



Diversity Matters

# Social and class issues

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**Updated:** Spring 2009

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## Finding Positive Employers

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Social and class issues are notoriously difficult to define. If you come from a working class background, are the first person from your family to attend university, or live in an area where hardly anyone goes to university, you may encounter particular difficulties progressing through higher education and into graduate employment.

In the UK, over half of professionals in many occupations attended independent (fee-paying) schools - despite the fact that only one-fifth of the population actually attends an independent school up to age 18. The professions dominated by those who have been through the independent school system include barristers, finance directors, top journalists, judges and civil servants, as reported by The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions ([www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions)).

If you are not clear what work you want to do, the material and tips on Windmills Interactive ([www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive](http://www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive)) may help you make your decisions. A discussion with the staff at your university careers service or the Prospects Planner ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pplanner](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pplanner)) job matching exercise may help as well.

Employers do not necessarily set out to recruit students from specific social groups and exclude others. However, some recruitment practices can have the effect of narrowing opportunities for some applicants.

According to The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions ([www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions)), for example, seven out of ten of the top graduate recruiters target only 20 UK universities. Their selection of universities will include some, if not all, of the Russell Group ([www.russellgroup.ac.uk](http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk)). This group is an association of 20 major universities in the UK, including the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and Queen's University Belfast.

However, do not assume that because an employer does not visit your university that they will not consider an application from you. Employers cannot visit every university or market themselves everywhere, so if you meet the entry requirements for a job, apply.

The panel also identifies that internships, or other work experiences, are becoming important for entry to many professions. These opportunities are not always advertised and may be secured using personal contacts or networking. They might also be unpaid. This disadvantages those who do not have appropriate contacts, within their family for example, and who will have to work hard to develop contacts. It also disadvantages those who are financially unable to work without pay.

Employers who look for academic 'high fliers', for example asking for a minimum 2:1 degree classification or high UCAS points/A-level grades, may be excluding applicants with non-traditional qualifications and those who have coped with serious financial or social pressures while studying. However, if you do not meet all of the academic requirements, but there are valid reasons, it can be worth contacting the employer directly to discuss this.

## Diversity

Some employers are more open to change and to increasing the diversity of their workforce than others. If an organisation adopts strategies to ensure that they recruit from as wide a range of applicants as possible, social or class background should not be an issue. A commitment to diversity is likely to be made clear in the website for the organisation.

The diversity of an existing workforce can also reflect how open an organisation is to employing people from a wide range of the population. In addition, an organisation's commitment to diversity may be reflected in who they send to represent them at employer events (like recruitment fairs or presentations) and at stages of selection (such as interviews and assessment centres).

Bear in mind that change does not happen overnight. The people working in some organisations and sectors may not currently represent all social and class backgrounds in UK society, but many organisations and professions are taking steps to resolve this. If an employer is encouraging applications from individuals with backgrounds that are under represented in their workforce, this may be an indication that they want to make positive changes.

## Identifying employers

Some specialist careers fairs, such as the GRADES Graduate Fairs ([www.grades.org.uk](http://www.grades.org.uk)), target diverse segments of the student population although they may not focus specifically on class issues. However, by attending, employers may be signalling that they are prepared to consider a wide range of applicants including those from various social and class backgrounds.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a growing feature in many organisations who wish to assess the impact of their activities on, for example, the environment, local communities and their employees. A clear commitment to CSR might hint that an employer's recruitment practices would encourage applications based on ability and not background. A good source of information on companies with a record of community involvement is Business in the Community (BITC [www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk)) and Scottish Business in the Community ([www.sbcscot.com](http://www.sbcscot.com)).

If business doesn't appeal, you could consider a social enterprise ([www.socialenterprise.org.uk](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk)). Also look at the not for profit sector including charities, the health service, non government organisations (NGOs) and local, regional and national government. Organisations that are not for profit often have clear and comprehensive recruitment practices that are intended to ensure equal opportunity for all, regardless of background or circumstances.

Small employers are everywhere and also may be a good target, especially if you are reluctant to or unable to move away from your local area or if larger employers are not represented there. Many small to medium sized employers (SMEs) may never have thought of taking on a graduate, but might be open to speculative applications from individuals who can make a positive contribution to their business. They might also be particularly interested in applicants from their local area.

## Sources of help

There are initiatives and programmes for graduates, offering support, advice, placements and training in job search skills. Examples include the Intro programme ([www.introprogramme.com/](http://www.introprogramme.com/)) in Northern Ireland and the Impact project ([www.careers.brad.ac.uk/impact](http://www.careers.brad.ac.uk/impact)) in Yorkshire which actively encourages the recruitment of groups who are under-represented in higher education.

Many university careers services offer support and advice for up to three years after graduation and can provide access to vacancy and employer information as well as information on local and national initiatives.

Further examples of diversity initiatives and activities can be found by checking out industry insights ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/industries](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/industries)).

## Self-employment

If you are self-employed, many barriers associated with the recruitment process are, of course, removed. However, you will need to know what you are doing and have a compelling business plan. Have a look at self-employment ([www.prospects.ac.uk/startup](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/startup)) for more information as well as sources of help and advice. The Prince's Trust ([www.princes-trust.org.uk](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk)) is one such resource which helps young people get started in business.

## Marketing Yourself and Disclosure

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### Match the entry requirements

Reading recruitment literature, job advertisements and looking at employers' websites will help you to identify their requirements. Then think about how you can demonstrate, with evidence, that you have the skills, qualifications, knowledge and attributes they need.

It is your decision whether you mention your social and class background in an application or at interview. There is rarely any need to do so, but there may be occasions when your background and life experience are an advantage and relate well to the requirements of the job - familiarity with a particular client group, for example.

If outside commitments have prevented you from getting involved in student life as much as you would have liked, think about the experiences that you have had. If you have had to overcome obstacles and juggle other priorities to get your degree, this can be presented as a positive.

### Demonstrate your skills

When you are making applications or being assessed by an employer, the quality of the evidence you provide will matter more than where it comes from. Many employers value experience gained in family businesses for example, whether this is in a shop, a restaurant, a factory or a firm of solicitors. Whatever your experience, you could well have developed many of the work skills that employers want.

Browse job advertisements for graduate training schemes and you will see certain skills and attributes are stipulated time and again. It is highly likely that you can demonstrate you have many of the qualities, such as persistence and determination, and skills, such as problem solving, teamwork and time management, which employers regularly request. The Council for Industry and Higher Education ([www.cihe-uk.com](http://www.cihe-uk.com)) produces reports such as Graduate Employability ([www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0802Grademployability.pdf](http://www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0802Grademployability.pdf)), which confirm the common requirements.

### Be Positive

When applying to employers, concentrate on the positives that you have to offer and don't point out the negatives. Focus on telling a potential employer about the experience you do have and relate it to their needs. When you look at employers' recruitment literature and websites, pay particular attention to the language that they use. When applying for jobs, use similar, formal language and terms.

If you are concerned about revealing your background when providing detail in applications or your CV, such as where you live, remember that some employers will remove personal data from applications passed to selectors. It is also common for detail from equal opportunities monitoring forms to be removed from applications before selection.

You might not have traditional qualifications such as A-levels, for example, but some employers may understand this and be aware of alternative qualifications. Sometimes employers are willing to take extenuating circumstances into account when reviewing applications from those whose qualifications do not fully meet entry requirements. However, the reasons for not achieving particular results at A-level or degree level need to be genuine and beyond your control. You may also have to make contact to discuss this with the employer before making an application.

It is not necessary to disclose age, gender or marital status in a CV. However, all application methods will require a full employment history. If you have had various jobs that were short term and perhaps not very relevant, these may be grouped together, e.g. 'February 2003 - August 2006: Various customer facing roles including ...'.

If you volunteer, share the details with potential employers. If you are asked about spare time interests, concentrate on items that you can use to highlight your positive personal qualities without selling your key interests short or giving the impression that your life outside lectures was a complete void.

## References

References can be extremely important. If you are asked for a personal reference, ask someone in a position of responsibility who can express him or herself well and will put forward your good points effectively.

## Your Rights

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Although social inequality is recognised by The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions ([www.cabinetoffice.co.uk/accessprofessions](http://www.cabinetoffice.co.uk/accessprofessions)), at present there is no legislation to prevent employers discriminating against applicants on the basis of social class. The Equality Bill does refer to the 'desirability of reducing socio-economic inequalities', although this is related to the work of public bodies.

### Bias

Despite companies' efforts to employ objective and fair criteria, personal and corporate preferences may still have an effect on selection processes. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD - [www.cipd.org.uk](http://www.cipd.org.uk)) points out the limitations of interviews in their Selection Interviewing Factsheet ([www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/recruitment/selectn/selnintvg.htm?IsSrchRes=1](http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/recruitment/selectn/selnintvg.htm?IsSrchRes=1)). These limitations include reference to the 'similar to me' bias that might influence an interviewer to prefer a candidate that they believe, for example, has a similar background, attitudes or personality to their own. If an interviewer is influenced in this way, this could place you at a disadvantage when trying to enter work that is dominated by people with a different social background to you.

If you do feel you have been discriminated against unfairly by an employer, you will only be able to make a legal complaint if the form of discrimination is illegal. Illegal forms of discrimination - including race, gender, age, and disability - are covered by legislation. Details can be found in other sections of this publication and on the Equality and Human Rights Commission website ([www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx)).

## Top Tips

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- Be confident and positive about what you have to offer. Employers need a diverse workforce to help them understand customers' needs and increase their capacity for innovation.
- Make full use of your university careers service and other services available at your university. You may be able to find help with study skills, finance, advice on careers and job seeking.
- A degree is not enough to get you a job. Employers look for skills and experience, so think about how you can add to yours. Consider internships, placements, voluntary work and roles in student societies or community groups.
- Do not assume that certain roles are closed to people with your background. Do your research. Find out what is required for entry and how you can remedy any gaps in your skills, experience or qualifications. For entry requirements and tips on entry for various occupations, see explore types of jobs ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations)).
- Establish and develop a network of contacts. They may be able to give you advice, help with work experience and even tip you off if a vacancy is coming up. Think about your existing contacts, e.g. family, friends, work colleagues, fellow students, teachers and lecturers. Do they know anything about the work that interests you or do they know someone who does?
- Ask if your university links students with previous graduates now in work. Past students may be happy to advise you about getting into their sector or role. These alumni networks are quite common and can really help if you do not have appropriate contacts of your own.
- Find out if the work that interests you has a professional body, they may be able to help with useful contacts and offer you advice.
- Interact with as many different kinds of people as possible so that you develop your experience of working in diverse teams.
- Find a mentor with whom you can discuss your ideas, inspirations, passions and ambitions. This might be a graduate with a similar background to your own and/or working in the field that interests you. Some universities run formal mentoring programmes. Your university careers service can confirm if one is available.
- Windmills ([www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive](http://www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive)) is an excellent source of career development material and is full of tips to help you choose and plan your career choices.

## Case study

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**Olivia graduated in 2004 from City University, London with a BSc in Psychology. She has been with her current employer, a not for profit organisation working with schools and academies, for 18 months. Her role as project officer includes managing two colleagues.**

University was not talked about in my family, although I was always encouraged to concentrate on my education. My parents, both working class people who worked in manufacturing, wanted me to better myself. I progressed well at secondary school, but the subject of university only came up when the sixth-form head at school handed me a UCAS form and said it was time to be filling it in. If you had asked me when I was 14 what I would be doing in my 20s, I expected to be married with children.

I thought I would give applying a try and see what would happen. I had to work hard to convince my dad about my choice of subject - psychology. He was keen on something that would lead to accountancy. Living arrangements also had to be considered. Moving away was not an option. Coming from a Greek family with traditional values, I was expected to stay close to home. Money was an issue too, as I didn't want to come out of a degree in debt. As a result, I was happy to stay at home while studying.

I had no idea where to start when looking for universities. The only ones I had ever heard of were Oxford, Cambridge and UCL. The careers adviser at school helped me find out where universities were and the grades they wanted. I was glad their help was available to me.

I didn't know how important it was to develop experience while studying. Luckily, I became involved with the careers service at university. My first job after graduating was in the student employment service, but I moved into the widening participation team within a few months. This job involved much more of what I wanted to do - working with young people. My role involved recruiting and training students to tutor in local schools in central and east London as well as linking students with mentors and helping to run events such as summer schools and visits from school and college students.

From this role, I moved into my current job with a not for profit organisation working with schools and academies.

Have I ever experienced discrimination based on my background? Not really. The issue for me has been my own awareness of what I could do. My advice to others is not to sell yourself short. Do your research before making a decision, and talk to people who can help you to demystify things and highlight possibilities. Look into various areas of work. They might be more achievable than you think. And see a careers adviser.

## Contacts and resources

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### Jobs and work

Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, [www.sscalliance.org](http://www.sscalliance.org)  
 Business in the Community (BITC), [www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk)  
 CIPD Selection Interviewing Factsheet  
[www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/recruitmen/selectn/selnintvg.htm?IsSrchRes=1](http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/recruitmen/selectn/selnintvg.htm?IsSrchRes=1)  
 GET, [www.get.hobsons.co.uk](http://www.get.hobsons.co.uk)  
 GRADES Graduate Fairs, [www.grades.org.uk](http://www.grades.org.uk)  
 Intro, [www.introprogramme.com](http://www.introprogramme.com)  
 Prince's Trust, [www.princes-trust.org.uk](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk)  
 Pure Potential, [www.purepotential.org](http://www.purepotential.org)  
 Target Chances, [www.targetchances.co.uk/home](http://www.targetchances.co.uk/home)  
 TARGETjobs Diversity - may be available in your university careers service  
 Young Enterprise, [www.young-enterprise.org.uk/pub](http://www.young-enterprise.org.uk/pub)

### Study

Aimhigher Programme,  
[www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG\\_073697](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG_073697)  
 Impact, [www.careers.brad.ac.uk/impact](http://www.careers.brad.ac.uk/impact)  
 The National Postgraduate Committee, [www.npc.org.uk](http://www.npc.org.uk)  
 Russell Group, [www.russellgroup.ac.uk](http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk)

### Reference

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, [www.cipd.org.uk](http://www.cipd.org.uk)  
 Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), [www.cihe-uk.com](http://www.cihe-uk.com)  
 The Equality Bill, [www.equalities.gov.uk/PDF/FrameworkforaFairerFuture.pdf](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/PDF/FrameworkforaFairerFuture.pdf)  
 Equality and Human Rights Commission, [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx)  
*Friends in High Places: Who Runs Britain?*  
 Jeremy Paxman, Penguin Books, 1991, ISBN 0140156003  
 Government Equalities Office, [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk)  
 Graduate Employability, [www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0802Grademployability.pdf](http://www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0802Grademployability.pdf)  
 Higher Education Statistics Agency, [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)  
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)  
 New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future, [www.hmg.gov.uk/newopportunities.aspx](http://www.hmg.gov.uk/newopportunities.aspx)  
 Scottish Business in the Community, [www.sbcscot.com](http://www.sbcscot.com)  
 Social Enterprise Coalition, [www.socialenterprise.org.uk](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk)  
 Sutton Trust, [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)  
 The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/accessprofessions)  
 Windmills, [www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive](http://www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive)