Bridge Group
research action equality

S_CIAL MOBILITY F_UNDATION®

Research report

Aspiring Professionals Programme: alumni outcomes

"I can't quite put into words how valuable participation in the APP, the work experience placement, and mentor have been for me. It definitely helped in the times I needed it most [...] I don't think I would be where I'm at now without those individuals who supported me."
Aspiring Professionals Programme alumni

"The two-week placement was a really good overview, I saw how achievable it was. I met people who had done it and learnt about what they did to get where they are now. The one-on-one conversations and personal level of engagement was extremely helpful at that stage. It really affected what I wanted to do."
Aspiring Professionals Programme alumni

"The kind of people who get ahead are the kinds of people that don't tend to have a lot going on in their personal lives. It means they are more amenable to things. It makes it easier for them to say yes to opportunities that come up."
Comparator sample, graduate from a lower socio-economic background

"It's harder to bring my whole self to the workplace – I won't go to a bar or pub as a Muslim, but I still have to network, so it's difficult building relationships."
Comparator sample, graduate from a lower socio-economic background

"At one of the assessment centres I had to make a presentation on why I wanted to join the graduate scheme. With their experience, my parents were able to help a lot – I was fortunate on that front – they could highlight what was good, what was less good, and which areas needed development."
Comparator sample, graduate from a higher socio-economic background

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Executive summary

i.   This research explores the early career and progression experiences of recent graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds[1] (lower SEBs) and how this compares with their more privileged peers. It focuses particularly on alumni of the Aspiring Professionals Programme (APP), run by the Social Mobility Foundation in partnership with employers, but also looks at recent graduates with no involvement in any APP. Alumni responding to the survey are employed by a wide range of organisations across the UK, while those participating in interviews are employed by a range of employers.

ii.   We approached the research questions via a mixed methods approach. This comprised interviews with APP alumni and comparator groups (the latter with a mix of lower and higher SEBs); a survey of APP alumni; and extraction of comparator data from national datasets.

iii.   In relation to employment and earnings, APP alumni perform significantly better than their peers nationally. This is a very positive finding, particularly since our review of literature and practice can find only limited evidence of the success of other outreach programmes with similar aims. Comparing survey data and national comparator data confirmed that the APP cohort were more likely than the national graduate population to be in full-time employment and earning higher salary amounts. 86% of APP graduates were in full-time employment 15 months after graduation, compared to 57% of the wider graduate population reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

iv.   At this point, APP graduates were on average not only earning more than the wider graduate population 15 months after graduation, but also earning more than the wider graduate population five years after graduation. Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data shows the median graduate salary five years

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[1] We use a range of criteria to define lower socio-economic background. This includes for example attending a state school, having received free school meals and having parents in non-professional backgrounds. We also include having lived in an area of low participation in higher education, as measured by the POLAR tool, in relation to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

after graduation was £27,000, whereas 51% of the APP cohort were earning over £30,000 just 15 months after graduation.

v.   Due to the eligibility criteria of the APP programme, alumni were more likely to have received free school meals and have attended a state-funded school. Thus, they were not representative of the wider graduate population. Nevertheless, the APP cohort were more likely to be in full-time employment and earn a higher salary than graduates who did not receive free school meals and were from higher progression areas (POLAR4). APP alumni who were ethnically diverse, Black and Asian also earned more than such graduates from the national cohort.

vi.   Interviews with graduates, including APP alumni, indicated that progressing to graduate employment is competitive. All interviewees spoke about how challenging it can be to find a good graduate job and successfully navigate the recruitment processes. But looking at interviewees' journeys to employment and comparing by socio-economic background highlighted a number of important factors in why unequal outcomes can persist.

vii.   It was clear that the APP provided participants with an important input: a critical early nudge to think about their future careers. The work experience, mentoring, and exposure to professional networks that they received prompted alumni to think about how to access careers in the professions early. It was notable that much of the comparator sample interviewed had accessed similar kinds of outreach programmes as part of their journey. This gave a sense that for those from lower SEBs, there were chance turning points, without which their career might not have developed as successfully as it did. Other turning points included, for example, being in the right catchment for a university bursary and having a helpful mentor.

viii.   The interviewees from lower SEBs were also able to talk about the advantages that they had gained through adversity that they now felt would help them going forward.

ix.   The interviews with individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds (higher SEBs) highlighted the additional resources that most of them can draw on that can assist them in progressing to employment. Access to additional qualifications, international experiences (gap years and teaching abroad) and advice from close friends and family who had pursued similar careers all aided these individuals in their journeys to graduate employment.

x.   There were shared challenges that all interviewees had to navigate. These ranged from employer-related issues (for example the stresses of the assessment centre process) to systemic issues (such as the UK's uneven economic geography).

xi.   Our research highlighted a wide range of experiences of the workplace. There were recurring topics: enjoyment of work, the challenges of navigating the professions, the culture of the workplace, and the challenge of modulating their accent, personality and more, in order to fit in. It was clear that participants felt that issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia were further dimensions that affected their experience of the workplace.

xii.   The survey indicated that most APP alumni responding to the survey enjoyed their work and felt it fits with their plans for the future. However, APP alumni required much higher salaries than the UK graduate average to agree with the latter point. Most respondents also felt that there were barriers to their progression in the job, including confidence (mentioned by 98%) and fitting into the culture of the workplace (93%).

xiii.   Interviews highlight the ways that socio-economic background affects experiences of the workplace and perceptions of progression. The APP alumni we spoke with talked about the challenges they faced in their chosen careers, and how the cumulative effect of feeling slightly out of place contributed to a sense that they would progress more slowly than their peers from higher SEBs, whom they saw as more clearly belonging. APP alumni's experiences highlight the ways that socio-economic background can continue to have an impact.

xiv.   The quantitative analysis suggests that participation in the APP is linked with improved graduate outcomes. However, salary alone does not tell the full story. Graduates' stories highlighted that the paths to good graduate jobs and their experiences in the workplace vary.

xv.   The structure of this research has foregrounded the differences in experiences between those from higher and lower SEBs. It became clear how significant the intervention required to overcome socio-economic inequalities is. The APP offers an effective, focused, early input at important moments in a person's development. However, for those from higher SEBs, the advantages (and, often the absence of disadvantage) that they experience are resources that can be returned to again and again over the duration of their career.

xvi.   These findings about early career experiences are just that: about early career experiences. It is an open question what the outcomes for these interviewees will be over the course of their career, as additional factors come into play or are amplified, such as caring responsibilities and cultural differences that affect a sense of belonging.

xvii.   Attempting to characterise the experiences of the different sample groups for this research in the broadest terms possible, there is a sense that for those from lower SEBs there are many contingencies in their journeys to graduate jobs. In comparison, there is an ease and sense of 'falling into' careers for individuals from higher SEBs. In many situations, interviewees from higher SEBs took the expected path – even if it was a challenging path – to their careers.

xviii. Finally, one of the overarching questions that this research has highlighted is: how should success be thought about for the journeys that people taking part in programmes like the APP go on? The APP is designed to support individuals into high quality career opportunities – and this report has highlighted how successful it is in achieving that aim. However, it was clear that for many of the interviewees, this frame of success (attaining a graduate role in a competitive corporate environment) created additional burden and a sense of responsibility, and at times put individuals into positions which made them feel uncomfortable or out of place. One of the most striking findings was the disparity between respondents' self-reported sense of success and their actual achievements in relation to employment and salary: earning an average graduate salary was not enough to provide APP alumni with an average level of satisfaction. They may simply have had higher expectations of salary. We do not have data to confirm whether the challenges they experienced in the workplace influenced their responses.

xix.   There is wider responsibility for employers, government, and regulators in encouraging inclusive work cultures and flexible working; and allowing people to manage their work in a healthy and sustainable way. Employers have the responsibility to support graduates in their early careers, recognising the pressures on them. In particular, employers should recognise the importance of supporting and welcoming graduates from lower SEBs and other under-represented groups, targeting support in the ways identified in this research. Graduates' recommendations, along with our own, point the way to specific actions employers can take.

xx.   Support for social mobility is not just about accessing graduate jobs: it is also about progressing professionally. There are a number of publications and initiatives to support this, such as the Social Mobility Employer Index, the Social Mobility Commission Employers' toolkit on progression and Progress Together.[2] The Bridge Group has published reports with recommendations for inclusive culture and progression in, for example, financial services and law.[3]

xxi.   Programmes like the APP can expand to meet the needs of their cohort in making informed choices about progressing in their early careers. This may include programmes offering mentoring, networking and careers advice targeted at young professionals from lower SEBs in their early careers, as this research highlights.

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[2] See respectively: www.index.socialmobility.org.uk, socialmobilityworks.org/ and www.progresstogether.co.uk/ . Progress Together is an organisation of UK financial services firms that aims to help members to progress and retain a socio-economically diverse workforce.

[3] See www.thebridgegroup.org.uk/research.

Scope and methodology

Overview

1. This research explores the early career and progression experiences of recent graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds (lower SEBs) and how this compares with their more privileged peers. It focuses particularly on alumni of the Aspiring Professionals Programme (APP), run by the Social Mobility Foundation in partnership with employers. We also include recent graduates with no involvement in any APP.

2. This section sets out the research questions and our methodology for a survey of APP alumni; extraction of comparator data from national datasets; and interviews with APP alumni and comparator groups. The description of methodology for the survey is appended by a summary of who responded.

Research questions

a) What are APP alumni doing in their careers now?

b) How does this compare with two comparator groups of their peers, of a similar age and with comparable qualifications?
   > From a lower SEB
   > From a higher socio-economic background (higher SEB)

c) What are the influencing factors for both groups that lead them to where they are in their careers today?

d) What barriers are there to early career progression for APP alumni?

e) Alongside any differences by socio-economic status, are there any differences in early careers progression with regards to: gender, ethnicity, type of employer, or other relevant factors?

f) How can employers better support young people from lower SEBs in their early careers, and with their career progression?

g) How can the SMF better support young people from lower SEBs in their early careers, and with their career progression?

Although this project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, changes to ways of working in response to the pandemic was not a focus of our research. Therefore, we cannot offer a robust commentary on the ways that the pandemic impacted people from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Alumni survey

3. The aim of the survey was to understand APP alumni's experience of the APP programme, their graduate outcomes, progression to employment, and early career experiences. The survey was initially sent out to alumni who attended the APP programme between 2012 and 2015 (n=276). This sample was later expanded to include alumni who attended the programme in 2016 and had completed a three-year undergraduate course (sent to n=26).

4. Although the online survey was open from June to October 2021, the response rate was low at 21% (n=64). This low response rate may be explained, in part, by the length of time since alumni engaged with the programme. For instance, some alumni participated in the programme a decade ago (as early as 2011-2012) and may not have had any other contact since.

5. Given that the survey involved routing (i.e., respondents were routed to different questions depending on their response to specific key questions in the survey, such as whether they attended university), the total number of alumni responding to each survey question varies.

6. It is also worth reiterating that the survey has a relatively small sample size (n = 64). Sample sizes would decrease further when examining specific routes within the survey and when analysing the relationship between variables (for example, gender by salary). Lastly, findings from this survey may not be entirely representative of the wider APP alumni cohort given the low response rate. In view of these caveats, any interpretations of the trends should be made with caution.

Who responded to the survey?

7. Three in ten (30%) respondents attended the APP programme in 2014-2015. However, the percentage of respondents who attended the programme from 2011 to 2014 was broadly comparable.[4]

Figure 1. Year that respondents attended APP programme

2011-2012	19%
2012-2013	17%
2013-2014	21%
2014-2015	30%
2015-2016	13%

Base N= 63
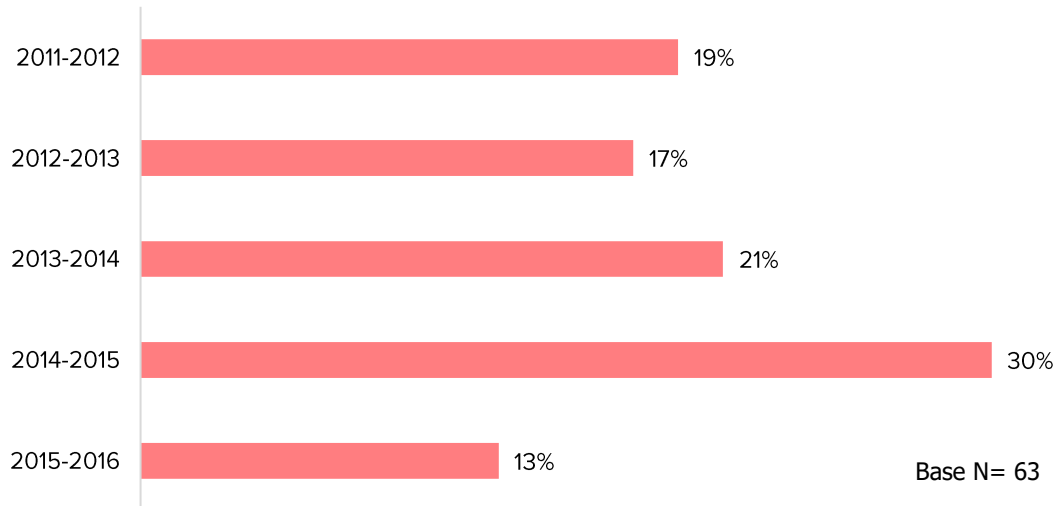
8. There were no significant differences in the gender of respondents. About half the respondents (53%) identified as female, while 47% were male.

9. As presented in the figure below, almost half the respondents identified as White (47%).

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[4] A small minority (2%) of respondents were not sure when they attended the programme. They were excluded from the above analysis.

Figure 2. Ethnicity of respondents

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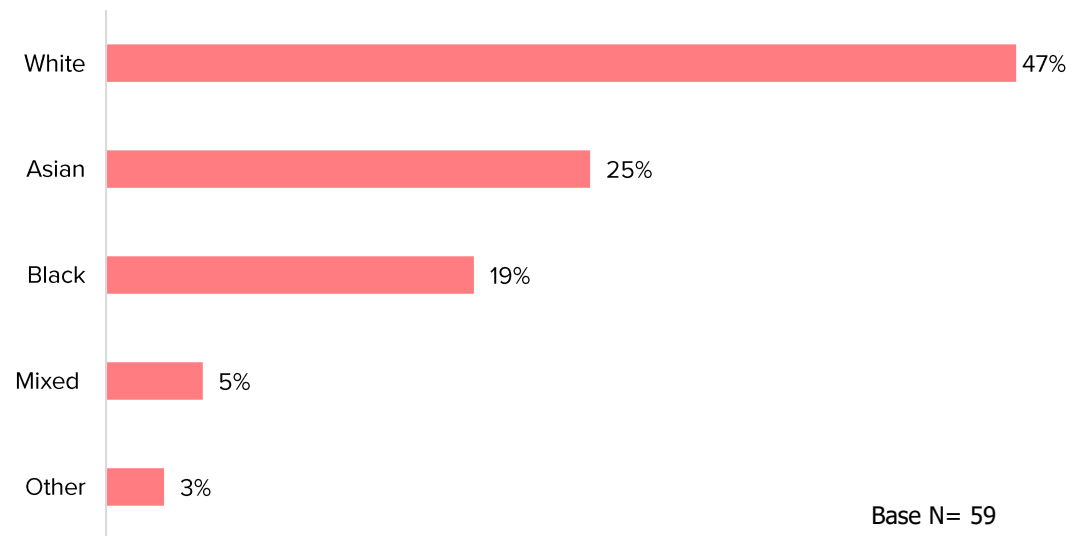
10. Most respondents had received free school meals and attended a non-selective state school (both 79%)[5]. A similar proportion (77%) also reported that neither of their parents had studied for a degree at university.

11. To examine the spread of the APP cohort around the UK, we asked survey respondents for the first half of their postcode from when they were aged 16 (total number who provided first half of postcode was n=57). We converted these partial postcodes into broad geographic regions.

12. APP respondents were most likely to have lived in London or the West Midlands at age 16. However, at that time, they were collectively well distributed across England.

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[5] We do not have data on what other types of school alumni attended. Since the programme does not normally accept applications from students who have attended a fee-paying school at any point in their education (with exceptions for, for example, care-experienced young people), it is likely that most of the 21% of respondents who did not attend a non-selective state school attended a grammar school or other selective state school.

Table 1. Percentage of APP cohort respondents, by region of the UK they lived in at age 16

UK region	Percentage of APP cohort
East Midlands	9%
East of England	7%
London	18%
North East	9%
North West	7%
Scotland	5%
South East	9%
South West	11%
West Midlands	18%
Yorkshire and the Humber	9%

13. To examine the level of participation in higher education (HE) in the areas where survey respondents lived at age 16, we cross-referenced their postcodes with POLAR4. POLAR4 is a tool that was generated by the Office for Students that is commonly used by universities and those delivering widening participation or social mobility programmes. POLAR4 provides the HE participation rate for a particular geographic area based on students entering HE between 2009-10 and 2013-14.[6] Using a partial postcode, we can convert this to the Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) that are covered and average the POLAR4 quintile and participation rates in these areas.

14. Of the APP cohort who provided details of their postcode (n=57), the majority of respondents came from Q2, 3 and 4 areas, the highest proportion being 36% from a Q2 area and the lowest 29% from a Q4 area. The median quintile of APP alumni that provided their partial postcodes was 3, and the median participation rate was 35%. The figures for those who were from quintiles 1 and 5 has been suppressed due to low sample sizes (n< 5).

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[6] POLAR4 has attracted criticism, due to doubts about its accuracy. We use it in this study, because the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) use it for student and graduate data.

Figure 3. POLAR4 quintiles of APP alumni

| | Quintile 1 - lowest HE progression | Quintile 2 | Quintile 3 | Quintile 4 | Quintile 5 - highest HE progression |
| | | 36% | 33% | 29% | |
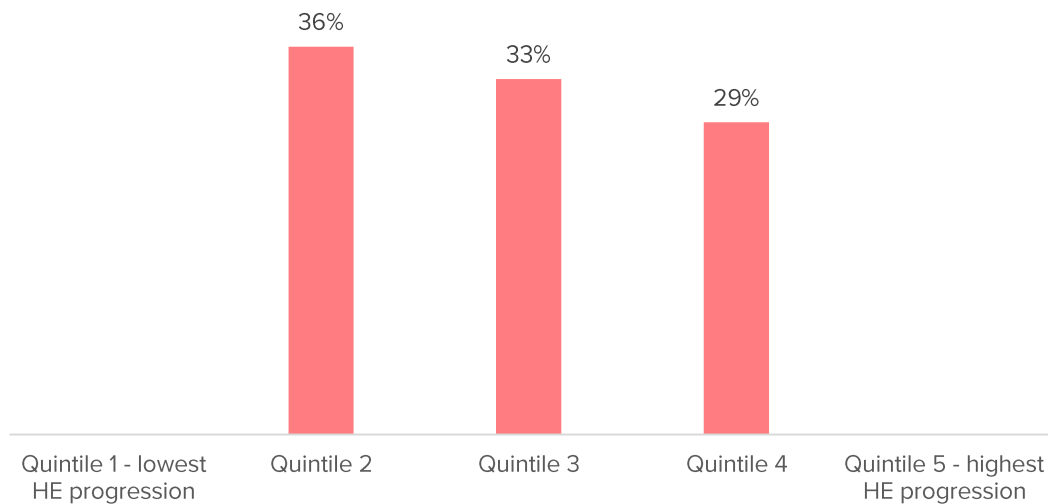
National comparator data

15. The aim of looking at the APP survey data against the wider context of national data on graduates was to understand how the APP cohort's outcomes (employment and earnings) compared to that of the wider graduate population. Where possible the secondary aim was to disaggregate by particular groups to establish where the APP cohort sat against comparator groups of their peers who either had comparable backgrounds (i.e., from a lower SEB) or differing backgrounds (i.e., from a higher SEB).

16. The national datasets referenced in this report comprised open access data available from HESA's Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) and reports using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. Data sources will be indicated and/or referenced throughout the report.

17. GOS is the largest annual social survey in the UK with nearly 400,000 graduates responding in the last survey. Run by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), graduates are surveyed 15 months after they graduate to determine their graduate outcomes and perceived impact of their qualification. The survey is sent to all graduates who studied at a UK HE institution; this also includes those who studied part-time, postgraduate students, and international students. For the purposes of this analysis and to maintain more robust comparability with the APP cohort, where possible postgraduate, part-time and international students have been excluded. Most

data is based on students who graduated between the academic years of 2017-18 to 2018-19.

18. LEO brings together administrative/government data from the Department for Education and links it with tax and benefit data from the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. This enables researchers to investigate individuals' education, employment and earnings over time. Due to the sensitivity of the data, LEO is not publicly, or easily accessible but regular statistical releases are made by the Department for Education and Office for Students. At present, LEO data is only available for those who studied in England and combines data from multiple cohorts of graduates starting in the tax year 2014-15 to 2017-18.

19. In the APP cohort, a small number (n=6) of respondents had not yet graduated and were removed from the analysis.

20. There are some limitations of this analysis so interpretations should be made with caution, as findings may not be replicable with a larger or similar sample of different respondents. The limitations are:

> The APP alumni survey has a relatively small sample size (n = 64), particularly those who provided valid data on employment (n = 49).

> In disaggregating data by respondents' background characteristics to compare with national data, sample sizes are further reduced. This means that some comparisons are not possible because of insufficient numbers. For instance, only a small number of APP cohort respondents were from a low participation neighbourhood (POLAR4 quintile 1) and therefore, the full range of comparisons across all POLAR4 quintiles was not possible.

> To enable comparisons, some groups had to be combined, either to generate a sufficient sample size or to make data comparable with the national datasets.

> Where possible, data and comparisons have been reported but some of these do not represent the full range of responses. For example, earnings data is focused on the two most popular salary bands, as combining higher and lower bands still did not achieve a sufficient sample size.

> Given the small sample size of APP alumni, findings from this sample may not be representative of their wider cohort.

Interviews

21. The qualitative research was designed around a comparison to better highlight the experience of APP alumni in their early careers. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of APP alumni (n = 17); and with a comparator sample which included individuals from both higher and lower SEBs (n = 13 and 14 respectively). The Bridge Group recruited the comparator sample via their employers[7] and the interviewees were all at a similar stage in their career to the APP alumni. The interviews explored participants' journeys to date from school, through university, to employment – as well as their future plans.

22. The APP alumni sample was made up of 17 participants. Five identified as female and 12 as male. In terms of ethnic identity, eight identified as White, four as Black, three as Asian, and one as Other (specified as Arab British). Where possible, we are as precise as possible with references to ethnic identity so as to avoid over-generalising experiences.[8] Due to the recruitment process for the APP, all alumni interviewees came from lower SEBs. We spoke with alumni from at least six different employers, across sectors including pharmaceuticals, consultancy and finance.

23. It is worth noting that recruiting graduates for interviews was challenging. Of the 64 alumni who completed the survey, 38 consented to being contacted for interview, of whom 17 ultimately signed up for interview. There may be a number of factors at play here: one is the time elapsed since their participation in the APP, another is being too busy to either complete the survey or set aside time for interview. Young graduates navigating their early careers can often feel under pressure to perform; some may not have felt able to set aside time for this activity. The APP alumni we did interview are likely to be alumni that had the strongest opinions, open to sharing particularly negative or particularly positive experiences.

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[7] We are grateful to the Bank of England, Clifford Chance, KPMG, JLL, and PwC for facilitating access to recent graduate recruits for comparator interviews.

[8] The statement #BAMEOver from the organisation Arts Inc is a clear explanation of why terminology matters (Inc Arts UK).

   See too the recent moves by UK broadcasters to avoid using the BAME acronym: (BBC). We have avoided the BAME acronym, except as a label in tables and figures.

24. The comparator sample comprised 27 participants. Thirteen came from higher SEBs, and 14 from lower SEBs. Socio-economic background was estimated based on demographic criteria as recommended by the Employers Social Mobility Toolkit; priority was placed on eligibility for free school meals, and then parental occupation at age 14.[9] Of the comparator sample, 15 identified as female and 12 as male. Five identified as Asian, three as Black, and 19 as White.

25. The comparator sample was constructed with the cooperation of partner organisations, who provided access to their graduate recruits. We are thankful for their assistance in this research and for allowing us to interview their employees.[10] Due to the small numbers interviewed from any one organisation, the views expressed may not be representative of other recent graduates in that organisation.

26. This research aimed to explore the early career experiences of graduates. It is important to recognise the limits of our approach. Since the research participants for the comparator sample were recruited through their employers, definitionally they are pursuing graduate careers. The research therefore lacks the perspective of graduates who were unsuccessful in achieving a graduate placement, school leavers who did not go to university, or people that started a graduate career before deciding to leave. The phenomenon of the 'leaky pipeline' – whereby women and people who identify as ethnically diverse, Black, and Asian enter university or careers, but are less likely to progress to senior positions – is well known. This research is based on 'water that is still in the pipe' (Women's Business Council). Our interviewees felt able to endure and overcome the barriers and challenges highlighted by this research, but others did not, and their perspectives are missing here.

27. Nonetheless this research makes a valuable contribution to understanding the early graduate job market from the perspective of recent graduates from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and contributes to understanding the impact of outreach programmes for participants.

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[9] See: https://socialmobilityworks.org/. We prioritised free school meals, because parental occupation was less clear.

[10] The partner organisations were: the Bank of England, Clifford Chance, KPMG, JLL and PwC.

Graduate progression to employment

Summary

28. Comparing survey data and national comparator data confirmed that the APP cohort were significantly more likely than the national graduate population to be in full-time employment and earning higher salary amounts. 86% of APP graduates were in full-time employment 15 months after graduation, compared to 57% of the wider graduate population reported by HESA.

29. On average, APP graduates were earning more than the wider graduate population 15 months after graduation, but by this time point they were also earning more than the wider graduate population did five years after graduation. Data from LEO shows the median graduate salary five years after graduation was £27,000, whereas 51% of the APP cohort were earning £30,000+ just 15 months after graduation.

30. Due to the eligibility criteria of the APP programme, alumni were more likely to have received free school meals and have attended a state-funded school. Thus, they were not representative of the wider graduate population. Nevertheless, the APP cohort were more likely to be in full-time employment and earn a higher salary than graduates who did not receive free school meals and were from higher progression areas (POLAR4). APP alumni who were ethnically diverse, Black, and Asian also earned more than such graduates from the national cohort.

31. Interviews with graduates, including APP alumni, indicated that progressing to graduate employment is competitive. All interviewees spoke about how challenging it can be to find a good graduate job and successfully navigate recruitment processes. Looking at interviewees' journeys to employment, and comparing by socio-economic background, highlighted a number of important factors in why unequal outcomes can persist.

32. It was clear that the APP provided participants with a critical early nudge to think about their future careers. The work experience, mentoring, and exposure to professional networks that they received prompted alumni to

think about how to access careers in the professions early. It was notable that much of the comparator sample interviewed had accessed similar kinds of outreach programmes as part of their journey. This gave a sense that for those from lower SEBs, there is often a contingency in their ability to progress to graduate employment.

33. The interviewees from lower SEBs were also able to talk about the advantages that they had gained through adversity that they now felt would help them going forward.

34. The interviews with individuals from higher SEBs highlighted the additional resources that some are able to draw on that can assist them in progressing to employment. Access to additional qualifications, international experiences (gap years and teaching abroad), and advice from close friends and family who had pursued similar careers all aided these individuals in their journeys to graduate employment.

35. There were shared challenges that all interviewees had to navigate – the stresses of the assessment centre process and the UK's uneven economic geography being two key topics.

Details

What did respondents do after the APP sixth-form programme?

36. Most respondents (94%) pursued an undergraduate degree after completing their A levels/ Highers or equivalent. A small minority also started a job or pursued a higher/degree apprenticeship (both 3%).

37. Respondents who attended university (n=59) chose a range of universities. The universities with the highest number of respondents (n>5) were the University of Birmingham, Durham University, the University of Nottingham and the University of Oxford.

38. The subject of respondents' degrees also differed. However, the most popular subject choice was Social Sciences (including Economics) at 41%,

Mathematical Sciences (24%), Law and Combined subjects (both 8%).

39. In terms of the region in which respondents went to university, 35% remained in their home region (i.e., were living in the South East prior to going to university and went to a university located in the South East of England). Of those from the North East and North West of England, 80% went to university in those regions. London was the most popular university region, with 21% of APP respondents having studied there, followed by the South East (15%).

40. As presented in the figure below, respondents' year of graduation ranged from 2016 to 2020. However, a small minority of respondents (8%) have yet to graduate or did not graduate.[11]

Figure 4. Year of graduation

Base N= 59

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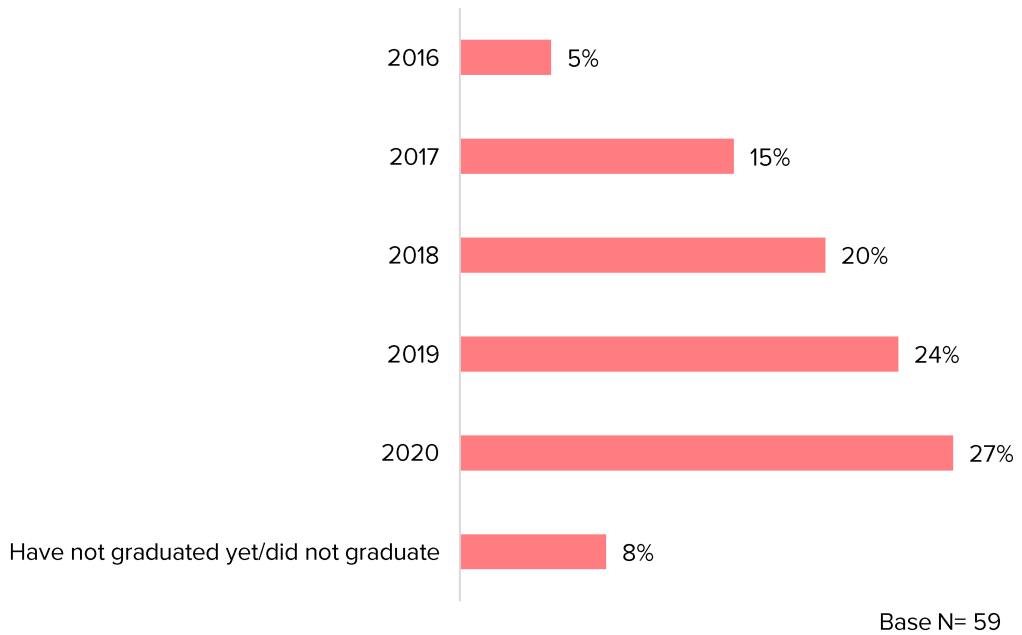
[11] Respondents who had yet to graduate were excluded from survey questions on employment and early career experiences. However, those who did not graduate and had started working (n<5) were included in the analysis on employment.

41. Half the respondents who had graduated from university did so with a second upper class (52%), while 39% received a first-class degree. A further 7% reported graduating with a second lower class and 2% selected 'other'.[12]

The APP programme: experience and impact

42. The survey presented respondents with a list of programmes that were available from the Social Mobility Foundation to APP undergraduate students. Respondents were then asked which of these events they had attended as an undergraduate.

43. The figure below shows that of the respondents who attended university, about half (47%) had not participated in any of the undergraduate programmes available through the Social Mobility Foundation. However, about a third (32%) had been involved in mentoring schemes with the SMF.

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who attended APP programmes as an undergraduate
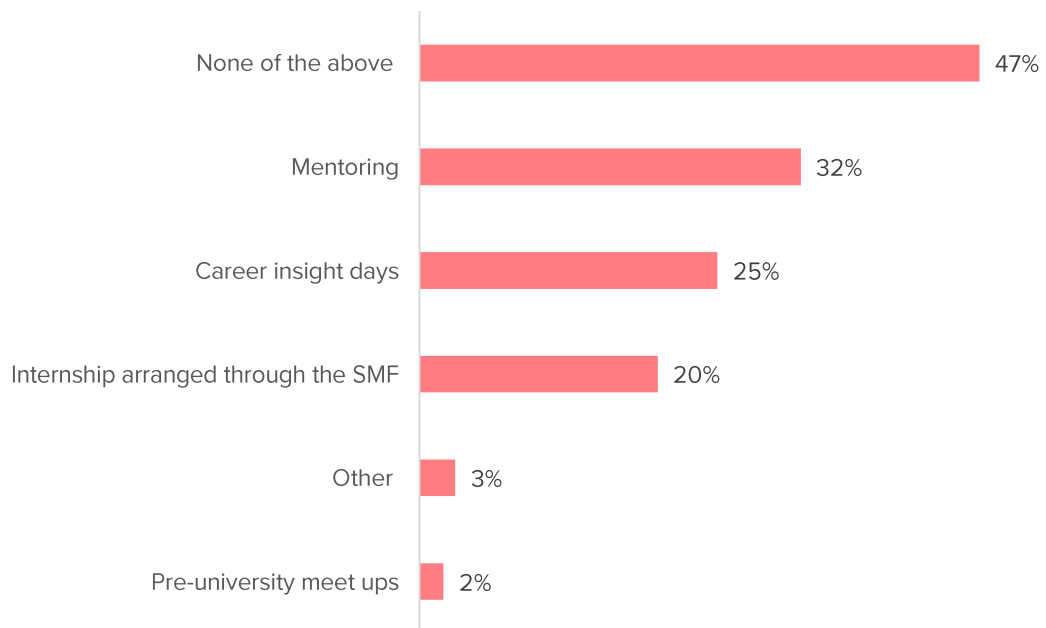
Base N= 59

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[12] This includes respondents who had graduated from US universities that employ the grade point average (GPA) system.

44. When asked about the impact of the sixth-form APP programme, the majority of respondents agreed that it had increased their confidence about their plans (92%) and informed them about the routes into and qualifications required in their chosen sector (81%).

Figure 6. Impact of attending the APP programme

It made me more confident about my plans	92%
It informed me about the routes into my chosen section and the qualifications I need	81%
It helped me decide on a type of job/career pathway	78%
It informed me about what a job in my chosen sector entails	78%
It gave me the practical support I needed to apply to university/specific course	59%
It made me decide to apply to a different course/university	48%
It prepared me for life at university	41%

Base N= 63 to 64 depending on question

45. Our qualitative research via interviews produced similarly positive findings. It highlighted a number of factors that influenced graduates' journeys to where they are today. Analysing the experience of APP alumni alongside the comparator sample highlighted how the APP provided participants important early input in thinking about how to access professional careers. **The skills and experience gained through the work experience placement, the personal growth, and the added early exposure to professional networks** all helped encourage participants to think about how to access professional careers.

"My professionalism, my communication skills, my networking skills, my ability to communicate effectively with different types of people at different levels in the company has exclusively come from the SMF. I would not have had such detailed

and culturally orientated experience without them. I would not have had this kind of capital to build if it wasn't for the APP programme."
"My parents often said that I was in year 12 and I was really really quiet and shy [...] but having been on the SMF programme and having other kids who are good at school but also from similar backgrounds to me I think helped a lot."

46. This practical input gave APP alumni an early boost in progressing to employment. It gave them a '**CV boost**' that they felt helped them stand out in recruitment processes and gave them something concrete to talk about at interview, or to get a further internship and placement while at university.

"Being able to put that on my CV definitely helped me access other opportunities"

47. Although the APP provides input at an early stage (and for about half the respondents, only during sixth form), it is clear the interviewees felt it had a large impact on their career journeys, with many reflecting that it was a pivotal experience. This sentiment was further illustrated by those who were keen to give back to the SMF – via mentoring or outreach work – to further extend the opportunities that they themselves benefitted from.

"Without the experience I wouldn't be in the position I am today, because they helped me get the insights I needed at a young age"

"I am indebted to the SMF, to the APP programme for getting me where I am today and I think that the support they have given me is actually really incredible. And I have to repay it and work with them in some shape or form in the future."

Early career experiences: employment

48. The previous section, drawing on interviews with APP alumni, indicated a strong perception that the APP had a large impact on their career journeys. This section assesses that impact in quantitative terms. It focuses on the extent to which APP alumni are in sustained employment or further study 15 months post-graduation; and are more likely to be compared to the wider national graduate population.

49. Questions on respondents' early career were asked based on two time points: 15 months post-graduation and current employment. These questions include employment status, occupational area (using the Standard

Occupational Classification), Socio-economic classification of their job and salary.

50. Questions on early careers 15 months post-graduation were asked only of respondents who pursued an undergraduate degree (94% of total sample) and had graduated at least 15 months ago at the time of the survey.

51. Once respondents had completed the section about their employment 15 months post-graduation, respondents were asked whether their current job is the same position as the one they had 15 months post-graduation. About half the respondents (54%) said 'yes'. It should be noted that the findings related to 'current employment' focuses on those who had a different job at the point of completing the survey than they did 15 months post-graduation (n = 31).[13]

52. At both time points, most respondents were in full-time employment. However, this had increased significantly from 87% at 15 months post-graduation to 92% at the time of the survey. At both timepoints, most respondents were in professional and managerial occupations.

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[13] One respondent was no longer employed at the point of participating in the survey, but their last job was the same position as the one they had 15 months post-graduation. This respondent was also excluded from the 'current employment' analysis.

Figure 7. Employment status at 15 months post-graduation and at the time of survey

Base N= 55
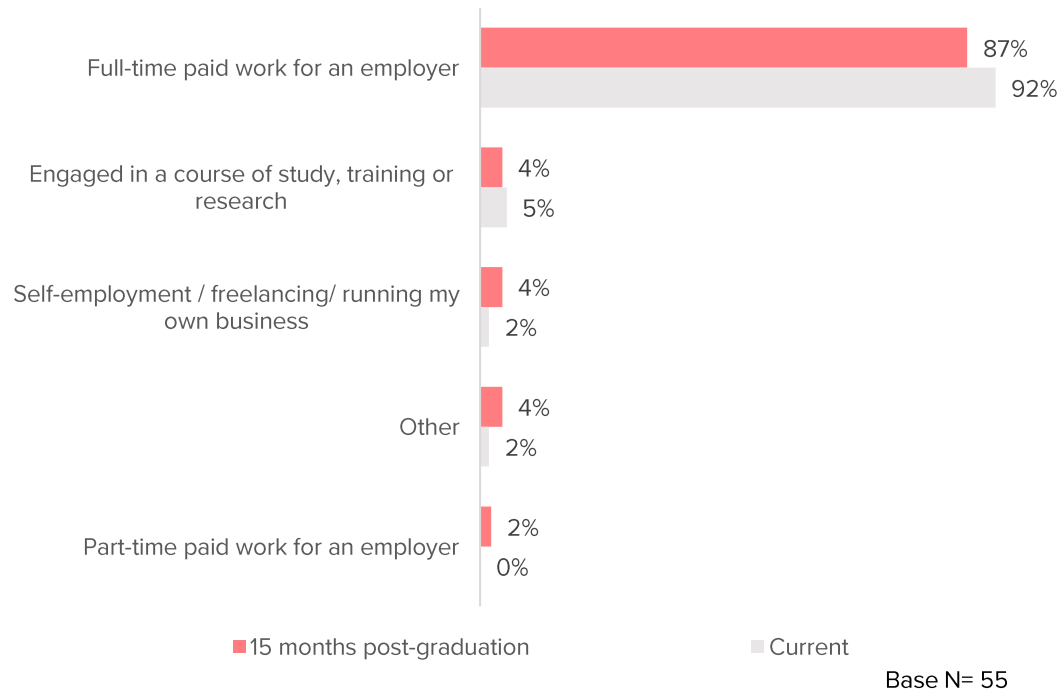
Figure 8. Socio-economic classification of respondents' employment 15 months post-graduation and at the time of survey
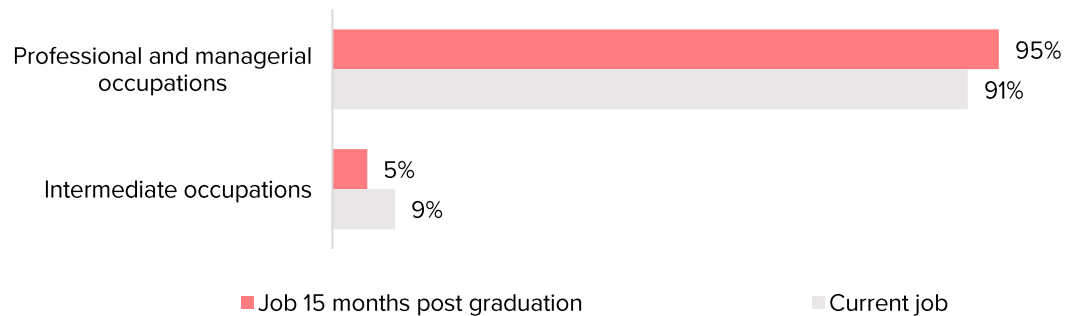
Base 15 months post graduation N= 44; current job N= 23

53. Of those who were employed, the three most popular occupational areas at both time points were (1) financial and investment services, (2) professional, scientific, and technical activities, and (3) education. The figures were as follows: financial and investment services (49% at 15 months post-graduation; 40% at current time), professional, scientific, and technical activities (19% at 15 months post-graduation; 20% at current time) and education (9% at 15 months

post-graduation; 10% at current time).

54. Given that most respondents were in financial and investment services, this suggests that the APP programme may have contributed to respondents' interests and ability to pursue a career in this sector.

55. These findings for APP alumni are very positive in themselves. We now compare these findings with national datasets. As noted above, four in five (87%) of APP alumni were in full-time employment 15 months after graduation. This is substantially higher than the 57% of UK graduates in full-time employment at the same point (using data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS), which covers those who graduated in the academic years 2017-18 to 2018-19) (Women's Business Council). This is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 9. Percentage of graduates who were in full-time employment 15 months after graduation

56. However, the APP cohort differs from the national cohort of graduates in several key characteristics. The eligibility criteria of the APP programme means that respondents were more likely to have received Free School Meals (FSM) and attended a state-funded school.[14] LEO data indicates that graduates with this background are normally more likely to have employment outcomes lower than the UK graduate average and their non-FSM and Independent school peers (UCL)(Department for Education, Graduate Outcomes (LEO): Employment and Earnings Outcomes of Higher Education Graduates by Subject Studied and Graduate Characteristics in 2016/17). However, our findings for the APP alumni provide evidence to the contrary.

57. The APP cohort scores more highly on another measure: most of the APP cohort (92%) were in employment (full- or part-time) and/or studying 15 months after graduation. This is slightly higher than the rates in the LEO data, where

[14] As reported in the Methodology, 79% of respondents met both these criteria.

one year after graduation, 88% of UK graduates were in further study or sustained employment. This rate marginally decreases to 86% three years post-graduation. LEO includes graduate outcomes from the tax years 2014-15 to 2017-18. This date range does not map directly onto the date range of the APP cohort in this report, but graduate employment rates have been relatively stable over the last ten years (Department for Education, 'Graduate Labour Market Statistics. Reporting Year 2020').

58. In terms of ethnicity and gender, a higher proportion of APP alumni than of the national population (using GOS 28/09/2023 14:01:00[15]) were employed 15 months post-graduation. Despite the methodological limitations (small numbers in the APP cohort prevent further disaggregation of ethnicity), ethnically diverse, Black or Asian APP alumni were more than twice as likely to be in full-time employment than those in the GOS.

Table 2. Proportion of APP and wider graduate cohorts in full-time employment 15 months post-graduation

	Overall	Female	Male	BAME	White	Total N
GOS (%)	57%	53%	54%	45%	56%	113,805
APP cohort (%)	86%	88%	83%	96%	75%	42

Early career experiences: salary

59. The survey of APP alumni shows that, at 15 months post-graduation, respondents were most likely to have been earning between £20,001 and £40,000 per annum.[16] However, the range of current salaries was much wider: these ranged from less than £20,000 to more than £80,000 per annum. We note that the range in current salaries may reflect differences in university attendance and length of time in the workforce.

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[15] A more detailed breakdown by ethnicity is available in the GOS but there were insufficient numbers in the APP cohort to make more detailed comparisons. In the GOS data, figures for employment/activity status by whether graduates were from a low participation neighbourhood are also available.

[16] 4% of respondents selected 'prefer not to say' about their salary 15 months post-graduation. This group was excluded from the analysis above.

Figure 10. Salary of respondents 15 months post-graduation and at the time of survey

Less than £20,000
- Job 15 months post graduation: 15%
- Current job: 3%

£20,001 to £30,000
- Job 15 months post graduation: 34%
- Current job: 23%

£30,001 to £40,000
- Job 15 months post graduation: 34%
- Current job: 29%

£40,001 to £50,000
- Job 15 months post graduation: 4%
- Current job: 23%

£50,001 to £60,000
- Job 15 months post graduation: 13%
- Current job: 10%

£60,0001 to £70,000
- Current job: 3%

£70,0001 to £80,000
- Current job: 3%

More than £80,000
- Current job: 6%

■ Job 15 months post graduation   ■ Current job

Base 15 months post graduation N= 47; current job N= 31

60. Respondents were also asked whether their current activity (for example, employment) fitted in with their plans for the future. Respondents were equally likely to strongly agree or agree with this statement 15 months post-graduation (76%) and at the current time (77%).

61. As noted above, the APP survey asked respondents to indicate their salary band within 15 months after graduation, with the majority (67%) earning £20,000 to £40,000 per annum. In the GOS, UK graduates reported their salaries at the same time period (with the caveat that the salary bands in the GOS are slightly different to those in the APP survey.) (HESA, 'Graduates' Salaries'). The table below shows that a similar proportion of UK graduates (65%) were earning £20,000 to £40,000 per annum. However, more of the

APP cohort than of the UK graduates were earning in the upper half of that bracket.

Table 3. Proportion of APP and wider UK graduate cohorts' earnings 15 months post-graduation

GOS £21,000-£29,999 per annum	APP cohort £20,001-£30,000 per annum	GOS £30,000-£38,999 per annum	APP cohort £30,001-£40,000 per annum
49%	33%	16%	33%

62. We also referenced the APP cohort against graduate salary data in LEO. LEO reports median salary at one, three, five and ten years post-graduation and is thus not directly comparable with GOS or our survey. We can still make broad comparisons, and these suggest that the APP cohort on average earned more than UK graduates.

63. One year post-graduation, the median graduate salary in the LEO data was £20,000. By comparison, 84% of the APP cohort 15 months after graduation were earning more than £20,000 per annum. Similarly, at 15 months post-graduation, around half (51%) of the APP cohort was earning more (£30,000+) than UK graduates earned five years after they graduated (£27,000). This is set out in the table below.

Table 4. Median salary of graduates over time from LEO and the proportion of APP cohort earning above the median

LEO data for UK graduates			APP cohort
1 year after graduation (median)	3 years after graduation (median)	5 years after graduation (median)	% earning £30,000+ 15 months post-graduation
£20,000	£23,700	£27,000	51%

64. Within the LEO data, UK graduates who had received FSM had a consistently lower median salary, compared to those who did not receive FSM. Of the APP alumni who received FSM,[17] 49% were earning more than £30,000 at 15 months post-graduation. Therefore, of those who received FSM in the APP

[17] The number of survey respondents who indicated a salary and that they had not received FSM was less than five and therefore they are not reported here.

cohort, nearly half (49%) were earning over £10,000 more at 15 months post-graduation than the wider UK graduate population who received FSM earned at one year post-graduation (£18,200).

65. In addition to referencing the APP cohort against the GOS and LEO data, we used selected salary data from the Graduate Labour Market Statistics for comparison.[18] This dataset provides information on average earnings by sector. About half the respondents in the APP cohort (49%) were employed in the financial sector 15 months post-graduation. In terms of salary, 68% of the APP cohort working in the financial sector were earning over £30,000 at 15 months after graduation. This is slightly higher than the average salary for graduates aged between 21 and 30, working in Banking and Finance, which was £29,000 in the Graduate Labour Market Statistics.

66. We were not able to report earnings by school type, as the open data available for this was from the previous graduate survey run by HESA (DLHE (HESA, 'Definitions: Destinations of Leavers.')). In this earlier survey, graduates were surveyed at six months and three and a half years after graduation and therefore, were not as closely comparable with the more recent GOS data and the APP cohort, where earnings data was collected at 15 months after graduation.

67. We turn now to explore earnings by gender and ethnicity. The table below presents data for the GOS and APP cohorts, disaggregated by salary bands, gender and ethnicity. APP alumni were overall more likely to be earning a higher salary, with female and ethnically diverse, Black or Asian APP alumni earning on average higher salaries than their wider GOS peers. However, we do see some variation within the APP cohort, with 27% of the female APP cohort earning £30,001-£40,000, compared to 39% of the male APP cohort.

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[18] This data is available for open access at: (Department for Education, 'Graduate Labour Market Statistics. Reporting Year 2020')

Table 5. Proportion of APP and wider graduate cohorts' earnings within selected salary bands, 15 months after graduation, disaggregated by gender and ethnicity

		Overall	Female	Male	BAME	White
GOS	£21,000-£29,999 per annum	49%	52%	47%	49%	50%
APP cohort	£20,001-£30,000 per annum	33%	41%	26%	29%	38%
GOS	£30,000-£38,999 per annum	16%	14%	20%	19%	14%
APP cohort	£30,001-£40,000 per annum	33%	27%	39%	33%	33%

68. Comparison with LEO data presents a different perspective. The data in the table below suggest that about half the APP alumni, regardless of gender or ethnicity, were earning more at 15 months post-graduation than the median UK graduate salary at one, three and five years post-graduation.

Table 6. Median salary of graduates over time from LEO and the proportion of APP cohort earning above the median disaggregated by gender and ethnicity

	LEO 1 year after graduation (median)	LEO 3 years after graduation (median)	LEO 5 years after graduation (median)	% of APP cohort earning £30,000+ 15 months post-graduation
Overall	£20,000	£23,700	£27,000	51%
Female	£19,700	£23,000	£25,200	46%
Male	£21,200	£25,600	£28,800	57%
BAME	£19,975	£23,825	£26,275	54%
White	£20,400	£23,700	£26,600	48%

69. There were not enough respondents to the APP alumni survey to fully disaggregate earnings by POLAR4 quintiles (showing whether alumni lived in lower HE participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) at 16). Since employment and salary data relating to LPNs is available in GOS and LEO, comparisons could be made in the future, if more data from APP cohorts is available.

70. Despite the above limitation, we can examine the salary distributions of APP cohort members by select POLAR4 quintiles (not including quintiles 1 and 5, due to the small sample sizes).

71. Overall, those in the APP cohort were earning more in comparison to peers (based on GOS and LEO data) but there was some variation based on the area respondents were from. Respondents who lived in higher HE progression quintiles were more likely to be earning over £20,000 per annum (with all respondents from Q4 earning over £20,000) compared to those in Q2 (lower HE progression).

Table 7. Proportion of APP cohort earning over £20,000 and POLAR4 quintile

Salary 15 months post-graduation	Q2 (lower HE progression)	Q3	Q4 (higher HE progression)	Overall
£20,001+ per annum	75%	87%	100%	85%

Progressing to graduate employment: wider perspectives

72. This chapter has shown so far that APP alumni feel that they benefitted from the programme and that they are more likely to be employed and earning more than broad comparator groups. This holds true, regardless of gender, ethnicity or postcode at age 16.

73. To gain a wider perspective, we present here findings from interviews with a comparator sample of graduates who did not participate in the APP programme, but who are now employed by one of five prestigious employers. These graduates are from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. We first explore their early careers experiences. We then draw in APP alumni as well for a discussion of the challenges.

74. Research participants from the comparator sample who came from higher SEBs talked about a range of additional resources that they were able to draw on that were helpful in entering a career in the professions – these included advice from friends and family, pursuing additional qualifications, international experiences (gap years and teaching abroad). Unlike the APP alumni these factors were not directly targeted at accessing careers in the professions, but nonetheless were beneficial in recruitment processes.

"I knew the grad market was pretty tough, and I had a few unsuccessful applications. After graduating I decided to go to Business School which was a real game changer – it wasn't only the extra qualification, but their careers guidance was better too."

"I think some of the most helpful skills I picked up actually were at the US summer camp, and when I was teaching English as a foreign language – it was one of the first times I was recognised as being good at something."

"My uncle has an events business, and I was able to get a position there for a while. My first proper suit and excel job. It was great going to all of these political events and seeing a different kind of work"

75. Looking now at research participants from lower SEBs, it was striking that these individuals had in their own ways replicated some aspects of the APP through a wide range of sources. Some had participated in other outreach programmes,[19] others had benefited from scholarships for independent fee-paying schools, catchment-based recruitment for university, or mentorships. The similarities between this sample and the APP alumni highlight the success of the APP in providing the kind of input that can make a difference in graduate outcomes.

76. However, it is a concern that all of the participants from lower SEBs that we spoke with had received some kind of additional input. Although a small sample, it suggests that there are significant entrenched barriers to accessing graduate careers for people from lower SEBs.

"Having the scholarship to attend a private school was a big domino effect. There's lots of extra-curriculars. Everyone is aiming high. They teach interview skills. There's an Oxbridge tutor. Having all those skills and experiences going into university made it really straightforward to get internships, summer jobs, and then navigate assessment centres."

77. Unlike research participants from higher SEBs, the participants from lower SEBs (including APP alumni) also talked about the advantages that they had gained through adversity – reframing their challenging experiences as sources of strength. Here participants would talk about their additional resilience, the improved communication skills, and their motivation for achieving long term financial security. Participants would talk of the work ethic

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[19] Frequently mentioned programmes included: Rare Recruitment, the Sutton Trust's Pathways to Law, UpRising, Strive and a different (unspecified) SMF event at their school/college.

or determination that they attained through living with family who had to strive to provide for their families.

"I think my Grandma and my Auntie played quite a big role in getting me to my career (...) although it's got nothing to do with what I do now, growing up with them and learning how hard-working and determined they are - that's definitely helped me"

"Not only has the SMF provided me with opportunities, they also set the standard. As a result, I have been able to support my brother. I have a lot of educational capital in order to help them [siblings] through the university applications or choosing the right A-Levels."

Progressing to graduate employment – shared challenges

78. Looking across all of the interview participants (APP alumni and the comparators sample from higher and lower SEBs) it is clear that having **access to the right information at the right time** about careers is an important factor in achieving positive graduate outcomes. Interview participants spoke clearly about the advantages of knowing what they needed to succeed in graduate recruitment, knowing how to navigate assessment centres, and having the confidence to go through these processes. Many of the interviewees (from all three groups) spoke about the advantages of starting these processes early – for some as early as the week after Freshers Week (this varied depending on their chosen field). Those who did not have this information going into university felt like they were playing catch-up in terms of learning what a 'spring week' was while others were already applying and securing opportunities.

"At university the first week was super fun. Then the second week it was super serious. Everyone was applying for their spring weeks. And I was like, what even is that? It was a learning moment – okay I need to be on this as soon as possible."

79. The APP alumni received this information through the programme, while they were still at school. The graduates from higher SEBs received this information through their school, peers, or family. This may also explain why many of our interview participants from lower SEBs had experience of outreach programmes designed to provide this kind of information.

"It definitely helped me to understand that doing things like being a treasurer of a society or just applying for lots of positions even if they are quite ambitious and applying for things like internships, I think I was more confident in doing these things."

"I think that's the epitome of social mobility, [...]: the exposure and how to do something about it, how to turn it around. To be given the tools to determine your own future is the most important thing that anyone can ever give you."

80. There were some overarching themes about the challenges of progressing to employment that recurred in conversations with APP alumni and the comparator sample from both higher and lower SEBs. These factors were related to the wider political economic conditions in the UK.

81. A consistent theme across all the interviews was **how competitive the graduate job market is** and how challenging the recruitment process can be. Feelings of inferiority and imposter syndrome were experienced by the majority of interview participants, regardless of their socio-economic background.

"it's hard to keep yourself mentally going when they don't work out...it's demoralising when you get rejection upon rejection"

"I think it is an incredibly stressful market at the moment. [...] I think it puts a lot of strain on people. It is definitely already stressing me out about in two years' time, when I might have to apply for a new job again. The thought of going through that application process again is very stressful. [...] At the moment, the thing that I am most concerned about, even though it is a year and a half away, is re-entering the job market, trying to get a new job."

"I thought I got the job just because they were trying to fill a quota for social mobility"

82. These feelings were most clearly attached to **assessment centres** – stressful days which loom large in interviewees' recollections of job applications. One factor that helped these days seem less daunting was if participants had planned ahead – with the help or advice from outreach programmes or their peers. An additional factor that eased the stress was preparing for the market well in advance of needing a job - having the foreknowledge to begin the process of applying for a graduate job from the moment they arrived at

university. (The second quote below illustrates the experience of one of the comparator graduates from a lower SEB, who had not received such advice.)

"Applying to jobs and internships it was definitely one of the most stressful periods of my life."

"The assessment centres were nerve-wracking – it should be hard, but I came from a background where no-one had done it. A lot of my friends that had connections and family in industry knew how to approach the tests, knew how to do the assessment centres. Knew about spring weeks, summer weeks. I didn't. I felt behind the game, students already had this knowledge and I didn't know how or why."

83. Further barriers to progressing to employment were wider structural factors associated with the UK's economy. Building on the competitiveness of the graduate job market, interviewees reflected on the phenomenon of **'credential inflation'** or **'qualification creep'** whereby candidates were seeking out a cutting edge by obtaining additional qualifications (masters, doctorates, or business qualifications) for entry level roles. The need to list internships (often unpaid) on CVs was mentioned in a similar vein. These are opportunities not equally accessible to all. Additionally, the **UK's uneven economic geography** meant that many felt the pressure to move to London or a big city to pursue a graduate career; again, an opportunity not equally accessible to all.[20] For these factors, the ability to draw on additional resources is important, but so too is the absence of stress about financial independence. This means that it is often more straightforward for individuals from higher SEBs to navigate these challenges.

"Being based in the North is a barrier. So much of the financial services industry is focused in London. It means there's a lot more pressure because the pool of potential jobs is a lot smaller [in the North]. In my city there's three financial services firms, some retail but nothing else. The options are so limited and limiting."

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[20] See, for example, our research on graduate retention across the UK that highlighted how challenging graduates from lower SEBs can find geographic relocation. The research highlighted how the increased costs of relocation, the need to achieve financial independence, and the affordable cost of living outside of London and the South East make it easier to relocate if you are from a higher socio-economic background. (Bridge Group, Staying Local: Understanding the Value of Graduate Retention for Social Equality.)

"It can be a bit unnerving sometimes, because you feel like they have so many connections, when you don't really have any. And I think in a business like consulting, connections and your network are super important."

84. An additional barrier mentioned by many was the **variability of university careers support**. It was felt that careers support in the UK was not all that helpful: that the information was too basic, too general, and delivered too late. For some it was helpful and well run – especially for those at Russell Group universities, or those who knew how to navigate the service and use it effectively. However, many reflected on how by the time they got to university, they already knew what they needed to do to progress. A common refrain was that interviewees would have appreciated the careers guidance to be more integrated with their course content, or that lecturers would have been more pro-active about careers guidance. However, there was also a common sentiment that university was already a busy time, and many did not have the capacity to seek out additional support for their career.

"It happened to my friend, that when they said they were going for a corporate grad scheme, the careers advisor told them that they should not waste their time applying to somewhere like that. That kind of stuff is not really very helpful."

"It's patronising to be told [by the university careers support] things that [I think] don't matter, like how to write a CV"

85. Finally, a barrier that was mentioned by a significant minority of interviewees is that some felt as if they were **victims of the 'diversity agenda'**. In other words, that some organisations were placing so much emphasis on recruiting diversely that some demographics that have been historically over-represented in the professions are now artificially disadvantaged by recruitment processes. However, we did not find evidence of such disadvantage. These comments suggest that there are a range of attitudes to diversity in the workplace.

"I don't have much chance of promotion ... it's more based on people from working class backgrounds ... so I'm overlooked"

"It's tough to get the balance right. You want to give everyone a fair chance, but you don't want to end up unfairly disadvantaging people that don't deserve to be. You still want to get the best people at the end of the day."

Graduate experiences in the workplace

Summary

86. Our research highlighted a wide range of experiences of the workplace. There were recurring topics: enjoyment of work, the challenges of navigating the professions, the culture of the workplace, and the challenge of embodying the professions. Furthermore, it was clear that participants felt that issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia were further dimensions that affected their experience of the workplace.

87. The survey indicated that most APP alumni responding enjoyed their work and felt it fitted with their plans for the future. APP alumni's agreement with the latter was above the UK graduate average only when their salary was well above the national graduate average. However, most respondents also felt that there were barriers to their progression in the job: these include confidence (mentioned by 98%) and fitting into the culture of the workplace (93%).

88. Interviews highlight the ways that socio-economic background affects experiences of the workplace and perceptions of progression. The APP alumni we spoke with talked about the challenges they faced in their chosen careers, and how the cumulative effect of feeling slightly out of place contributed to a sense that they would progress more slowly than their peers from higher SEBs, whom they saw as more clearly belonging. APP alumni's experiences highlight the ways that socio-economic background can have a lasting impact on perceptions of belonging.

89. Although this project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, changes to ways of working in response to the pandemic was not a focus of our research. Therefore, we would not be able to offer a robust commentary on the ways that the pandemic impacted people from different socio-economic backgrounds. The Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation 2021 explored the ways in which the pandemic had affected inequality including in work and career progression (Social Mobility Commission). Readers may also be interested in the online webinar hosted by the Bridge Group exploring

graduate recruitment in a post-Covid-19 world (Bridge Group, 'Graduate Recruitment in a Post Covid-19 World.').

Details

Enjoying work and being on track

90. Many of the graduates were **enjoying their work**. Interviewees reported satisfaction from being able to work on high-value projects or do work which they felt was improving the world – for the environment or society. APP alumni would speak with pride about having realised their ambition of achieving a graduate career. Additionally, along with the comparator sample from lower SEBs, alumni would talk about the pride of not only being a first-generation university student, but a **first-generation professional** – often making more money than their parents had ever earned and being able to give back to their families.

"My dad would have studied if he could have. That's why I'm working so hard because he didn't have these opportunities. My starting salary is triple what my mum and dad earned. It's great being able to tell dad he can take Friday, Saturday and Sundays off. I can take him to the football."

91. The enjoyment that interviewees from higher SEBs experienced did not tend to have this additional layer of meaning, and they spoke with more of a freedom about being able to specialise in their chosen career to align with their interests and ambitions.

"I work in corporate social responsibility. I've worked with a lot of big organisations and a lot of incredible clients – responding to Covid and Brexit. It's high pressure and high performing, but it's what I want to be doing"

92. Related to the question of enjoying work, our APP alumni survey asked whether the job they had at 15 months post-graduation fitted with their long-term plans. Most respondents (74%) agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. This figure is comparable to that of the nationally representative

Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) cohort[21]. APP alumni responding were equally likely to strongly agree or agree with this statement 15 months post-graduation (76%) and at the current time (77%). The table below summarises the responses from the two groups.

Table 8. Proportion of APP and GOS cohorts agreeing that their activity 15 months after graduation fits with their plans for the future

	APP cohort	GOS
Strongly agree / Agree	74%	74%
Neither agree nor disagree	14%	9%
Strongly disagree / Disagree	12%	17%

93. When we disaggregate this by employment status, we find that for those in full-time employment (APP cohort n = 46) the proportion of agreement (strongly agree or agree) is 80% for both the GOS and APP cohort. Those who disagree (strongly disagree or disagree) comprise 12% of the GOS and 9% of the APP cohort. (HESA, Graduates' Reflections on Activity.)

94. As presented in the table below, we also disaggregated by earnings the extent to which graduates' current activity was aligned with their plans.[22]

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[21] As part of the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS), graduates (those from the 2017-18 academic year) were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with certain statements about their current activity. One of these statements is whether their current activity (e.g., employment or further studies) fits with their future plans. (HESA, Graduates' Reflections on Activity.)

[22] This has been restricted to just two salary bands due to small samples sizes in the APP cohort.

Table 9. Proportion of APP and GOS cohorts by earnings agreeing that their activity 15 months after graduation fits with their plans for the future

	GOS £21,000-£29,999 per annum	APP cohort £20,001-£30,000 per annum	GOS £30,000-£38,999 per annum	APP cohort £30,001-£40,000 per annum
Strongly agree / Agree	85%	59%	91%	81%
Neither agree nor disagree	7%	18%	5%	13%
Strongly disagree / Disagree	8%	24%	5%	6%

95. When disaggregated by earnings, there was a higher proportion of disagreement from the APP cohort in the £20,001–£30,000 salary band, relative to the national cohort. A potential explanation for this could be that the APP cohort have a more specific idea (or higher expectations) than the wider graduate cohort of their future plans and that the APP cohort in the lower salary band had not made the progress they planned or hoped for. This is explored in the following section.

Barriers to progression

96. Moving on to exploring perceived barriers to progression in the workplace, we present first the findings from our survey of APP alumni. In the survey of APP alumni, respondents were asked which of the following factors helped with progression in the workplace. Most respondents mentioned confidence (98%) and fitting into the culture of the workplace (93%).

Figure 11. Perceived factors that help with career progression

Coming across as confident — 98%

Fitting into the culture of the organisation — 93%

Feeling like I belong in the organisation — 88%

Maintaining a 'personal brand' and visibility — 84%

Having a mentor within the organisation/profession — 79%

Speaking with a similar accent to most employees — 44%

Base N= 56 to 57 depending on question

97. When asked 'to what extent have you found the following factors difficult?', respondents were most likely to have selected 'somewhat' or 'to a great extent' for factors relating to workload and work life balance.

Figure 12. Factors respondents found difficult in the workplace

Managing the workload — 65%

Managing my work life balance — 63%

Fitting in at your organisation in terms of family background and income — 47%

Feeling like I belong in my organisation — 42%

Fitting in at your organisation in terms of ethnic identity — 30%
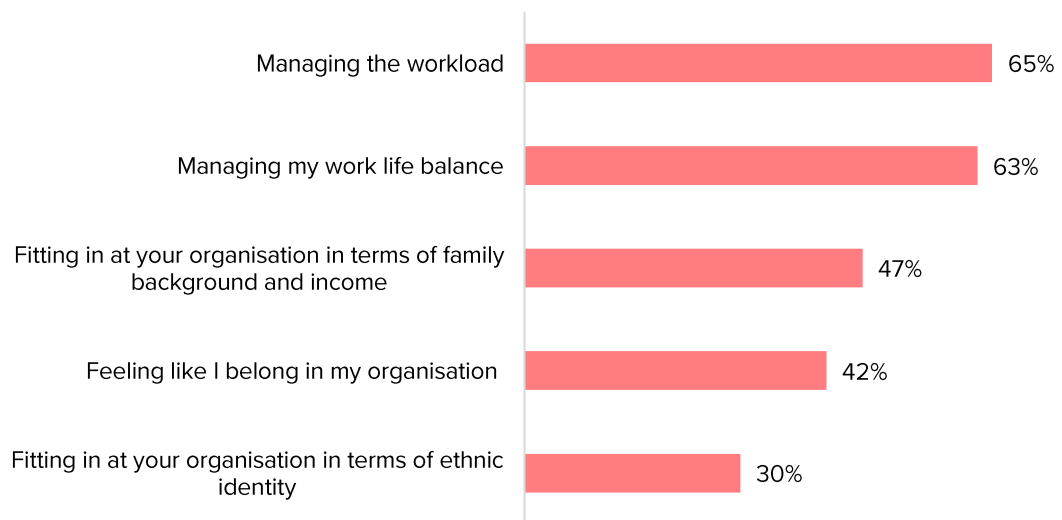
Base N= 57

98. The figure below disaggregates these responses by gender. Men were significantly more likely than women to agree that the factors were challenging. For instance, men (58%) were more than twice as likely than women (27%) to say that 'Feeling like I belong in my organisation' was difficult in the workplace. However, given the small sample size, this analysis by gender should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 13. Factors respondents found difficult in the workplace, by gender

Base Female N= 31; Male N=28
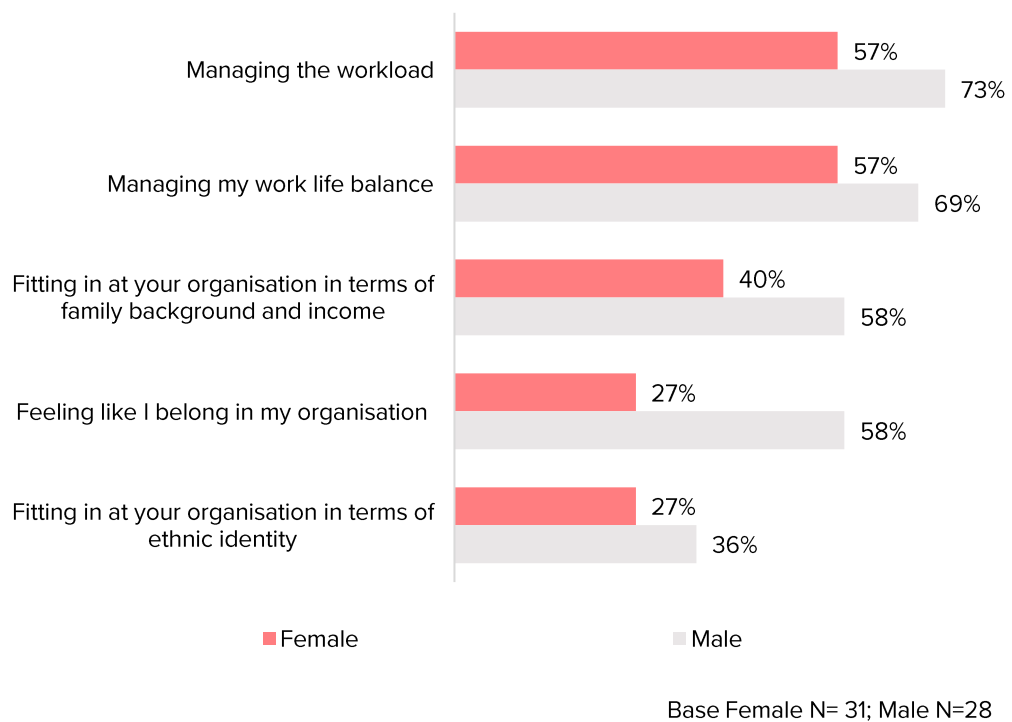
99. There were no consistent trends in age amongst those who found managing their workload difficult in the workplace. This is shown in the figure below. We have used the year that respondents attended the APP programme (when they were in Year 12) as a proxy for their age. This also provides some indication of when they might have attended university and/or started working. We use this proxy, because data on the number of years respondents have been employed was not available. Some respondents pursued further studies after their undergraduate degree, while a small minority were employed at 15 months post-graduation but are not currently working.

Figure 14. Percentage of respondents who found managing their workload difficult, by year they attended the APP programme

2011-2012	73%
2012-2013	55%
2013-2014	58%
2014-2015	73%
2015-2016	71%

Base N= 55 for overall question

100. The figure above suggests that on average, regardless of age and perhaps number of years in the workforce, most respondents found it challenging to manage their workload. It is worth noting however, the sample size for this analysis is very small (n<15 in each category), suggesting the need for future research in this area.

101. Although 'fitting in at your organisation in terms of ethnicity' (30%) was the least likely to be selected as a challenge, this trend differed by respondents' ethnicity. Ethnically diverse, Black or Asian respondents were about 13 times more likely than White respondents to say that it was a challenge to fit in at their workplace based on their ethnicity.[23] All those graduates interviewed who identified as ethnically diverse, Black or Asian reported having experienced racism in the workplace.

[23] Respondents who identified as ethnically diverse, Black or Asian were combined into a single BAME category (N<30) due to small sample sizes. We recognise that this group is not homogenous and have combined them for statistical purposes only.

Figure 15. Percentage of respondents who found 'fitting in at your organisation in terms of ethnicity' to be difficult, by ethnicity

BAME 55%

White 4%

Base White N= 26; BAME N= 29

102. Our interviews with APP alumni broadly echoed the survey findings and provided more depth. These interviews indicated that, despite early exposure to the professions through their work experience, APP alumni felt that it was still a challenge to **navigate the professions**. Many were still uncomfortable with professional networking and felt out of place in their chosen career. In particular, it was felt that the importance of good social relationships for progression – particularly relationships with line management – made it more difficult to progress. These experiences were echoed by comparator interviewees that came from a lower SEB. A common theme across all three groups was the importance of finding a good mentor who would advocate for you.

"When you're going for promotion the managers will ask – are they ready for the next step? So, if you don't have that network of senior people, and people aren't willing to vouch for you it won't happen. It's not just your manager, it's the other stakeholders too. If someone knows you – straight away that makes it easier."

"I was part of a mentoring scheme which was really helpful because this sector is so incestuous. They provided guidance and helped with making connections and meeting people. They were from the same part of the country as my dad, they were genuine and had a similar background."

103. Interviewees from higher SEBs still found it challenging to progress. However, they would often talk about the '**luck**' of finding a good team, or a supportive line manager. Cumulatively these stories of 'luck' suggest a situation where it is easier to be luckier when you share a socio-economic background with the wider profession and senior staff. In other words, the privilege that people from higher SEBs experience when navigating the professions is not explicit or easily identifiable but is the absence of feeling out of place or of uncertainty about how certain professions operate. The privilege of coming

from a higher SEB is about the absence of struggle as much as the additional social and economic capital that individuals might be able to draw on.

"In the very beginning I felt supported. But it can be luck of the draw -- I was assigned a really supportive career coach, I was very lucky."

"I am trying to put in the hard work but if I am also not up there, socially, people won't know who I am and it is quite hard to make people back you when they don't know you."

104. A common perception amongst interviewees was that their current workplace was diverse and inclusive at an entry graduate level, but the **further up the organisation, the less diverse it became**. Interviewees – especially those from lower SEBs – felt that socio-economic background played a part in this. Although companies have placed a lot of emphasis on diverse graduate recruitment in recent years, it was felt that those from lower SEBs were not adequately supported in their progression. In part this was about those with prior social connections being well placed to bring in business. Secondly there was the cumulative effect of feeling out of place. Interviewees – regardless of socio-economic background – told us about friends who had decided to leave because they were unhappy.

"Certainly, at the graduate level there is a lot of diversity. That diversity declines rapidly as you become more senior. Diverse candidates often do not hang around that long. I think while recruiting they don't mind whether you are diverse or not, but there is not much support beyond the graduate process for diversity. [...] I would imagine that it is because it is challenging enough to do the work we are asked to do without any other challenges on top and diverse people are more likely to have other challenges."

105. The reasons for people leaving were often cultural. It was clear that the **culture of workplaces** can be alienating. Many interviewees recognised that the situation was improving, but that there were persistent, unresolved issues. A recurring topic of conversation was how the culture of staying late until the work is done can push some away. The length of working hours – often well beyond a full-time contract – was an aspect of working culture which many accepted but were not happy about. It was clear that many still felt the cultural pressure to work late and be seen working late, with many feeling that it was a necessary sacrifice to be successful in their careers. This was exacerbated by the blurring of working and socialising, which made it difficult to maintain

boundaries around their working hours. This can be especially challenging for those with additional caring responsibilities.

"The way people go to the pub with each other all the time is a problem – I don't want to miss out on the nepotism, because they were all drinking together. Those things happen! There are Friday night gin nights for example – I'd come into work on the Monday and all of the interesting work with development and responsibilities would be assigned away. What do you say in those situations?"

"There's the expectation that you must go above and beyond – to dedicate your entire life to the job."

"It is a lot about your reputation and if you are thought of as someone who works really, really hard, visibly working, visibly in the office late. And you need to work with the right people. It is a combination of who you know and what you know."

106. There was a clear sense that progression in a career requires people to **embody the role**. That is, many of the dimensions of progression that individuals from lower SEBs experienced as challenging was having to adapt aspects of their identity (such as accent or attitude), as they were acutely aware that perception and representing their work was an important part of succeeding. Some talked about how they experienced this in small ways too and how the exhaustion of having to portray confidence and extroversion cumulatively wore them out. To a degree, people are changing who they are to fit into the required profession, rather than the profession adapting to accommodate and welcome people from their background.

"I adapted the way I talk and my body language, putting on a business personality."

"I've definitely softened my accent and attitude. You have to be careful about your image, there's a reputation of the kind of lads that come from where I'm from, you have to pro-actively defend against that."

"If you are given a piece of work or someone speaks to you and you having to google to find out what certain words mean, or just not having that literacy that maybe other people do."

Intersectional challenges

107. The journeys that some interviewees had been on were further complicated by their experience of racism, sexism, and homophobia. These factors – in many ways inseparable from their socio-economic background – affected people's perception of their career and sense of belonging.

108. Due to the limitations of the comparator sample – all of the individuals from higher SEBs we interviewed identified as White – it is not possible to be definitive about how socio-economic background would alter experiences and perceptions of racism, sexism and homophobia. However, it is possible to say that due to the nature of systemic racism, it is often people that identify as ethnically diverse, Black and Asian that will also experience the barriers associated with socio-economic background. This contributes to our findings that for first generation professionals it is often the cumulative impact of barriers and feeling out of place that can push someone away from their career, and that **for people from higher SEBs it is often the absence of challenge that best describes their privilege**.

109. Most interviewees with a protected characteristic and/or who were from a lower SEB talked about how aspects of their identity added to feeling 'out of place'. For example, the blurring of socialising and working was alienating to some interviewees from lower SEBs, but this was amplified for those who identified as Muslim who could not drink for religious reasons or avoided meals out because of the challenge of finding halal options. The **cumulative effect** of these cultural norms can work to push someone to start looking for work elsewhere. These challenges are amplified by their situation as a first generation professional with a limited support network around them, and when there are few (or no) role models at more senior levels who share their background.

"The most difficult thing is knowing how to make the right decision. I loved the job, but I was really upset. Some saying I should stay, others saying I should move – just leave. Difficult to know what the right thing to do was. I wouldn't cry the week I got paid, but I was crying every other week."

110. Some were made to feel uncomfortable by off-hand comments by senior members of staff – that even if they meant no harm, reminded interviewees that they were **out of place**, reinforcing their feelings of not belonging.

"I remember having a conversation at a social when I was very junior – I wasn't 'out' because I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone – where a senior member staff asked: "have you got a girlfriend?" When they saw how visibly uncomfortable and anxious I must have been they said: 'Oh, have you got a boyfriend'."

111. Women in particular felt as if they had to defend their right to be in certain positions – and expressed worry about staying in their career as they got older.

"There are times when you can feel disadvantaged as a woman. Often with clients too, people that express surprise: 'oh, you're who I'm meeting with today' – YES, would you like to see my qualifications?"

"I'm at a point in my career where I'll have kids soon and so it's important the support they give me when I'm on maternity leave and when I come back, because it's a lot more challenging for women after they have kids in this sector"

112. Or how their particular history – with delays to graduating due to personal circumstances – made them that much more of an outsider compared with their joining cohort and with people of a similar age in their organisation.

"I started later than my peers (late 20s compared to straight out of university), this has led to a couple of awkward moments, we'll be having lunch and people are talking about getting mortgages etc. and I'm just sat with a sandwich. Or the people I joined with will be social, going out at the weekends, and I just feel old."

113. **These social challenges amplify the barriers** already explored above, such as the importance of line management for progression, and finding a mentor from a similar background.

"You want to feel welcomed. If you don't see people like you […] then you start to question: will you fit in?"

"Me and my line manager, we did not get on. I'm very independent and have a serious science background, and she wanted to feel like she knew better. I wasn't given the power to sign off on things, even though other staff members at my level could. You know I'm good at my job, why won't you let me do it. […] It felt evidently racist, anytime rap music would come up -- they'd look to me for an opinion. […] things only improved when I was able to have the only Black manager in the company as a mentor."

114. Moreover, it was often felt that the **onus was on employees to change their organisation** rather than the organisation adapting to offer better ways of working. Additionally, some felt it was not worth the potential reputational risk of holding another staff member to account because of the effort or trauma of having their negative experience dissected by multiple members of staff.

"It's sometimes not worth the effort [to address a potential racist incident] because it could backfire."

"It was great we got approval from senior staff to set up the [representation] committee. And then they turn around and say – and you can co-chair it because you're "One of them".

115. Developing and maintaining good relationships is important for succeeding in the workplace, however our interviewees found the culture at their workplaces made it difficult to build these relationships or to feel as if they 'fit in' with the culture at work.

116. The Bridge Group's prior research in this area has suggested how the ways to break down these barriers – a welcoming culture, flexible working, accountability for discrimination across the organisation, transparent recruitment and progression, and more diverse leadership throughout an organisation – can benefit all.[24] These kinds of reforms can help to overcome socio-economic inequalities, as well as the intersectional challenges of socio-economic background in conjunction with racism, sexism and homophobia.

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[24] See for example our reports on socio-economic diversity in financial services (Bridge Group, Who Gets Ahead and How? Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression in Financial Services: A Study of Eight Organisations.), and the real estate sector (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Diversity in the Real Estate Sector) and the arts (Bridge Group, Hold on. Diversity and Managing in the Arts.)

Discussion

117. This research has demonstrated that APP alumni enjoy graduate outcomes that are above (and often well above) the average for their peers not involved in the programme. This is a significant achievement, particularly since our review of literature and practice can find only limited evidence of the success of other outreach programmes with similar aims. **APP alumni were more likely than the national graduate population to be in full-time employment and earning higher salaries:** 86% of APP alumni responding to the survey were in full-time employment 15 months after graduation, compared to 57% of the wider graduate population reported by HESA. On average, APP alumni were earning more than the wider graduate population 15 months after graduation, but by this time point they were also earning more than the wider graduate population did 5 years after graduation. This advantage holds true, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

118. Due to the eligibility criteria of the APP programme, alumni were more likely to have received free school meals and have attended a state-funded school. Thus, they were not representative of the wider graduate population and all else being equal, were likely to have achieved lower graduate outcomes. Although the sample size was limited and we were unable to control the effects of factors that may affect graduate outcomes (for example: A level attainment, subjects studied and university attended), **the quantitative analysis suggests that participation in the APP is linked with improved graduate outcomes.** However, salary alone does not tell the full story. Graduates' stories highlighted that the paths to good graduate jobs and their experiences in the workplace vary.

119. The structure of this research has foregrounded the differences in experiences between those from higher and lower SEBs. It became clear how significant the intervention required to overcome socio-economic inequalities is. **The APP and schemes like them offer an effective and focused intervention** at important moments in a person's development. This can provide important insight when planning for the future and encourage participants to begin job hunting sooner rather than later, as well as pro-actively considering which courses and universities best suit them. However, for those from higher SEBs, the advantages (and often the absence of disadvantage) that they experience are resources that can be returned to

again and again over the duration of their career. Moreover, they are the kinds of resources that are helpful in multiple settings, whether they decide to pursue a career in finance, consultancy, law, or in the arts and cultural sectors.

120. These findings about early career experiences are just that: early career experiences. **It is an open question what the outcomes for these interviewees will be over the course of their career,** as additional factors come into play. The women we spoke with were already expressing concern about balancing childcare with their chosen career, and the interviewees who identified as ethnically diverse, Black or Asian, or identified as Muslim, gave a clear impression that it is the cumulative effect of feeling out of place that can push someone away from their chosen career. Interviewees from lower SEBs could see how peers from higher SEBs who had a richer (quite literally) social network would be better placed to bring in business for their respective organisations as they progressed. It is therefore an open question how lasting these differing experiences will be over the course of a career.

121. Attempting to characterise the experiences of the different sample groups for this research in the broadest terms possible, there is a sense that **for those from lower SEBs there are many contingencies in their journeys to graduate jobs.** Did they participate in an outreach scheme? Did they qualify for a scholarship? Did they construct a supportive extra-curricular society at university? Did they find a mentor that shared their background? These are small moments that interviewees were able to look back on and identify as important turning points in their respective journeys. However, there is a contingency to them: how many times could their scenario have played out, and their journey to a good graduate job be affected by receiving (or not receiving) the right input at the right time? **In comparison, there is an ease and sense of 'falling into' careers for individuals from higher SEBs.** In many situations, interviewees from higher SEBs took the expected path – even if it was a challenging path – to their careers. At each stage in their journey, they took the next most sensible step, which for the interviewees we spoke with, led them to good graduate jobs in law, consultancy and finance.

122. Finally, one of the overarching questions that this research has highlighted is: **how should success be thought about for the journeys that people taking part in programmes like the APP go on?** The APP is designed to support individuals into high quality career opportunities – and this report has highlighted how successful it is in achieving that aim. Looking more broadly across all interviewees from lower SEBs, it was however clear that for many,

this frame of success (attaining a graduate role in a competitive corporate environment) created additional burden and a sense of responsibility, and at times put individuals into positions which have made them feel uncomfortable or out of place. One of the most striking findings was the disparity between respondents' self-reported sense of success, and their actual achievements in relation to employment and salary.

123. As we have noted, most of the interviewees from lower SEBs had received some type of targeted support: some through the APP, others elsewhere. Such programmes contribute to informed decision-making, and it is possible that some providers may need to confirm more explicitly that an informed decision to pursue a career path other than that highlighted by the programme is also a valid outcome. In addition, everyone working with young people preparing for and entering their early careers should be conscious of the need to help them build the skills to evaluate their own wellbeing.

124. This also speaks to the challenges that all interviewees – regardless of socio-economic background – raised, the desire for a fulfilling job with a healthy work / life balance. This is not something that a programme like the APP can solve on its own. There is wider responsibility for employers, government, and regulators in encouraging inclusive work cultures and flexible working; and allowing people to manage their work in a healthy and sustainable way. Our recommendations point the way to specific actions employers can take.

Recommendations

125. The first section focuses on graduates' views of changes they would like to see to help them progress to good graduate employment. We then include a brief section with our **summary** recommendations for employers, drawing on the Bridge Group's published research.

Graduates' views

126. The APP was a well-received intervention at an important time in an individual's development. It prompted participants to think early about what career they might like to pursue, and how they can go about pursuing that career. However, many of our interviewees had constructive suggestions for how they might be better supported in their early careers. This section focuses on their recommendations.

127. Alumni responding to the survey were asked what kind of career progression support they would have liked from the SMF or the employers which sponsored their APP programme, as well as their own employers. They were most likely to say that they would have liked professional development courses from the SMF or their APP employers (for example, on networking and presenting). On the other hand, most respondents would like their employers to have arranged a mentor for them in their chosen profession. Responses are presented in more detail in the figure below.

Figure 16. Respondents' preferred type of career progression support, by organisation
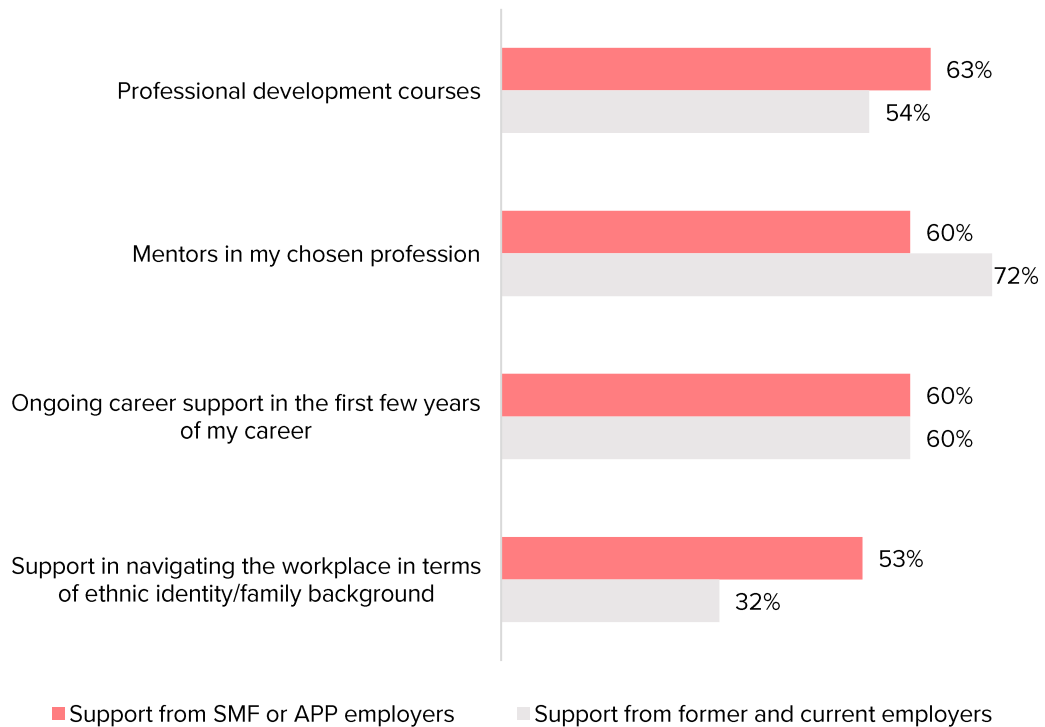
Base N= 57

128. Over half the respondents (at least 53%) would like ongoing support from the SMF or the employers which sponsored their APP programme. This finding suggests that views on how the SMF can support alumni is distinct from respondents' expectations of an employer. There are some areas of support that respondents would prefer to receive from the SMF rather than their employers. This is particularly true for professional development courses and support in navigating the workplace in terms of ethnicity and family background.

129. The majority of our interviews with APP alumni echoed this wish for ongoing support. A number of the APP alumni we interviewed expressed specifically a desire for **post-university careers support**.

130. All the interviewees benefitted from the support that was provided at sixth form or college, and it was then a common experience that university was a very busy period where it was difficult to manage all of their commitments –

let alone stay in touch with the APP and SMF. However, by the time they had graduated, interviewees felt that they would have been ready and would have liked some input at that stage, to 're-connect' as many put it. In no small part because the graduate job market is so competitive – any help in connecting with the alumni network, (re)connecting with a mentor, accessing internships or skills / training would have been greatly appreciated.

"The SMF was really engaging, but at university it was just difficult to juggle life. I lost touch a bit. Having a way to connect with each year group would be great for networking and making connections."

"To be honest, if they could offer something more of the same, facilitating an internship after university or during university for those that are struggling – even though it's a crowded market – that would have helped."

131. As well as talking about the **value of the mentoring** accessed via the APP, alumni talked about how more could be made of that connection, and how important they can be throughout a career. Some also felt as if they were not getting as much from their mentor as other APP alumni or were not offered one at all.

"I felt a little bit bad in terms of reaching out to the mentor…I think it would be useful to have a session on how to keep a relationship going with a mentor…and support people in using that resource, because I wasn't sure what to ask, how to take this conversation further, I didn't want to ask stupid questions…something to help people make the most of the resources that are offered."

132. Amongst the graduates from the comparator sample we interviewed, as well as the APP interviewees, there were recurring suggestions for improvement in helping people progress from university to a graduate job: **the careers service at university**, and **transparent recruitment and progression**.

133. Although there were interviewees who felt that their university careers service was sufficient, there were some common suggestions for improvement. One was to **have careers guidance better integrated with their core subject**. Another was for **guidance to be more tailored and specific**. Additionally, most felt that **careers guidance could be offered earlier**, to better reflect the reality that some students begin thinking about their future careers from the moment they arrive at university.

"By the time I had learned about the process and the system and how grad schemes work, I was a bit late"

134. Turning to the workplace, many interviewees discussed the importance of transparent recruitment and progression. Here, **knowing what was needed to be done to progress** was felt to be important; as was **having pro-active conversations with managers about how to progress**. Although there were formal, widely known criteria for progression, we frequently noted comments that there were additional hidden criteria that affected progression. Interviewees appreciated it when there were **structured paths to internal recruitment** that made it easy to move within a large organisation to further develop their career.

"I think they're not very transparent about how long things take and what the process is … I even know people who have been promoted but not told what their salary is."

"Beyond the graduate programme, I feel like there needs to be more support and transparency on the progression system."

135. Finally, many reflected on how the **culture of a workplace and conditions of employment** could be improved. This was felt to be important to retain staff and improve overall wellbeing. Suggestions varied, but included: **flexible working, a pay ratio between the highest and lowest paid in an organisation, social activities that do not rely on alcohol,** and for their **diversity policies to be seen to be having an impact on day-to-day working**. In order to improve the culture, it is important to reflect on the biggest changes (pay ratios between the highest and lowest paid) as well as the small changes (what kinds of social activities are organised) that can make a difference to how people feel about the places that they work.[25]

"At my previous place of work I felt invisible and didn't feel like they invested in me [...] I want a company culture where people help each other, relationships where people communicate and is inclusive and diverse"

"Providing more social interaction while working from home and making an effort to make people feel part of the company"

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[25] Organisations such as Deeds + Words can advise on inclusive cultural change. See https://deedsandwords.co.uk/.

Summary recommendations for employers

136. The graduates we interviewed for this research collectively have much in common with other early career professionals working with prestigious employers - and have similar views on what needs to change. We present below a summary of recommendations that recur across the Bridge Group's work with such employers, and that are directly relevant to the interviewees' comments. For details of actions underpinning these recommendations, please see the Bridge Group's website.[26]

137. Given that our study includes the views of recent graduates employed by a number of organisations, their views and experiences may not be representative of all graduates with similar characteristics employed by those organisations. We strongly recommend that individual employers gather more information about recent graduates' experiences in their respective workplaces.

Summary recommendations

> Engage your colleagues in this research: discussion promotes understanding and the momentum for change.
> Review and reshape organisational cultures: to become more inclusive and with a shared understanding of what constitutes merit.
> Make recruitment and promotion processes more open and transparent.
> Include socio-economic background within the broader diversity and inclusion agenda.
> Embed diversity and inclusion within mainstream processes for identifying and rewarding good performance and for managing and retaining talent.
> Formalise the informal: for example, senior sponsorship and work allocation.

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[26] Research reports are at www.thebridgegroup.org.uk/research. See, for example, the recommendations in our 2020 reports on Banking and Finance and Real Estate; see also our 2018 report on early career progression in the law.

> Ensure robust data collection and analysis is in place to inform and evaluate progress.
> Take intersectionality seriously: Bridge Group research shows that ethnically diverse employees from lower SEBs tend to face a 'double disadvantage'.[27]

Employers' Toolkit

138. The Bridge Group produced the Employers' Toolkit in collaboration with the Social Mobility Commission and industry leaders to promote socio-economic diversity and inclusion. It provides practical recommendations to ensure that talented individuals from lower SEBs are not overlooked.

139. The toolkit uses the evidence base to offer practical ways in which all employers can be more equal, access new talent, and develop more inclusive workplaces. It should become a guide for all leading employers that care about these matters. The toolkit and resources can be accessed at socialmobilityworks.org.

Social Mobility Employer Index

The Social Mobility Employer Index is an annual benchmarking and assessment tool for employers operated by the Social Mobility Foundation. The Index assesses performance on seven areas of workplace social mobility, with an optional employee survey to add further context. Participant employers receive a tailored feedback report with practical recommendations on ways to improve and the Social Mobility Foundation publishes the data analysis, insights and general recommendations along with the top 75 performers.

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[27] As above.

Appendix 1: Review of literature and practice

140. Social mobility is defined as the movement of individuals, families or groups, through a social hierarchy or between different social classes. While patterns of social mobility in the UK are contested, the current consensus is that rates of absolute social mobility have declined over the past forty years and that, overall, society has become less fluid. High rates of social mobility are considered by many policy makers as emblematic of a meritocratic society in which social position is based on talent and hard work, rather than background or social class of origin. This explains why apparently declining rates have become a matter of increasing concern for governments in the UK over the past fifteen years.

141. Improving access to 'elite' professional and managerial jobs is often considered critical to addressing this situation, because these roles have traditionally offered the most important route towards upwards social mobility for individuals. There is, however, evidence that it has become increasingly difficult for young people from less advantaged backgrounds to access these elite jobs over the past thirty years, which have become increasingly closed on the basis of social class.[28] For example, one study by the Sutton Trust in 2014 found that amongst new entrants to investment banks educated in the UK, almost 40% had been educated privately, compared to 7% of the population (The Boston Consulting Group).

142. Socio-economic background also influences career progression and remuneration in careers. With respect to career progression, the study cited above also found that in investment banks up to 60% of senior leaders had been educated privately (Op cit.), suggesting that the advantages of background are amplified in careers. A study by the Bridge Group in 2020 found that up to 90% of senior leaders in a sample group of elite financial service firms had the most privileged socio-economic backgrounds, compared to 34% of the population at large (Bridge Group, Who Gets Ahead and How? Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression in Financial

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[28] See for example: (HM Government)

Services: A Study of Eight Organisations.).

143. Sociologist Sam Friedman's pioneering work has pointed to a considerable 'class ceiling' in elite professions, where people who are upwardly socially mobile experience a significant pay gap. This gap is particularly significant in the finance sector, and amounts to over £17,000 per annum (Friedman and Laurison).

144. This brief literature review considers outreach and other interventions that have been introduced by organisations and occupations to help young people from under-represented backgrounds access 'elite' jobs and subsequently get on. It is a positive development that organisations have introduced a range of such interventions. However, outreach with young people cannot happen in isolation: outreach can support and prepare young people for progression to employment, but potential employers need to ensure that their cultures and structures do not present barriers to entry. In evaluating outreach, we need to be conscious of these two aspects of success - and recognise that outreach programmes may not have the remit of influencing organisational culture. However, where an employer runs outreach with the aim of widening its own graduate recruitment, but without addressing any barriers, then there are questions of both efficacy and ethics.

145. Evaluations of outcomes over the short, medium and longer term are not widely available, especially those using statistical data. Those which do exist suggest ambivalent results, especially as the culture and structure of elite organisations has been slow to change. There is very limited evidence to date of wholesale change in the demographics of new entrants to elite organisations. Outreach participants' experiences in graduate recruitment processes and in early career are also mixed, with some reporting debilitating experiences of stigma and shame.

Explaining occupational exclusion on the basis of social class

146. Before describing the impact of social mobility interventions, it is important to note first that there are many explanations for what is often called occupational closure (or social exclusion) from elite jobs, which this review can only touch on. However, in brief, analyses are often divided between those which focus on the 'supply side,' especially considering the effect of

educational inequalities on individuals hoping to secure these jobs; and those which focus on the 'demand side,' the decisions made by managers in relation to hiring and promotion. While explanations overlap, in this review, we focus more heavily on supply-side issues and the impact of supply-side interventions, especially as they impact people's ability to navigate demand-side issues and potential discrimination. We focus on the supply side, because the APP is a supply-side outreach intervention. We do not directly discuss the impact of demand-side interventions, such as CV-blind recruitment, contextual recruitment or other changes to screening processes.[29]

147. One demand-side issue is that elite employers tend to recruit the majority of their new graduates from 'elite' universities, in the UK typically amongst the 'Russell Group.' This is problematic because students from higher SEBs are heavily over-represented at these institutions. This is not the result of superior and innate talent or ability but can be explained by more advantaged students' having generally benefitted from improved access to educational resources, which may have facilitated stronger performance at school. The most advantaged fifth of school leavers are ten times more likely to attend a top university than the least privileged fifth (UCAS). An additional issue is that students from less advantaged backgrounds have lower retention rates at universities (Social Market Foundation).

148. 2018 research by the Sutton Trust provides more detail of differential access to highly selective universities. It found that applicants to Russell Group universities from non-selective state schools were less likely to be placed at a Russell Group university compared to those from independent schools (44% versus 71%), while almost two thirds of those who applied from grammar schools were placed (63%).[30] Applicants from Further Education colleges had lower acceptance rates at 30%. Acceptance rates for Oxbridge were higher for applicants from independent and grammar schools, with about a third of applicants from independent schools (34%) and grammar schools (31%) being

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[29] For a discussion of these points in relation to the professions and financial services see for example: (Ashley et al.); (Moore et al.)

[30] Being placed at a university means that an applicant has been made an offer, accepted that offer and had the offer confirmed after examination results are known. UCAS refers to this as being accepted, and thus acceptance rate means here the ratio between applications and those being accepted (placed).

placed, compared to 25% of applicants from sixth form colleges and 22% from comprehensive schools (Montacute and Cullinane).

149. Another demand-side issue is that while elite employers tend to suggest that academic qualifications are key indicators of technical competence and therefore of 'merit,' at the point of selection most applicants are similarly qualified and so this does not provide a differentiating factor. In response, and given significant uncertainty around how to identify and define 'talent,' hiring managers have often based selection decisions on a range of more subjective factors, such as confidence and 'polish.' The latter is an ambiguous term which tends to refer to 'embodied' characteristics such as dress, accent, speech, behaviours and mannerisms. It is important to note that what is considered 'appropriate' by employers is largely arbitrary and based on historical stereotypes, thus having little relationship with the technical requirements for the role.

150. The key point here is that recruiting for polish has a negative impact on socio-economic diversity, because it is generally most available to people who have been 'appropriately' socialised - and this tends to be people who perhaps have been privately educated and who are middle or upper-class.

151. Access is also affected by social capital, as over the past ten to fifteen years, recruitment cycles have moved earlier in academic careers, so that young people are expected to engage with potential employers in their first year at university or even when they are at school. This is much more feasible for young people who have friends and family in similar careers, who can provide information about recruitment cycles and entry routes.

152. With respect to career progression, Friedman and Laurison have explained the 'class ceiling' as people from more advantaged backgrounds having more financial support to navigate early careers, which may involve insecure contracts, unpaid internships, and thus be relatively precarious. This financial precarity is perhaps less likely in financial services, where formal internships tend to be paid. However, Bridge Group research across several professional sectors shows other forms of advantage: being culturally similar to existing employees may leave more privileged people better positioned to build networks and gain informal sponsorship to help them get on; and confidence

may be enhanced as they perceive themselves as a good fit for more competitive roles and are more likely to be perceived as such by employers.[31]

153. In 2021, Friedman produced a report concerning class and career progression in the Civil Service.(Friedman) This found that civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the Civil Service, and even when they 'get in' they struggle to 'get on', and that the proportion of senior civil servants from higher socio-economic backgrounds is higher today than in 1967.

154. Explanations provided were that certain accelerator routes are available to the top, which are more visible to people who have organisational guides, who may in turn be more available to people who are culturally similar; career guidance is sometimes unclear; people from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to self-sort into operational routes, which appear more tangible or meritocratic; career progression relies on learning opaque behavioural codes including what Friedman terms 'studied neutrality'; and people from more privileged backgrounds often downplay that privilege. The report also found that these difficulties are more pronounced for women and people who are ethnically diverse. While the causes of inequality are context-specific, it is likely that some explanations overlap with those we might find in investment banking and financial services.

Organisational social mobility programmes and interventions

155. Organisational interventions focusing on widening access (like the underlying issues) can be divided between those that focus on the supply-side, in other words supporting potential employees with navigating recruitment processes and developing soft skills, and those that focus on demand, in other words focusing on how organisations make decisions around who to hire. Where organisations focus on the former this is known as a 'deficit model' of diversity, as the emphasis is on the individual rather than the organisation to change. In these circumstances, significant change to the profile of new

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[31] See: (Bridge Group, New Taskforce to Boost Socio-Economic Diversity in UK Financial and Professional Services Sectors.); (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Background and Progression to Partner in the Law.); (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Diversity in the Real Estate Sector)

entrants is less likely overall, especially as assimilation to dominant norms is emotionally exhausting and often impossible.

156. Some professional service firms have made changes to their hiring processes, to introduce, for example, CV-blind hiring, contextual admissions or to recruit from a wider set of universities. The impact on the demographics of new entrants is not clear, and it is even less clear whether financial service firms and investment banks have made significant changes to their recruitment policies. Where they have not, this is likely to have a negative impact on the 'success' of supply-side interventions, as outcomes for participants will also depend on whether hiring processes are fair.

157. Supply-side interventions include, for example, outreach, with the intention of offering young people insight into professional and managerial roles, and more sophisticated programmes. These are often devised and implemented by charities and third-sector organisations working alongside elite commercial organisations to widen access.

158. One of the latter is the Social Mobility Foundation's (SMF) Aspiring Professional Programme (APP). This programme offers young people from under-represented social backgrounds periods of work experience with elite employers in a range of sectors including financial services, medicine and law, along with coaching, skills training, mentoring and other forms of relevant support. The SMF was amongst the first to focus on supporting young people who live outside London, which is relatively saturated with relevant interventions, and to focus on supporting young people in social mobility 'cold spots'.

159. Other organisations working in a similar space include the Sutton Trust, which offers a range of programmes including 'Pathways to Finance' and 'Pathways to Law.' Rare Recruitment and SEO also support young people from under-represented backgrounds into professional roles, working with them when they are still at school, with a particular historic focus on intersections with ethnicity. UpReach provides support to university students from under-represented backgrounds, focusing on employability skills.

160. To date the focus of these organisations, and of the commercial entities with which they work, has been on helping under-represented groups get into elite professions and occupations, rather than progress within them, although there is some more recent work in the latter space, which we outline below.

Interventions and impact: some generalised evidence

161. Before discussing the specific impact of social mobility programmes, it is helpful to consider similar programmes which have been more widely studied, especially those aimed at Widening Participation (WP) in higher education. Some of these programmes have aimed to improve aspiration, but research suggests this is misdirected, as expectations around higher education play a more important role in influencing or determining outcomes, and reflect individual's subjective assessments of their probability of getting in (Harrison and Waller). The distinction between aspiration and expectation is important in the current context, since it suggests that some young people may self-select out of elite universities because, on the basis of prior academic attainment and expected 'fit,' they do not believe they will get in.

162. It is also important to underline that previous literature on outreach programmes relating to higher education and WP suggest these can have an important and positive impact, when they include 'active counselling or simplify the university application process, but not when they only provide general information on higher education' (Herbaut and Geven). However, while the initial impact may be positive, evidence on the impact of outreach aimed at WP which looks beyond initial access to higher education and to later outcomes in the labour market is less certain. This is partly because relatively few studies have been conducted which take this longitudinal approach, but also because the results of any such research have suggested ambiguous effects.

163. One interesting example here is a study conducted in Israel (Addi-Raccah and Israelashvili), which followed almost 200 students who had participated in a university outreach programme and who were now in their thirties. This found that outreach had contributed to their enrolment in higher education but had also promoted the idea of meritocracy – in other words, the notion that success would be available on the basis of hard work and talent alone. This is a highly individualistic narrative, as a result of which the participants attributed their success or failure within the higher education system to their own personal abilities, rather than experiences of social advantage or structural discrimination. The authors concluded that activities to widen participation can have the paradoxical effect of legitimising social inequalities, and therefore help to secure and perpetuate the current, unequal, social order. Similar findings are evident in the organisational social mobility agenda, as outlined next.

Getting in and getting on: short, medium and longer-term impacts of social mobility interventions

164. This section of the review focuses on the specific impact of organisational social mobility programmes. Thinking about supply-side interventions first, attending a Russell Group university remains central to securing access to many 'top jobs'; and improving the likelihood of students' attending an 'elite' institution of this type is often an important impact measure of success for social mobility programmes. Overall, the evidence is positive here.

165. For example, in 2015 the SMF commissioned the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) to conduct research on whether participants in the APP were more likely to attend a leading university, having participated in the programme (Jin et al.). Quoting from the report, this found that while this does not impact the likelihood of SMF students' attending university in absolute terms, it does have a significant impact on whether they attend a high-status institution. The estimated impact on the probability of attending a Russell Group institution is equivalent to an increase across SMF cohorts of between 17% and 27%, compared to the level of participation that would otherwise be expected in the absence of the SMF's APP. This is encouraging, as attending a Russell Group university (or another leading university) is likely to play an important role in future career prospects, precisely because elite employers are more likely to select from these institutions.

166. Social mobility programmes also focus on the development of soft skills which would facilitate entry to elite careers and again, evaluations tend to suggest positive results. During 2015, the SMF commissioned a qualitative study to complement the quantitative research outlined above and to explore APP participants' experiences on the programme. This study found that participants tended to report a significant uplift in confidence and explain that, as a result of taking part, they felt more comfortable in elite working environments and when interacting with people from a different, perhaps more advantaged, social background than their own. In this report and in the SMF's own evaluations since then, participants in the APP also consistently self-report significant and positive improvements in soft skills such as teamwork and communication.

167. Improving confidence is a key goal of many social mobility interventions, in part because, as noted, it is a crucial ingredient for success when applying for graduate programmes. It is then positive that interventions improve

participants' self-belief and confidence to apply. However, it is uncertain whether these benefits can be sustained during later encounters with the labour market, during graduate recruitment processes and in their early career. This can be explored further by thinking about participants' outcomes and experiences.

168. Starting with outcomes, more direct intermediate measures of success include whether participants gain access to an 'elite' graduate job. Understanding the impact here is hampered by some methodological challenges. However, in 2021 the IFS conducted a study for the SMF following up the one outlined above. This examines employment outcomes for participants in its programmes, using a matched control group of graduates with similar observable characteristics including performance at A level and parental background (Greaves and Farquharson).

169. This study found that SMF participants were 19 percentage points less likely than similar graduates to be in employment six months after graduation, but 16 percentage points more likely to be in postgraduate study. For those in employment, there is no strong evidence that the SMF programmes changed the skill level or the industry of participants' first job after graduation, compared to the comparison group. SMF participants are in fact less likely than the comparison group of employed graduates to be in highly skilled occupations (though they are slightly more likely to be in one of the SMF's 11 priority areas). These findings must be qualified on the basis that there was a low response rate from SMF alumni who were in employment. We also note that these findings are counter to those of this report: we found that 15 months after graduating, APP alumni were significantly more likely than the national cohort to be in paid employment and earning a higher salary.[32]

170. These findings have not yet been explored using qualitative research, including interviews with participants. It is possible to speculate that SMF students are relatively more likely to enter postgraduate study as an additional means to help overcome barriers associated with their class, by gaining more specialist or advanced qualifications, thus putting them in a more competitive position relative to peers, though this would require further research. It is also possible that participation in the internships and work experience provided by social mobility programmes directs students into

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[32] The national comparisons included in this study use a broader comparator group of all UK graduates.

different careers. This in turn could perhaps be explained by both push and pull factors, and may relate to the difference between aspiration and expectation outlined above. A 2021 paper found that while some participants in social mobility programmes felt encouraged to apply for graduate roles and optimistic about their chances (Ashley, 'Organisational Social Mobility Programmes as Mechanisms of Power and Control'), for others these experiences confirmed their expectations that they may not get in, or their perception that they were a poor fit culturally with these firms, or simply that they are not interested in the type of work available in these organisations, encouraging them to look elsewhere.

171. In 2019, Ashley conducted research for the SMF, and for the Diversity Project Charity, with the former exploring the longer-term impact of social mobility interventions on candidates in financial services and the latter also focusing on their experiences once employed in the investment management sector (Ashley, Socioeconomic Diversity in the Investment Savings and Industry. A Study into the Barriers and How They Can Be Overcome.). Most of the participants in the SMF research had graduated from university and were in their early career, aged up to twenty-six. This study confirmed that many young people had found the support provided within social mobility programmes life-changing. They believed that they were in a different and generally 'better' position than if they had not taken part, having gained better knowledge of graduate jobs and entry routes, and for example having understood the importance of attending a Russell Group university from which elite employers prefer to select.

172. However, consistent perhaps with the IFS data, relatively few had secured a graduate role in the sector in which they had originally intended to work when they had taken part in the SMF APP. This could be explained by several factors, of which sheer competition is one. Many more people apply to elite graduate roles than can be appointed and the majority of interviewees in this project had applied to such roles - and not got in. However, many interviewees in this study did also explain that during these encounters with elite labour markets their confidence had been progressively undermined.

173. They found that during periods of work experience provided within social mobility programmes, their identities had been relatively protected. They had been welcomed into elite organisations and been treated with respect by peers and line managers. This is not surprising, because these programmes

are explicitly designed to raise aspirations and perhaps expectations and as noted, seem effective on that basis, at least in the short term.

174. Their participation in social mobility programmes and positive experiences during these periods of work experience had encouraged interviewees to apply for graduate roles. However, their encounters with organisations at this point were often markedly different. Participants in Ashley's research recounted strong pressures to assimilate to dominant norms during graduate recruitment processes and beyond. Some described feeling that their background was associated with significant stigma and shame, as a result of which they struggled to feel a sense of belonging or fit during formal work experience, such as Spring Weeks and summer internships. These experiences were often especially acute where class intersects with gender and race and for those who came from the most deprived backgrounds or places. These feelings of being stigmatised could be exacerbated during interactions with current professionals and peers who were competing for graduate roles, where students experienced regular micro-aggressions, in other words, small insults and slights, which made them feel 'lesser' and uncomfortably aware of their social class.

175. The negative impact of these experiences can be significant, in part because being less advantaged or being relatively financially precarious carries stigma in wider society. For example, focusing on working-class school girls, leading academic Diane Reay has described a 'psychic economy' of class defined by fear and anxiety, where failure looms large and success is elusive; where young working-class girls see themselves as 'nothing'; and where 'feelings of inferiority and superiority are routine' (Reay). Ashley's research, outlined above, would suggest that young people from less advantaged backgrounds do not leave these experiences at the doors of corporate institutions, but bring them inside, where they are often amplified by everyday rituals and routines. While it is important that current employers are made aware of how everyday cultures can leave some people feeling effectively excluded, and should take remedial action,[33] addressing these issues comprehensively

[33] See for example recommendations in the Bridge Group's reports on socio-economic diversity in financial services (Bridge Group, Who Gets Ahead and How? Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression in Financial Services: A Study of Eight Organisations.), and the real estate sector (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Diversity in the Real Estate Sector) and leading law firms (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Background and Early Career Progression in the

would also rely on the longer-term goal of reducing inequalities in society at large, which would reduce the stigma associated with being poor.

176. Some similar themes are taken up by Ashley in the previous project cited above, where she interviewed young people as they participated in a social mobility programme (Ashley, 'Organisational Social Mobility Programmes as Mechanisms of Power and Control'). Her analysis echoes the Israeli study outlined above. Ashley's study found that young participants in social mobility programmes are often sold a 'meritocratic' narrative by current professionals, who encourage them to believe that their social identity will play no role when securing a job: 'work hard and you can achieve anything'. They are also presented with highly seductive, aspirational and fun visions of professional life (op. cit). This encourages many programme participants to apply to elite graduate roles and to adjust their behaviour as a result, including for example choosing the university they attend to maximise their chances of accessing those roles; working ever harder to achieve these dreams; and even changing aspects of their appearance and dress.

177. On the one hand this could be considered positive, as students learn what behaviours graduate employers wish to see, and some seek to adopt them. On the other, there is little evidence that organisations have made similar changes to their own recruitment practices or to their internal structures and cultures. The paper concludes that, to encourage their aspirations, participants in social mobility programmes are often provided with partial truths about professional life, but that having been sold this highly individualistic narrative, in which the reality of structural discrimination is erased, there is a danger that some will blame themselves, should they fail to 'succeed'. If recruitment practices remain biased, and cultures are discriminatory, then participants in social mobility outreach may ultimately struggle to 'get in and get on' with elite employers. It is possible that this has a longer-term impact on career progression, as they might be less equipped to manage the 'reality' of organisational cultures which are often not meritocratic, though this would require further research.

178. The findings reported in Ashley's study have important implications for the organisations working with charities to provide these opportunities, including how they balance raising expectations amongst young participants, against

Law.) (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Background and Progression to Partner in the Law.)

the reality that hiring (and promotion) practices may continue to exclude. Unless elite employers engage with these difficult points, there is a danger that while social mobility programmes may offer important reputational benefits to elite organisations, they are of more ambiguous long-term benefit to the young people who take part. To remedy this situation, it is vital that the elite employers with which charities work continue to make their recruitment and promotion processes fair and their cultures more inclusive.[34]

179. Additional evidence that there is some distance to travel here has been provided by the Bridge Group's 2018 research on early career progression in elite City-based law firms (Bridge Group, Socio-Economic Background and Early Career Progression in the Law.). This found that newly qualified lawyers from less advantaged backgrounds outperformed their more privileged peers in performance appraisals. They were though statistically less likely to be kept on by their firm upon qualification and were also more likely to leave their firm at an early stage. Helping to explain the latter, interviewees reported struggling to feel a sense of belonging in these firms and being subject to numerous micro-aggressions, or small slights and insults, based on their class. This report provided startling findings about the ongoing impact of social class on careers, which again raises ethical issues.

180. Outreach programmes can support social mobility through making the pipeline more diverse: by helping young people from less advantaged backgrounds to develop skills, knowledge and confidence. But outreach programmes cannot achieve social mobility by themselves, as employers need to be open to this diversity in the pipeline. Real change requires all employers to be inclusive to talent from all backgrounds. Understanding progression from outreach programmes needs significant further research and underlines the necessity and value of the current project.

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[34] See for example the Employers' Toolkit socialmobilityworks.org, produced by the Bridge Group in collaboration with the Social Mobility Commission and industry leaders to promote socio-economic diversity and inclusion.

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Appendix 3: The Social Mobility Foundation Aspiring Professionals Programme

Academic year	Typical age	SMF APP	Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn
Year 12 (England & Wales) S5 (Scotland) Year 13 (NI) Penultimate year of secondary education	16-17	Year 1	Applications & admissions	Launches University visits Futures Days Skills workshops	Skills workshops Work placements University application support	University application support Work placements
			Mentoring Sector guides Newsletters with access to resources and opportunities Ad hoc advice & support			
Y13 (E&W) S5 (Scot) Y14 (NI) Final year of secondary education	17-18	Year 2	University interview coaching Discussion groups	Social [Exams]	Skills workshops Exam results and university admissions support	Pre-university events Career insight days
			Newsletters with access to resources and opportunities Ad hoc advice & support			

Undergraduate Studying a bachelor's degree for 3 or 4 years	18-21	Year 3+	Mentoring Skills workshops CV and application support, interview coaching Internships Campus and SMF networks Newsletters with access to resources and opportunities
Graduate study or employment	22+	Alumni	SMF networks Newsletters with access to resources and opportunities Volunteering and ambassador opportunities