offering lessons for social mobility, this shows the importance of working class students applying to good universities if they wish to improve their chances to work for, and succeed in, elite professions. This is, of course, an initial important barrier to overcome.

Once at university, it's then important for working class students to get top grades, as elite professions offered their yearlong paid placements to the best performers. This may involve a degree of self-awareness, identifying what they are best at and strategically choosing modules and courses to improve their averages or grades.

Finally, working class students must actively participate in the placement application process and improve their interview skills to succeed. It takes a long time to write professional CVs, fill in the application forms and conduct mock interviews with recruiters from elite professional firms.

Universities usually have dedicated staff to help students through the whole process but working class students must actively seek out and engage with this help as it can pay high dividends. The flip side to this is that working class students are often more shy and less likely to seek help from advisers and the university in general, compared with their upper-middle-class counterparts.

Nonetheless, our study shows that while the barriers to social mobility in

elite professions have become greater in recent years, they are not insurmountable. The year-long paid [placement](#) is one way that working class [young people](#) can breach the barricades against social mobility.

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