

<b>Institution:</b> Royal Holloway, University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 17 Business and Management Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Social Class and Exclusion from Elite Professions in the UK: Identifying Barriers and Finding Solutions		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Louise Ashley	Senior Lecturer	2014-date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>During the last 30 years, elite occupations have become increasingly exclusive according to social class or socio-economic background. Studies show that an established elite has a tight hold on many of the most remunerative and prestigious jobs in the UK, contributing to wider societal inequalities and low rates of relative social mobility. Dr Ashley's body of research explores barriers to entry and subsequent career progression in occupations such as law, accountancy, and finance, and provides recommendations for change. Her research has resulted in:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Changes in recruitment and human resource management practices implemented by large elite firms in sectors including law and accountancy, which have opened access on the basis of socio-economic background.</li> <li>2) Developing good practice that improves how universities and charities support individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds into elite jobs.</li> <li>3) Changing the conversation around social exclusion and inequality within policy circles and via substantial media engagement, contributing to reputational pressures on organisations which encourage them to act.</li> </ol>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Since the 1980s access to elite professions has become more socially exclusive. According to UK government research, younger professionals today typically grew up in a family with an income 27% above that of the average family, compared with 17% for today's older professionals. A lack of social diversity within elite professions and competitive occupations has a negative impact on our economy as it reduces the available talent pool. This contributes to skills gaps and is likely to reduce productivity and performance. Exclusion from the elite professions is cause and effect of wider social inequalities across the UK and is related to low rates of relative social mobility, an important policy agenda for successive administrations in the UK in recent years.</p> <p>Ashley's research addresses exclusions and inequalities in elite professions and occupations with competitive entry. She was commissioned by the UK government's Social Mobility Commission (SMC) to lead two studies based on her research expertise and experience in this area in 2015 and 2016 (R1 and R2). Academic research had pointed to high levels of social exclusion within the professions, but policy literature had not explored how this might be addressed. Ashley's studies identified what practitioners can do to ensure that access to and progression within elite professions becomes more equitable. These were qualitative studies based on over 200 semi-structured with representatives throughout the professions. They showed that, despite being presented by firms as objective, recruitment and selection processes</p>		

systematically disadvantage candidates from less privileged backgrounds. This research was co-produced alongside and reciprocally informed a journal article (R3) with a second forthcoming in 2021.

### **Key Findings**

Key findings include that elite professional service firms' activities in relation to SEB had focused on outreach and work experience rather than recruitment and selection. The emphasis amongst elite firms was therefore on changing the characteristics of applicants in order that they 'fit' with dominant cultures. Dr Ashley showed that this represented a 'deficit' model of diversity whereby the aspirant professional was considered in terms of 'lack.' She argued that meaningful change would depend on attention to the 'demand-side.' In other words, amending recruitment and selection systems and structures, including to change the criteria elite firms use to identify talent during this process, as well as changing organisational cultures to recognise aptitude and potential in applicants from all backgrounds, rather than rewarding forms of 'polish' which map on to social class.

### **Key Recommendations**

Ashley's research recommendations for firms included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Amend attraction strategies to encourage higher numbers of applications from socially diverse students and widen the universities from which they select;
- Ensure that students from all backgrounds have access to the type of support which enables them to navigate the selection process effectively;
- Interrogate current definitions of talent, to ensure that disadvantaged students are not ruled out for reasons of background rather than aptitude and skill;
- Collect quantitative data to act as a benchmark against which to assess future progress and evaluate the impact of associated interventions
- Use contextual data in screening, drop screening on credentials gained at school, and trial CV-blind procedures in selection processes

The insights, findings and resultant recommendations (R1 to R3) formed the basis of further extensive consultancy and thought-leadership. In addition to leading her own research projects, Dr Ashley became Research Fellow at the Bridge Group in 2017, a leading non-profit consultancy promoting social equality in organisations in the UK. In both capacities, she has either led and/or contributed to diversity audits and evaluations include at Linklaters, JP Morgan, KPMG, the BBC, Access Accountancy, the Social Mobility Foundation, The Diversity Project Charity, and Health Education England. These studies have led to changes to policy and practice within firms and across whole occupations, with highlights detailed below.

### **3. References to the research**

- R1. **Ashley L**, Duberley J, Kenny, E, Birkett, H (2016) "Socio-Economic Diversity in Life Sciences and Investment Banking" Report commissioned by the 'Social Mobility Commission', 138 pages.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/549994/Socio-economic\\_diversity\\_in\\_life\\_sciences\\_and\\_investment\\_banking.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/549994/Socio-economic_diversity_in_life_sciences_and_investment_banking.pdf); QI: 17 Google Scholar citations as of 11 December 2020)
- R2. **Ashley L**, Duberley J, Sommerlad H, Scholarios D (2015) "A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission". Report commissioned by the 'Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission', 111 pages.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/434791/A\\_qualitative\\_evaluation\\_of\\_non-educational\\_barriers\\_to\\_the\\_elite\\_professions.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/434791/A_qualitative_evaluation_of_non-educational_barriers_to_the_elite_professions.pdf); QI: 101 Google Scholar citations as of 11 December 2020)

R3. **Ashley L** and Empson, L (2016) Understanding Social Exclusion from Elite Professional Service Firms: Field Level Dynamics and the Professional Project. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(2), 211-229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015621480> QI: ABS 4\*

#### 4. Details of the impact

Inequalities in access to elite professions reduce the talent available to these organisations thus damaging our economy. They also exacerbate inequalities in society at large, and contribute to low rates of social mobility in the UK. It is important to underline that despite these problems, opening access to elite firms is not always in their immediate interest. Their current practices are cost-effective and efficient, and using class as signal of suitability helps to secure status and prestige. More progressive practices require very considerable cultural and structural change. Furthermore, such changes are often slow to take effect and meet considerable resistance within elite professions. Ashley's research is important because it recognises these barriers to change and to access. She has raised awareness of the nature of the problem and provided practicable recommendations which have been widely adopted by elite firms. In sum, this impact falls into three key categories, as outlined below.

##### 1. **Contributing to changes in recruitment and human resource management practices implemented by law and accountancy firms**

Shortly after the release of Ashley's research in 2016 (R1), leading law and accountancy firms announced important changes to their graduate screening: EY (formerly known as Ernst and Young) removed UCAS and degree classification in August 2015, while PwC dropped the UCAS tariff as an entry criterion for the majority of its graduate schemes in July 2015) [see E1]. Rare Recruitment provides data solutions based on this research that allows firms to contextualise the academic performance of graduate scheme and other applicants. Subscribers to their service increased significantly as a direct result of report R1 in 2015. Across the 20 law firm clients which provide full data to Rare, the adverse impact of social class on appointment rates has as a result been almost eliminated. Rare's CEO said Dr Ashley's research: **"helped moved an entire industry to consciousness that they had to change . . . The impact is beyond doubt . . . [the] adverse impact based on class has been very nearly eliminated in recruitment. That is remarkable . . . we shouldn't underplay . . . the role Dr Ashley's research played in making it happen"** (E2).

As a research fellow for the Bridge Group, a non-profit consultancy promoting social equality, Dr Ashley contributes to research and audits at numerous major employers, leading to changing recruitment and promotion practices. In a testimonial provided to the Bridge Group in relation to a major report delivered to KPMG, within which Dr Ashley played a key role, the Director and Co-head of Inclusion, Diversity and Social Equality, explains that actions taken by KPMG have included a review of work allocation processes and recommendations have fed into its Fairer Futures campaign which has diversified the firm's recruitment at entry level (E3).

##### 2. **Developing good practice in organisations that support young people into elite jobs**

Between 2013 and 2015, Dr Ashley evaluated the Social Mobility Foundation's (SMF) 'Aspiring Professionals Programme,' leading them to introduce new forms of support which have helped improve outcomes for students on the SMF's programmes, improving access to elite professions (see testimonial E4). In 2020, she delivered a report to the SMF and Health Education England (HEE) on how medical students from diverse backgrounds experience discrimination and bias based on class and race, and are excluded from vital tacit information and knowledge, and networking opportunities, which facilitate careers. Her report provided over fifty recommendations to bodies including the HEE, Medical Skills Council, the British Medical Association and the SMF. The SMF has now extended its services to aspirant medics while they are at university, including so far peer-to-peer mentoring, training and coaching on career strategies, and offering networking events. The programme leader said Dr Ashley's report:

***'corrected our misconception that medicine is a meritocracy . . . it provided us with a blueprint for change' (E5).***

Between 2016 and 2019, Dr Ashley evaluated Imperial College London and JP Morgan's 'Schools Challenge', a programme supporting approximately 100 disadvantaged students each year, living in London, towards a career in STEM. This resulted in numerous recommendations to change the programme design and thus improve outcomes, which focus in the short term on students' soft skills. The project lead at Imperial College London said: *"Dr Ashley's evaluation and research has been instrumental in helping our decision making."* Following their participation in the programme: ***"Students report a range of positive outcomes including increased confidence and better knowledge about careers in STEM and associated entry routes"*** (E6). Following her report on socio-economic backgrounds in the investment and savings sector, the Diversity Project Charity, Fidelity Investments, introduced a social mobility strand to its diversity policy focused on widening access. The Diversity Project Charity funded the project and is focused on driving diversity in the investment and savings sector. They too have introduced a working group focused specifically on social mobility, the leader of which said: ***"The Diversity Project have set up a new workstream to focus on social mobility in the investment and savings sector . . . this research served as an important motivation to act and also provided a framework which has helped us to plan"*** (E7).

In January 2017, the Social Mobility Foundation (SMF) and Social Mobility Commission (SMC) launched the 'Social Mobility Index', to help UK organisations benchmark and improve their performance in social inclusion. ***Dr Ashley is a member of the advisory committee identifying 'what works' and should therefore be prioritised within the Index, against which entries should be judged.*** The Index educates organisations and has driven change by exerting a degree of peer pressure - over 100 employers in 18 sectors now take part, many of which report improved rates of access the basis of SEB. According to its founder: ***"the Index has played an important role in helping to drive forward good practice in recruitment and promotion processes . . . Dr Ashley's role on the advisory committee has helped to facilitate these changes"*** (E4).

### ***3. Changing the emphasis of the policy and public conversations around social exclusion and inequality***

Dr Ashley has been invited to deliver over 60 talks between 2015 and 2020 to audiences primarily in the City, numbering approximately 3,000. She has contributed to public policy documents and strategy including the Social Mobility Commission's 'Social Mobility Toolkit,' published in 2020 (E8), and has been appointed to the Working Group of the ***Corporation of London's Socio-Economic Diversity Taskforce***. Dr Ashley's research has received ***very wide domestic and international media coverage*** in both mainstream and trade press, in print and broadcast media, including Sky News, the Today programme on Radio Four and Newsnight on BBC Two. Dr Ashley played an important role in developing the ***BBC documentary 'How to Break into the Elite' and appeared in the programme when it aired in August 2019, watched by 1.13 million viewers.*** The producer said Dr Ashley's: ***"work . . . was vital for us in getting buy in from the broadcaster"*** (E9). This programme helped to alert a wide population to the nature of social exclusion and exert further pressures on organisations, encouraging them to act. The documentary was called: *"explosive" by the Daily Mail while The Evening Standard said ' . . . programmes like this feel like the start of a necessary shift."* (E9). A new series on the same subject has now been commissioned by the BBC to be aired in 2021, and Dr Ashley is providing input and advice to the producer as this develops.

As noted, change is slow to take effect and is often resisted by organisations. Raising awareness that the problem exists is undoubtedly a necessary and vital first step, including to exert reputational pressures. ***As a result of the wide coverage as outlined above, Dr Ashley's research has had an important impact on the policy and public conversations which have helped to drive this awareness and attitudinal change.*** Research by High Fliers, an organisation which researches the graduate labour market in the UK, found that ***reaching***

**social mobility targets was a top priority for 50% of the top graduate employers they surveyed in 2019, compared to just 17% in 2014.** Moving social mobility up the organisational agenda rests on many people's work but Dr Ashley's research has undoubtedly played an important role. The ex-CEO of the SMF has been a central figure in the social mobility agenda over many years including as Commissioner for the UK Government's Social Mobility Commission (SMC). Now a Conservative MP, he confirmed that there is no doubt that: *"advocacy based on [Dr Ashley's] research encouraged more organisations to act in order to widen access and to improve outcomes for people from less privileged backgrounds"* (E4)

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E1. Graduate screening example on Target Jobs <https://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/accountancy-and-financial-management/438970-the-big-4-s-entry-criteria-and-your-graduate-job-application>
- E2. Testimonial from Raphael Mokades, CEO of Rare Recruitment (November 2019).
- E3. Making Change Together. The Bridge Group Impact Report, <https://www.thebridgegroup.org.uk/news/impactreport2019> (May 2019) see also <https://home.kpmg/uk/en/home/campaigns/2018/08/fairer-futures.html> for information about the KPMG Fairer Futures campaign (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020)
- E4. Testimonial from David Johnston, ex-CEO of the Social Mobility Foundation (November 2019).
- E5. Testimonial from Deb Conner of the Social Mobility Foundation (December 2020).
- E6. Testimonial from Silje Andersen, Project leader of 'The Schools Challenge' at Imperial College London (November 2019).
- E7. Testimonial from Lindsay Hudson, Social Mobility Lead, Diversity Project (November 2020).
- E8. For example see the Social Mobility Commission's Employer Toolkit to which Dr Ashley contributed: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/863502/Employers\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863502/Employers_Toolkit.pdf). Longer list of documents to which Dr Ashley has contributed and/or in which research has been cited is available on audit request.
- E9. Testimonial from Clare Hix, Producer of BBC Documentary, 'How to Break into the Elite.' (November 2019)