The Educational Backgrounds of Leading Lawyers, Journalists, Vice Chancellors, Politicians, Medics and Chief Executives

The Sutton Trust submission to the Milburn Commission on access to the professions

March 2009

Executive Summary

Key Findings

- The majority of those at the top of the leading professions were educated in independent fee-paying schools which remain largely closed to the majority of the population.
- This includes seven in ten of the leading judges (70%) and barristers (68%), as well as a majority of the partners at top law firms (55%) and leading journalists and medics (both 54%).
- While the representation of those from independent schools has generally declined over the last twenty or so years, there are some signs from the legal profession that more recent recruitment has resulted in an increased proportion of students from fee-paying schools.
- Access to Oxbridge is also an important educational route to the top professions. Eight in ten barristers (82%) and judges (78%) studied at either Oxford or Cambridge universities, as did a majority of top solicitors (53%).

Policy recommendations

1. Professional bodies should lead engagement with younger age groups in primary schools upwards
2. Schools should be incentivised to foster the life skills the professions demand and which employers often complain is lacking, particularly amongst non-privileged youngsters
3. The government should develop a national programme of school-alumni links to provide role models and practical support to students
4. Careers and education information, advice and guidance should be improved at school level
5. A 'Social Mobility Charter Mark' should be introduced to recognise best practice amongst companies, encouraging others to follow suit
6. The professions should systematically accredit and reward the contributions of individual employees to community and access work
7. A single set of best practice guidelines for work experience and internships should be developed to encourage programmes giving equal access to young people from all backgrounds
8. As higher education is a critical route into many careers, access partnerships should be formed between the professions and universities, building on the Pathways to Law model
9. The student financial support system should be extended to non-privileged young people embarking on work experience placements and internships
10. Access to 'gateway' post-graduate courses - and the related financial support mechanisms - should be reviewed to ensure they are accessible to those from low income backgrounds

Introduction

The evidence suggests that levels of social mobility in the UK are lower than in many other advanced countries. That is to say, that the link between parental background and a child's future life chances is particularly strong; if you are born poor, you are more likely to stay poor in this country than in many other advanced nations. This matters throughout the income distribution, but the Sutton Trust has particularly concerned itself with mobility at the top – how we can ensure that bright young people from non-privileged homes are able to access the education and other chances that will lead them to success in the most influential and sought-after careers.

Through a number of studies into the educational backgrounds of those at the top of the UK's major professions, the Sutton Trust has highlighted the predominance of the privately-educated. Those with an independent schooling - who now constitute 7% of the school-age population - are considerably more likely to take leading jobs in the media, politics, and law.

Attending independent school is by no means an ideal proxy for socio-economic class – and the private sector will argue that many of their pupils receive fee assistance of some kind. But with average annual fees of £10,000 for day schools and £22,000 for boarding schools - and with fee assistance amounting to only 6% of fee income - it is clear that in broad terms the private sector remains the preserve of the well off. For those concerned with social mobility, therefore, it is concerning that the opportunities to talented individuals outside this elite group of schools is significantly diminished.

This paper is an assimilation of the findings of a number of our previous studies which have looked at the backgrounds of:

- Top lawyers – barristers at leading chambers, high court judges and partners in 'magic circle' law firms
- Chief Executive Officers of FTSE 100 companies
- Top journalists – newspaper editors, newspaper columnists, broadcast presenters and broadcast editors
- Medics - those with positions on the Councils of the medical royal colleges or other national representative bodies
- Politicians – members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords
- University Vice-Chancellors – the higher education elite leading our universities

The report goes on to make a series of ten policy recommendations for schools, government and the professions to widen access to the most sought-after careers.

This paper focuses on access to the professions, rather than the wider but related issues of educational attainment and access to schools and universities. In the appendix, however, we have included as context some of the key statistics on the attainment gap in education and the pool of academically able young people from non-privileged homes whose talent is being undervalued.

School backgrounds

In total we have looked at the school backgrounds of almost 2,300 of the leading figures in academia, journalism, law, medicine, business and politics.

Table 1: School backgrounds of leading figures in the professions

	Year	Sample	Ind%	State%	*Grammar%*	*Comp%*
Judges	2007	100	70	30	*28*	*2*
Barristers	2004	259	68	32		
Lords	2007	631	62	38	*21*	*17*
Magic Circle Solicitors	2004	298	55	45		
CEOs	2007	100	54	46	*26*	*20*
Journalists	2006	95	54	46	*32*	*14*
Medics	2007	100	51	49	*32*	*17*
MPs	2007	657	32	68	*25*	*42*
Vice-Chancellors	2008	102	24	76	*66*	*10*
ALL[1]		*2342*	*51*	*49*		

In seven out of the nine of the fields examined, the majority of those in the highest positions have been educated in independent fee-paying schools, which now account for seven percent of the school-aged population and around 15% of those taking A level and equivalent qualifications. In two cases – the judges (70%) and the barristers (68%) – this figure is well over two thirds. In only two of the fields examined are the state-educated in the majority – amongst MPs and university Vice-Chancellors.

There are notable differences in the type of independent school attended too. Amongst Vice-Chancellors and journalists, those who were privately educated generally attended more modestly-priced day schools. In comparison, large numbers of the leading judges are alumni of some of the most elite public boarding schools, such as Eton and Harrow.

Variances in the types of state schools attended are evident too. Indeed, almost nine in ten of the state school educated university leaders went to grammar schools, whilst most state-educated politicians went to comprehensive schools. This is a reflection in part of changes in the education system and the introduction of the comprehensive system in the 1970s.

[1] The overall figures should be used with caution: as some of the sample sizes are significantly bigger than others, the overall figures do not necessarily accurately reflect the makeup of the combined leading professions.

The studies also suggest changes in the educational backgrounds of leading professionals over time. Most of the research we have undertaken compares those at the top of the professions today with their counterparts ten or twenty years before.

Table 2: Changes in school backgrounds over time

	Year	Sample	Ind%	State%	Grammar%	Comp%
Judges	1989	100	74	26	20	6
	2007	100	70	30	28	2
Journalists	1986	100	49	51	44	6
	2006	100	54	46	33	14
VCs	1998	81	31	69	58	11
	2008	102	24	76	66	10
Medics	1987	100	51	49	32	17
	2007	100	51	49	32	17
CEOs	1987	100	70	30	20	10
	2007	100	54	46	26	20
Politicians	1974	100	46	54	32	22
	2007	100	38	62	27	36
Solicitors	1988	130	68	32		
	2004	298	55	45		
Barristers	1989	122	73	27		
	2004	259	68	32		

The research suggests that over time more people from state school backgrounds have been able to access the leading positions in society, with a decline in the proportion of the independently-schooled in more recent studies. So, for example, 70% of the Chief Executives of FTSE 100 companies in 1987 went to independent schools, compared to 54% of those in the same positions in 2007. And 68% of leading solicitors in 1988 were educated in fee paying schools, compared with 55% in 2004. A similar trend is apparent in all the fields we have looked at, with the exception of medicine (where proportions have remained static) and journalism (where there has been an increase in those from the private sector).

However, there is a word of warning in the research too. Our survey of partners at magic circle law firms found that the young partners of today are almost as likely to have been educated in private schools (71%) as the older partners of twenty years ago (73%).

		Sample	Indep%	State%
1988	Under 39	23	59	41
	40 or over	66	73	27
2004	Under 39	47	71	29
	40 or over	106	51	49

So while the law firms did appear to open up to a generation of partners educated in state secondary schools in the 1960s (predominantly grammar schools), this does not look to be a lasting change, and more recent recruitment appears to have resulted in a growth in the representation of those from the fee-paying sector.

University backgrounds

The studies also compare the university backgrounds (in terms of the first degrees) of leading professionals. What is most striking is that almost all those in our surveys had participated in higher education and most had attended a handful of the most selective, research-led institutions. This is perhaps not surprising: we might expect the most prestigious professions to recruit from the most academically-selective institutions, where the pool of talent is the greatest. It does, however, underline the importance of ensuring access to these universities is equitable in the first place.

Table 3: University backgrounds broken down by profession

	Year	Sample	Oxbridge%	ST13%[2]
Barristers	2004	337	82	
Judges	2007	100	78	
Magic Circle Solicitors	2004	429	53	
Journalists	2006	97	45	13
Lords	2007	631	42	56
CEOs	2007	100	39	
MPs	2007	625	27	44
Vice-Chancellors	2008	114	23	47
Medics	2007	100	15	
ALL[3]		*2533*	*45%*	

In three of the nine professions surveyed, a majority of the leading figures had been to Oxford or Cambridge universities, including eight in ten leading barristers and judges. The majority of Vice - Chancellors, media professionals and politicians graduated from universities other than Oxford and Cambridge, although well over two fifths of journalists and members of the House of Lords are Oxbridge graduates. Only around a quarter of MPs and Vice-Chancellors attended these two elite institutions, but there is a high representation of other highly-selective universities amongst these groups.

[2] The Sutton Trust 13 Universities are those that came top of an average ranking of newspaper league tables in 2000. They are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, LSE, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, UCL, Warwick and York.

[3] Again, the overall figures should be used with caution as some of the sample sizes are significantly bigger than others.

It is also possible to compare the university backgrounds of the leading figures of today with their counterparts of ten or twenty years ago.

Table 4: Comparing university backgrounds and ages of those at the top of professions

	Year	Sample	OXB%	ST13%
Judges	1989	100	87	
	2007	100	78	
Journalists	1986	100	67	
	2006	100	56	
VCs	1998	101	36	50
	2008	114	27	47
Medics	1987	100	28	
	2007	100	15	
CEOs	1987	100	67	
	2007	100	39	
Politicians	1974	100	62	
	2007	100	42	
Barristers	1989	136	88	97
	2004	337	82	93
Magic circle solicitors	1988	138	65	83
	2004	429	53	79

In all cases, the percentage of Oxbridge graduates within the fields has declined, reflecting in part the expansion of higher education in recent decades and the existence of a broader range of institutions. Indeed, our study in to the backgrounds of politicians found that the proportion of MPs who went to Oxford or Cambridge from all three major parties has fallen since 1951. A similar decrease occurred in relation to Vice-Chancellors (11 percentage points), journalists and barristers (both 7 points) over the last couple of decades.

Implications

Who holds the positions of power and influence in our society is important for two connected reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on how accessible routes are to those professions, and reflects inequalities in our education system which means that the type of school attended and the family background of children are such powerful predictors of future life chances. Secondly, it highlights the very particular experiences and standpoints that such influential people bring to their positions. This is particularly important for those professional elites making judgments that affect the whole of society. What experience of education do the politicians who direct our state school system have? How in touch with the concerns of the population are those judges who have been educated in environments serving a minority of the population? Which issues do newspaper editors judge to be important when deciding the stories to promote for public debate? And, importantly, can the professions spot potential in young people with social backgrounds very different to those of their membership?

It is therefore right that through the recently-launched Milburn Commission the Government has recognised broadening access to the professions as a policy priority for reasons of both economic efficiency and social justice. At a time of increasing economic hardship, the country cannot afford to waste the talents of bright young people from any walk of life.

It should be emphasised that in looking at access to the professions we should not confine ourselves to thinking only of those young people facing major socio-economic disadvantage, crucially important though this group is. The Trust's work has shown that many of the country's top positions are filled by those from a narrow social elite – so the access agenda must be about giving young people from ordinary backgrounds a chance to shine, as well as tackling deep-rooted deprivation and low aspiration. Tackling low social mobility is as much about opening up the top of echelons society as it is about promoting the talents of those from disadvantaged communities.

Policy issues

Of course the issues – and therefore the policy responses – are not common across the professions. The challenges facing those with a relatively well-established and clear route of entry (such as law and medicine) may be very different to those with a less defined and more varied entry profile (such as journalism and politics). Similarly, access to some professions is open to young people with a broad range of qualifications, through on-the-job training and development schemes; whereas for others it is intimately connected with access to higher education, often to a certain 'type' of university or postgraduate course. Certainly the analysis included in this report emphasises the importance of an elite education as a pathway to success in the ten fields we have considered.

Other barriers do, however, exist. In many fields, the availability and expense of work experience, internships and postgraduate study often serve as obstacles to the non-privileged. For many professions, some experience on the 'shop floor' is a crucial first step on the career ladder, opening doors to paid employment in a competitive market. Too often these early career opportunities are informally organised, poorly paid (if they are paid at all) and come about through personal networks and links with families and friends, which immediately disadvantages those from poorer and non-graduate homes, as well as those living outside of the main urban areas (particularly London). The opportunities available to a bright young person from a working class home in Cumbria are very different to those open to a middle class graduate living in the South East.

Similar issues apply to masters courses and postgraduate study which are increasingly important stepping stones into some sectors (the legal profession is an obvious example, but entry to journalism, for instance, is becoming more dependant on post graduate qualifications too). For the lucky ones, these courses will be funded by an employer, or financed by a family member – but where does it leave those from poorer homes who do not have such sponsorship or who do not live near the appropriate university or college?

As well as these practical hurdles, there are also cultural obstacles to overcome. The notion that higher education or a type of university is 'not for the like of them' is common amongst many young people from disadvantaged communities. Even for those from 'ordinary' backgrounds, the notion of Oxbridge, for instance, or of formal interviews, or of fitting in to a perceived social elite, can be a deterrent. Similar factors are at work in the professions. It is a great psychological leap for young people with no graduate friends or family to envisage being a doctor or a lawyer, let alone to have an adequate grasp of the practical steps they need to follow to get there. And, of course, it is also important that recruiters can overcome their own psychological hurdles – not simply recruiting in their own image, but recognising talent and achievement in all its forms.

So a multi-faceted approach is needed: working to raise young people's aspirations towards the professions and to dispel misconceptions about them; ensuring young people receive concrete advice and support to realise those ambitions; and removing barriers at the point of entry to the professions. The Pathways to Law initiative, funded by the College of Law, the Sutton Trust and based on a model developed at Edinburgh University, is a concrete example of a project which works on all three fronts – raising aspirations and expectations in school; providing concrete advice and support for high achievement; and involving the leading law firms where we hope many of the project's graduates will end up[4]. We call for the expansion of this innovative scheme in proposal eight, below.

[4] Please see www.pathwaystolaw.org for more information

Proposals for reform

Recognising the remit of the Milburn Commission, our ten proposals below are purposefully confined to those with a very clear and direct link to the professions, rather than wider questions around education. We do not consider issues affecting progression within the professions.

1. Professional bodies should lead engagement with younger age groups

Young people from better off backgrounds are often on a trajectory to further and higher education by age 11, while those from less advantaged homes often have little concept of where their education and career path might take them. So it is never too young for the professions to engage with school children, for example through outreach to primary schools and visits. Lawyers could hold mock trials shedding light on the legal process; architects could run a day's activities based on building design and geometry. These should all be linked to the curriculum and sit alongside more general work to raise young people's aspirations. As well as local firms developing links in their area, professional associations should develop resources and model activities suitable for use in school contexts.

2. Incentivise schools to foster the life skills the professions demand

A common complaint amongst employers is that school-leavers and graduates starting jobs lack the 'softer' skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. And there is some evidence too that those from better-off backgrounds – and particularly from independent schools – have stronger executive skills than their poorer peers and are therefore more 'work ready'. It should therefore be a priority for state schools to develop these life skills further in their pupils, through a range of activities which enhance students' presentation skills, expression and leadership qualities. The professions can play an important role here, and links with independent schools, which are often highly successful in this area, should be developed further. Importantly, we should be looking for a more sophisticated way of measuring school performance – not based solely on exam results, but on other outcomes which reflect the preparation for jobs and life the school has offered its students.

3. Develop a national programme of school-alumni links

Schemes which get current undergraduates to inspire and support sixth formers from similar backgrounds have proved effective in raising aspirations towards university. Following the same principle, state schools should make more use of their alumni links – getting students who have been successful in the professions back in to the classroom. This would include giving

practical advice - for example on what subjects to take and how to gain work experience - but would also provide important role models, demonstrating what is possible even in the most deprived communities. A national web-based brokerage programme should be developed to match professionals willing to engage with students with schools with specific needs. State schools could search the database and where possible make use of alumni with relevant expertise; where this is not possible, a professional living nearby – or with a child at the school – could be used.

4. Improve Information, Advice and Guidance at school level

At least half the information students in state schools receive about education and careers is inadequate in some way. Students need realistic and impartial advice about qualifications, subjects and university choices. In particular young people need to know the expectations of the professions they are interested in and the avenues which are most likely to lead to success. Where applicable, students should also be made aware of the alternative work-based routes and 'second chances' to enter the professions. Implementing the recommendations the Trust put forward to the National Council for Educational Excellence last year[5] - including appointing lead teachers at every key stage responsible for careers advice and developing a network of dedicated advisers – should be a priority.

5. Introduce a 'Social Mobility Charter Mark' to recognise and reward best practice

Firms that invest in access work and make a contribution to promoting social mobility should be recognised and best practice rewarded. A charter mark-type scheme should therefore be developed which acknowledges outstanding work in this area, across a number of fronts. This could include developing an open and transparent work experience scheme, which removes financial and other obstacles for poorer youngsters; fostering particularly productive links with local schools and colleges; or introducing a rewards scheme for employees who devote time to community outreach work. Such a charter mark would be voluntary, but should have real currency with businesses and become something which potential clients look for as a sign of a socially responsible organisation.

6. Professions should accredit contributions of individuals to community work

Linked to the above, there are many professionals who are passionate about widening access to their fields of work and their efforts should be systematically encouraged. In particular,

[5] Please see http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf

professional bodies should review whether there is scope for individuals' commitment to and time spent on access work or community outreach to count as credits towards professional qualifications or as CPD.

7. Promote best practice guidelines for work experience and internships

Also linked to proposal 5, we believe more could be done to spread good practice in guidelines for work experience and internships that are open and accessible to all. A number of organisations in different sectors have developed schemes explicitly aimed at creating fair selection processes for work placements and internships. These could be reviewed to establish a single set of guidelines identifying best practise in this critical area. [6]

8. Access partnerships should be formed between the professions and universities

There are many fruitful partnerships that can be forged between higher education institutions (or particular faculties within universities) and the professions. A prime example of this is the Pathways to Law initiative, sponsored by the College of Law, which involves a number of top legal firms and five of the most prestigious law faculties in the country. Its combination of university sessions, mentoring, work placements and leadership training, should be extended to other fields as a practical and workable model which makes a real difference. On a smaller scale, profession-specific summer schools might be run in partnership with higher education providers. And universities – often based near the financial and business hearts of our cities – could also offer subsidised accommodation to non-privileged young people taking work experience placements during the vacations.

9. Extend student financial support system to work experience and internships

Once students leave university, the system of financial support – through state grants and loans – dries up. Yet for many professions, work experience is essential but poorly paid. This can be a real obstacle for those from poorer homes and particularly those living outside London where many of the opportunities can be found. In recognition of this, subsidised student loans for living costs should be available to those from non-privileged backgrounds wanting to embark on certified work experience and internship schemes for up to one year. While no young person will

[6] The social enterprise http://www.internocracy.org/ has made some headway in this area

want to add to their burden of debt unnecessarily, a government scheme would be preferable to the commercial loans many new graduates fall back on.[7]

10. Review access to 'gateway' post-graduate courses

Undergraduate university admissions get a great deal of attention from policymakers and the media, while postgraduate study is largely forgotten. But what evidence there is reveals that many such courses are dominated by students from privileged backgrounds. As postgraduate study and Masters Degrees become more important in accessing many of our leading professions, the financial support offered to non-privileged students applying for these key 'gateway' courses needs to be reviewed. Universities should also publish a breakdown of their student intakes for these courses by socio-economic background, so that participation rates can be monitored.

[7] The national internship scheme aims to fund young people at a similar level as students: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/4210088/National-intern-scheme-to-help-graduates-through-the-recession.html

Appendix – Contextual Education Statistics

There are considerable educational achievement gaps between different groups of young people, whether split by school type, income bracket or social class, with corresponding gaps in access rates:

- Just one in five children (21%) on free school meals achieves five GCSEs at A* to C including Maths and English, compared to 49% of those not on free school meals

- One third of candidates with three A grades at A level are in private schools, which provide just 15% of candidates

- 44% of those from richest fifth of homes go to university, but just 10% of those from poorest fifth do the same

- Just 8% of entrants to the dozen highest-ranked universities are from the poorest postcodes areas, which account for a third of young people

- Pupils from just 200 (mainly independent) schools make up half of Oxbridge entrants; the remaining 3,500 make up the rest

There is also evidence of a considerable pool of untapped talent– academically able young people from non-privileged homes who do not access the opportunities to make the most of their potential.

- Each year there are 60,000 pupils in maintained schools who at some point in their secondary school careers are amongst the top fifth of academic performers, who do not subsequently go on to university.

- Every year there are also around 3,000 state school students who have the necessary grades to be among the 30,000 students going to the top dozen ranked universities, but who end up elsewhere. There are also 500 'missing' students from poor postcode areas who have the necessary qualifications to attend these elite institutions, but who do not.

- A pupil in a state school needs to achieve two grades higher at A level to stand the same likelihood of going to a top-ranked university as his peer in an independent school.