



# A Disciplinary Research Collaboration

***Socioeconomic status and work experience in elite professions: Are universities doing enough to close the social gap?***

Daniel Belcher, Gerasim Hristov Julie Ayton

**School of Finance and Accounting**

# Academic Year 2022-2023

**Socioeconomic status and work experience in elite professions: Are universities doing enough to close the social gap?**

# Executive Summary

Amid growing concerns about social mobility in Britain's higher education system, the influence of socio-economic background on a student's trajectory into elite professions remains stark. While the government has amplified its focus on closing this gap, the numbers speak to a persistent disparity. Entry rates for 18-year-old students from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education hover around 15%, while their advantaged peers enjoy rates closer to 60%. This discrepancy, rooted in theories of social reproduction, underscores how higher socio-economic status (SES) students often benefit from greater exposure to dominant cultural and educational practices, providing them with a competitive advantage in navigating the higher education landscape. In a bid to combat these challenges, institutions such as Westminster Business School (WBS) have invested heavily in Employability Development Opportunities (EDOs). These EDOs are tailored to bolster student preparedness for the workforce by enriching their skill sets, knowledge, and overall appeal to potential employers. Crucially, EDOs underscore the significance of relevant work experience, which has overtaken academic achievement as a pivotal criterion for potential employers in the UK.

Yet, the sobering reality remains: upper-middle-class students possess a pronounced advantage in awareness, access, and participation in opportunities like internships, which play a pivotal role in shaping career trajectories. Against this backdrop, our study delves deep into the role universities play in addressing this social divide, particularly within the financial and professional services sectors. Drawing on primary data from both students and employability officers at WBS, our research sheds light on the efficacy of interventions by institutions like WBS in raising awareness and improving access to high-quality job opportunities in finance and accounting for students from lower SES backgrounds. As we navigate through this exploration, we remain keenly attuned to our guiding research questions: to what extent are students from lower SES backgrounds accessing top-tier work experiences, and are institutions like WBS truly making strides in amplifying their employability potential?

By demystifying these questions, we aspire to chart a path forward – one replete with actionable insights and recommendations that can guide both policymakers and educational institutions in their mission to foster true social mobility into the UK's elite professional realms.

# Background and Aims

Social mobility in higher education and into Britain’s elite occupations is key on the government agenda, as there’s still a clear social gap at university entry level, and consequently on the graduate job market. The representation of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) in higher education in England is still very low, as 18 year-old entry rates vary from 15% for the most disadvantaged to 60% for the most advantaged (UCAS, 2022)[[1]](#footnote-1). This can be explained by the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Students from higher SES have greater exposure to the dominant culture and educational practices of universities, giving them an advantage in entering, navigating and surviving the higher education (HE) system. Unfortunately, cultural capital continues to be a significant factor in academic achievement in higher education, as it is associated with increased university enrolment and completion rates (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Gaddis, 2013). For instance, Witteveen and Attewell (2017) examine the function of family background in higher education, determining that students with more affluent families are more likely to excel academically and subsequently outearn their lower SES peers. Recently, the Social Mobility Commission has been focusing on analysing social barriers into elite professional services firms, which are known for offering the most generous salaries in the UK graduate market (HFR 2023). Indeed, the most prestigious professional services firms (in accounting, finance, and law) continue to be heavily dominated at entry level by graduates from high SES (Ashley et al., 2015; Sutton Trust, 2014). Social reproduction is not the only reason for this, as students from lower SES may develop lower aspirations for those most prestigious jobs (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Also employers are partly to blame as elite professional service firms – mostly London-based – tend to privilege candidates with higher SES because of social pressure (Ashley & Empson, 2017).

Hence the government needs to work with both employers and universities if they want to achieve their social mobility goal. In 2020, the UK government published a “diversity employers’ toolkit” specifically targeted at financial and professional services firms with a clear aim of ensuring that “staff in the financial and professional services sector aren’t left behind due to their socio-economic background”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Universities are developing an array of employability development opportunities (EDOs) to help their graduates be “work ready” by developing their skills, knowledge, and attributes that make them attractive to potential employers (Pitan, 2016; Pitan & Muller, 2020). These EDOs include career development activities, extra-curricular activities and most importantly work experience. EDOs are crucial in facilitating students’ successful transition from higher education to the world of work, especially in the context of an increasingly competitive and demanding labour market (Sultana & Watts, 2006). Relevant work experience, through industrial placements or internships, is now more important than academic achievement in securing a graduate job (CBI, 2021). When UK employers are asked about the key factors they consider when recruiting university graduates, 58% consider relevant work experience whereas 45% value a degree subject relevant to the job and only 23% regard academic results as being a key factor (CBI, 2021). Unfortunately, the social gap persists when it comes to internships and work placements. Even though the government has long recognized that “fair access to internships is vital for social mobility” (Milburn, 2009)[[3]](#footnote-3), upper-middle-class students still have a social and cultural advantage in their awareness of, access to, and participation in internships (McCafferty, 2022; Wright & Mulvey, 2021). The story is similar for other EDOs like career development and extra-curricular activities, as students who have better resources in the first place are more able to benefit from these opportunities (Bathmaker, 2021; Wong & Hoskins, 2022; Wright & Mulvey, 2021).

In this context, the current study aims to explore the role of universities in closing the social gap in the financial and professional services sector. By collecting primary data from both students and employability officers at Westminster Business School (WBS), we provide new evidence on whether and how a business school like WBS is able to raise awareness and access to high-quality finance and accounting job opportunities for disadvantaged students. We hope that our results will provide insightful recommendations to both government and business schools in helping social mobility into elite professional service firms. With this intention, we are trying to answer the following research questions:

*To what extent do low SES students enjoy access to paid, high-quality work experience in elite professions (in accounting and finance)?*

*Are business schools like WBS doing enough in terms of employability development opportunities to promote awareness of and access to those work experiences?*

# Methods

Our study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The target population for this research consists of current undergraduate students from the School of Finance and Accounting (SFA), regardless of their socio-economic background. We used a purposive sampling technique to select participants who can provide rich insights into their experiences with internships and employability development opportunities at WBS. The university of Westminster is a perfect case study for our research question as it is a post-1992 institution at the heart of London with a clear aim of helping students from a variety of backgrounds to realise their full potential.[[4]](#footnote-4) Within the business school, the SFA hosts a variety of undergraduate programmes with professional recognition and the use of state-of-the-art Bloomberg virtual trading rooms. Out of 400 SFA undergraduate students (across 4 programmes), the majority comes from disadvantaged backgrounds, as measured by parental education.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed to participants via email. The questionnaire consists of both closed- and open-ended questions, designed to capture demographic information, socio-economic background, educational experiences, and perceptions of internship accessibility and effectiveness. Following recent research in the field (Goldstone, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Hernandez et al., 2020), we measure socio-economic background with two key variables. First, parental education reflects the human capital and educational attainment within a family. Higher levels of parental education often correlate with greater awareness and understanding of the importance of education and career development. We capture parental education by whether both, one or neither parents/guardians graduated from a higher education institution. Second, household income serves as an indicator of the financial resources available to the participants. Higher income levels typically correlate with better access to resources and opportunities, which can influence employability development. Respondents could choose between five income ranges from “under £30,000” to “over £100,000”. Students were classified as low-SES when their family income was less than £30,000 and when neither or only one parent completed a higher education qualification.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Next, we use EDOs as a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of business schools in promoting access to internships/work placements for students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Pitan & Muller, 2020). By focusing on key EDOs – Work Experience, Career Development Learning, and Real-Life Activities – we aim to assess how these opportunities are distributed among students and whether universities are doing enough to ensure equal access for all, regardless of their socio-economic status (Reay, 2006). Work experience encompasses internships, placements, and other practical experiences that provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings (Pitan & Muller, 2020). Career development learning involves activities and support services that facilitate students’ exploration of career options, enhancement of employability skills, and engagement in work-related experiences (Sultana & Watts, 2006). Real-life activities represent all kinds of partnerships with employers, student tours to corporations, and visits by alumni to schools for delivering lectures (Mason et al., 2009). To analyse the impact of these EDOs, we collected data on students’ participation in internships/work placements, their satisfaction with the support provided by their institutions, and their perceptions of the role of their school in facilitating access to these opportunities (Tomlinson, 2008). Some questions were inspired from the FutureTrack longitudinal survey conducted by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research.[[7]](#footnote-7) We then compared the experiences and outcomes of students from different socio-economic backgrounds and explored the factors that may contribute to any disparities observed. The response rate for the survey is very low (n=40) due to the timing of the research. Indeed, we started collecting data end of May when students were on summer break and mostly disengaged with all university matters.

In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted structured interviews with a subset of 12 respondents who expressed an interest from the survey.[[8]](#footnote-8) The interviews were conducted between mid-June and mid-August, they lasted between 30-50 minutes each, and focused on students’ personal experiences with internships and the role of the university in facilitating access to these opportunities. We also conducted structured interviews with two staff members of the careers and employability team to gain more insight into the university’s efforts in narrowing the social gap into elite professions in finance and accounting. All data was collected and treated confidentially.

# Results

Table 1 below presents some descriptive statistics about our sample. The sample is dominated by low-SES students (63%), British (60%), from Asian ethnicity (60%) and final-year students (60%). Of the 12 interviewees, 5 of them are considered low-SES students. In Table 2, we can see that most students had some kind of work experience, independently of their socio-economic background. Similarly, most students, both low- and high-SES, expect to graduate with first class honours, although more disadvantaged students answered 2:1 or “I don’t know”. Finally, the majority of students already secured or intend to apply for a full-time job, whereas a minority will continue onto a postgraduate degree.

***Table 1. Descriptive statistics (n=40)***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** |  |  | **Socioeconomic background** |  |
| Female | 21 |  | High SES | 15 |
| Male | 19 |  | Low SES | 25 |
| **Ethnicity** |  |  | **Year of study** |  |
| Asian | 24 |  | 1st year student | 8 |
| White | 14 |  | 2nd year student | 8 |
| Other | 2 |  | final year | 24 |
| **Nationality** |  |  | **Work experience** |  |
| British | 24 |  | No | 14 |
| EU national | 10 |  | Yes | 26 |
| Other | 6 |  |  |  |

***Table 2. Statistics by socio-economic background***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Low SES (n=25) | High SES (n=15) |
| **Work experience while at university** |  |  |
| No | 9 | 5 |
| Yes | 16 | 10 |
| **Degree class expected** |  |  |
| First class | 10 | 10 |
| Upper second class | 8 | 5 |
| I don't know | 7 | 0 |
| **Expectation upon graduation** |  |  |
| Full-time job | 14 | 10 |
| Part-time job | 2 | 0 |
| Postgraduate degree | 3 | 2 |
| I don't know | 6 | 3 |

*EDOs offered at Westminster Business School*

Business schools across London seem to offer similar EDOs to their students in terms of one-to-one career advice, employability fairs and workshops, volunteering, extra-curricular activities, real-life activities and work opportunities. Some schools go one step further by offering a dedicated PDP tool and/or an employability award, which is the case of Westminster. [Engage](https://engage-employability.westminster.ac.uk/unauth) is the university’s online platform for all careers, employability and enterprise resources. Students can find job opportunities and other EDOs. For instance, over the 2022/23 academic year, WBS advertised more than 50 events, whether online or on campus, potentially relevant to SFA students. These events include generic employability skills workshops (e.g., public speaking, networking, LinkedIn, etc.), information sessions about specific employability programmes (e.g., investment banking mentoring programme, employability award), career fairs (whether industry-specific or not) and insight sessions where industry professionals are invited to address a particular topic (e.g., Fintech, CIMA, women into finance).

The careers office at WBS also runs two flagship programmes relevant to our study: the [Westminster Working Cultures](https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/employability-and-career-development/working-and-studying-abroad/types-of-opportunities-and-destinations/westminster-working-cultures) and the [Inclusive Futures: Insights](https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/employability-and-career-development/exploring-careers/inclusive-futures-insights). The latter is specifically targeted at low-SES students, and eligible students at L4 and L5 receive an email about this opportunity at the start of the year. The programme is currently offered to UK home students only, but is likely to be opened up to international students next year. About 90-100 students apply to the programme every year, for 30 spaces available. Last year 12 participants were from WBS, including 6 from SFA. At the end of the programme, students are asked to rate their confidence in various attributes related to the acquisition of soft skills. The attribute with the highest increase in confidence is “networking skills”, followed by “knowledge in your career industry”.

*Student engagement in these EDOs*

Table 3 shows the quality of the student experience in terms of various EDOs offered at Westminster. The first 2 statements relate to PDP and the curriculum, EDOs not covered in this study as not significantly related to graduate outcomes. Still we wanted to assess if students recognize the benefits of their course and attending university in general, and the answer is clearly yes. In terms of extra-curricular activities (ECAs), students were generally happy with the opportunities on offer. Looking at their engagement in some of those ECAs, table 4 clearly shows a divide between low- and high-SES students. The majority of disadvantaged students participated (actively or passively) in various clubs – the most popular being the Finance society – or didn’t know about these opportunities. Whereas high-SES students mostly knew about these ECAs but chose not to participate.

The interviews shed some light on the reasons why the Finance society was so popular with low-SES students. For instance, one L6 student told us:

*“In the first year the Finance Society definitely helped the most because they were kind of the first that introduced me to how these things actually work. You know, applying to summer internship graduate jobs, even when I didn’t even have a proper CV. So then I also did a 1-on-1 with careers advice, but that wasn’t really helping me apply to any of the roles, but it was more about seeing what I can do to better my skills. The finance society was the most helpful out of everything.”*

# When asked whether and why “these extra-curricular activities have helped you / will help you / would have helped you find a graduate job”, 19 students said yes against 7 who said no. The cited benefits are exposure, connections, advice, and gaining hard and soft skills. That being said, few students mentioned that “many societies were not very active” and “didn’t really do much to help the students”, even the Finance society. Or that “there’s nothing that makes these activities stand out on a CV compared to other applicants”.

Students were less optimistic about other EDOs. When asked if they “benefited in many ways from the careers office” or if “there are excellent opportunities to connect with the real world”, a minority agreed (less than 30%). And when asked whether “jobs advertised through the intranet are of high quality, paid, and relevant for my subject or career plans”, only 14 students agreed, whereas 16 students disagreed (10 students didn’t have any opinion). These answers were further investigated in the interviews.

About the careers office, their employability workshops and 1-to-1 advice sessions are useful as a starting point, i.e., for students who don’t have a CV yet and don’t know where else to go. Several respondents benefited greatly from such early-stage support. Beyond this, many students were not impressed by the employability team as they apparently lack the knowledge and experience of the finance industry. For instance, “when I approached the employability office, asking them if they could review my CV, I was given one of the worst CVs possible, I got some of the worst feedback from it”; “they told me to get rid of these technical words and the formatting of the CV they gave was just really horrible”. Similarly, “they gave me pointers in the wrong direction like it was okay to have two pages, but it wasn’t very applicable to finance. I think finance in general are very heavy on formatting, you can't go over one page on your CV otherwise you end up in the trash”. “But where they were basically trying to teach us how to make our CVs, they were telling us that from a completely wrong perspective of finance students.”

***Table 3. Experience at university***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| Since I started university, I have a much clearer idea of what I want to do and what I need to do to achieve my career plans | 10 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 2 |
| My course is helping me to develop the skills I believe I will need to get a job | 6 | 13 | 12 | 8 | 0 |
| There are excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around campus, e.g., student union and societies/clubs etc. | 5 | 18 | 10 | 7 | 0 |
| I benefited in many ways from the careers office, e.g. through career fairs and training, workshops, one-to-one career advice etc. | 2 | 8 | 12 | 15 | 3 |
| There are excellent opportunities to connect with the real world, e.g., company visits, guest lectures, etc. | 2 | 9 | 16 | 9 | 4 |
| Jobs advertised through the intranet are of high quality, paid, and relevant for my subject or career plans | 2 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 5 |

***Table 4. Extra-curricular activities***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Participated | Aware but didn't participate | Not aware |
| **Student Union** |  |  |  |
| Low SES | 10 | 5 | 7 |
| High SES | 4 | 10 | 1 |
| **Student ambassador** |  |  |  |
| Low SES | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| High SES | 5 | 10 | 0 |
| **Finance society** |  |  |  |
| Low SES | 15 | 2 | 6 |
| High SES | 5 | 8 | 2 |
| **Other societies** |  |  |  |
| Low SES | 9 | 5 | 6 |
| High SES | 6 | 7 | 2 |
| **Volunteering** |  |  |  |
| Low SES | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| High SES | 4 | 7 | 3 |

About connections with the real world, again most interviewees were not satisfied with the opportunities offered at WBS or at the course level, particularly when compared with other (target) universities like London School of Economics or King’s College. They mention a couple of guest lectures and/or company visits over their 3-year studies, and students engaged with the Finance society complained about a total absence of funding to organize events with industry professionals.

Similarly, respondents complained that the job opportunities advertised through Engage were not particularly relevant for them, unless you want to work in the accounting department of the NHS. Firstly, “I was looking for entry level roles on Engage for a finance student. And to be honest there wasn’t much stuff”, “I think the closest one to finance was like accountants”. Then, “when it comes to the placement year and the sandwich year, your only option pretty much is the NHS, which not everybody wants to work for”. Finally, “there was no internships that I was interested in or just in general internships that were THE average known finance companies or working within the financial department of a large corporation or like a FTSE100 company. A lot of them were just like small accounting firms”. And when students with work experience were asked “How did you obtain such work?”, only 3 out of 26 replied “job advertised by the university”. Obviously, our sample is very small, but there’s clearly a gap in terms of relevant job opportunities in finance advertised through the university’s intranet.

*Student engagement in external opportunities*

Table 5 shows how students are using various sources of careers information or advice, whether through the university or elsewhere. The university – through the Careers office or teaching staff – is considered the least helpful source used by respondents across both SES. The most helpful source, again used by low- and high-SES students alike, is family or friends. Interviews revealed different levels of proactivity in seeking EDOs, from reactive students, e.g., “my friends were applying to placements and then that's when I started applying”, to proactive students, e.g., “I was on this online forum where a lot of people that work in finance communicate with each other”.

*Work experience while at university*

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, most students (65%) had some kind of work experience, independently of their socio-economic background. The majority of students undertook paid part-time work or short placements (e.g., 3 months) and the key motive was “to gain work experience or develop particular skills on the job”, shortly followed by “to help pay my essential living costs”. To the question “Do you think your work experience has helped you / will help you find a graduate job and why?” more than 70% recognize the importance of developing hard and soft skills through relevant work experience over and beyond what they learn in their degree. For instance, one student writes that “employers only care about experience. Having a degree and good grades is just a hygiene factor”. Some students don’t agree and one even mentions that “the economy in terms of hiring is in a freeze and employers want candidates from top universities with at least a years’ worth of experience for entry level roles in corporations that pay the London living wage”.

For students who don’t have any work experience, the main reasons provided across social backgrounds are *(i)* to concentrate on their studies and/or *(ii)* being unsuccessful at finding a job, even unpaid. When asked to expand further, several respondents mentioned the lack of previous work experience in securing even an internship. One final-year student even wrote “I felt like I had no knowledge on what is needed to have a successful application for graduate schemes and was unaware on what to do to improve on it”. This is concerting, particularly given that this student took advantage of several EDOs offered by the school, including visiting the careers website, attending one-to-one careers advice, and completing a module to develop her employability skills. For low-SES students, other reasons include lack of time due to family commitments.

In terms of securing a job, we already mentioned that a very small proportion of respondents used the university’s intranet. Most students – both low- and high-SES – secured a job through direct online applications, either applying for a job advertised by the employer, or through a speculative application. About the quality of the work experience, the little data we have tend to suggest that both low- and high-SES students were able to secure high-quality – paid and relevant – jobs at elite firms.

***Table 5. Sources of careers information or advice***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Helpful | Not helpful | Not used |
| University Careers Advisory Service | 16 | 9 | 13 |
| Private careers advice/employment agency | 15 | 4 | 18 |
| Teaching staff in your department | 21 | 10 | 7 |
| Professional bodies | 16 | 7 | 13 |
| Family or friends | 27 | 7 | 4 |

To sum up, WBS seems to offer a wide variety of EDOs, in particular on career development learning, through their intranet. Unfortunately, some students are not aware of these opportunities, and more crucially, these EDOs are not the main drivers of employability. Many respondents complained about the amount of emails they receive when they first join university and the fact that they are overwhelmed and probably missing crucial information. For instance, our low-SES interviewees who presumably were invited to attend the “Inclusive Futures: Insight” programme confessed knowing nothing about it. In this context, **raising awareness about key EDOs – and mostly the importance of work experience – should be key** for a university like Westminster where most students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and hence lack crucial social capital. All but one of our interviewees coming from a low SES admitted not knowing the importance of internships until their first year (even second year) of university, whereas high-SES students already knew from their family or personal connections. On a positive note, several low-SES students started engaging with various EDOs such as ECAs as soon as they became aware of their importance so they could benefit greatly from these opportunities.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on our analysis above, and on our own experiences as L6 students and module leader, our key recommendation is the need to significantly raise student awareness as soon as they arrive on campus (e.g., about Spring weeks and the importance of networking). The best way to do this – which is already done in many other universities – is to invite recent alumni from different sectors within finance to come and share their own experience with L4 students.

Once we’ve raised awareness, students need to be exposed to the real world as early and frequently as possible, in a variety of ways. These include company visits, guest speakers, finance-specific networking events, as well as better advertising existing employability opportunities offered at WBS (e.g., Inclusive Futures, Westminster Working Cultures). Networking events should be organised in collaboration with the Finance society, which has been the main (and most helpful) source of careers advice and information for our (most aware) respondents. We also recommend organizing cross-industry panels for both networking and exposure. At the course level, a student mentioned the importance of a professional curriculum:

*“I believe that there could be more modules that are directly correlated to the finance industry. For e.g. I believe that the new computational module addition in the 2nd year is very good for the course. More modules like this need to be added to improve the overall level of the finance course.”*

Last but not least, WBS should focus on providing high-quality job opportunities in accounting and finance. One respondent highlighted the importance of work experience as well as the link with the corporate world:

*“Students should be compelled to develop core skills – communication, time management, presentation, leadership and teamwork through work experience as part of their course. This should also be graded. Advisors in the career centre should have corporate experience and understand the milk-round process of recruitment and the importance of timing when looking for internships or full-time roles. This should be communicated to the students.”*

# Dissemination

We will disseminate the results of our study through various channels. First, we prepared a poster to present our findings at the SCC event in October. Second, we will send our report to students and staff who participated in the survey and interviews. We will also share the project and its recommendations with the Head of SFA, the SFA DTLQ and course leaders, as well as the Employability team at WBS. The two student partners involved in this project (Daniel and Gerasim) already agreed to come back in October to talk to L4 students about their own experiences and journeys to a graduate job in finance.

After this, we aim to develop the report into a full-length academic paper to be submitted to a journal in finance or education. We’re also forming a research cluster with staff members from SFA and other WBS schools in order to take this project further and extend its scope to other business schools in England. We already drafted a literature review and presented our work-in-progress at the SFA annual symposium last June, and we’ve already identified a suitable funder and will aim to apply for a grant in the Spring.

Gerasim also hopes to share the findings of the study through the charity he recently co-founded to help promote social mobility in the finance industry.[[9]](#footnote-9) He is keen to stay on board the project as a SFA alumni, and his work with the charity will be a perfect match for this project.

# Research Team Reflection

Gerasim Hristov – This paper from the start was a passion project for me and it reflects my personal experiences throughout university. It was my anecdotal impression of the treatment and outcomes of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that prompted me to find out if such lived experiences are shared. My goal with this project was to find the root cause behind the inability of underprivileged students to find employment in their areas of interest. Hence, with the help of Dr. Julie Ayton, this immensely important research topic became possible and a reality. Throughout the several months of work, I learned a lot about how to approach complex societal issues from a researcher’s point of view, how to analyse data and how to identify policy recommendations that would have a measurable impact on people’s lives. Furthermore, through Daniel Belcher’s involvement, this project became even more successful due to his outstanding data analytical capabilities acquired during his time at S&P Global. In total, this project has helped me understand the intricacies behind the success or failure of students in their search for employability and the role universities and socioeconomic status play in that.

Daniel Belcher – First introduced to the importance of social mobility, through involvement in vocational and educational report writing on corporate governance issues; I became increasingly aware that social disparity and diversity issues we observe on corporate boards and C-Suite positions appear to start far earlier in one’s career. It was therefore an easy decision to research a similar hypothesis and join a high-impact research project with two esteemed professionals in their own disciplines, Julie Ayton and Gerasim Hristov, who continue to inspire and guide my academic and professional career. As someone who has straddled the lines of social classes and experienced both perspectives, I wanted to use my position to contribute to the goal of understanding why differences in SES lead to a stark divide in the early career opportunities, especially in high paying elite corporate institutions. The key takeaways I learnt from this project are as follows: firstly, that educational development opportunities play a critical role in bridging the socio-economic gap and informing all students of opportunities beyond their social expectations. Secondly, the interpersonal and analytical skills learnt, along with the concerning social themes explored on this project, have undoubtedly contributed to my goal of lifelong stewardship in supporting others, to achieve their goals, and to contribute to their successful careers alongside my own.

Julie Ayton – This is not the first SCC project I am involved in, and there’s a very good reason for that. Whether it is a curriculum development project or a disciplinary research collaboration, students bring fresh and valuable insights to the table. It was a pleasure to collaborate with such passionate students, particularly when they were the ones initiating the project. Also, it made the data collection easier, as students may react/respond differently when interviewed by other students rather than staff. I believe we all learnt a lot from this project and I’m very much looking forward to continue this research agenda in the coming years. And obviously engage in other SCC projects in the future.

**References**

Ashley, L., Duberley, J., Sommerlad, H., & Scholarios, D. (2015). *A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions*. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission London.

Ashley, L., & Empson, L. (2017). Understanding social exclusion in elite professional service firms: field level dynamics and the ‘professional project’. *Work, Employment and Society, 31*(2), 211-229.

Bathmaker, A. (2021). Constructing a graduate career future: Working with Bourdieu to understand transitions from university to employment for students from working‐class backgrounds in England. *European Journal of Education, 56*(1), 78-92.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.

CBI. (2021). *Skills for an inclusive economy: CBI/Birkbeck Education and Skills Survey 2021.* ().[https://https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/7020/12684\_tess\_-survey\_2021.pdf](about:blank)

Dumais, S. A., & Ward, A. (2010). Cultural capital and first-generation college success. *Poetics, 38*(3), 245-265.

Gaddis, S. M. (2013). The influence of habitus in the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement. *Social Science Research, 42*(1), 1-13.

Goldstone, R. (2022). *Social class, school-to-college transitions, and the student further education college experience in England*

Liu, J., Peng, P., & Luo, L. (2020). The relation between family socioeconomic status and academic achievement in China: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 32*, 49-76.

Mason, G., Williams, G., & Cranmer, S. (2009). Employability skills initiatives in higher education: what effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes? *Education Economics, 17*(1), 1-30.

McCafferty, H. (2022). An unjust balance: a systematic review of the employability perceptions of UK undergraduates from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 27*(4), 570-593.

Milburn, A. (2009). Unleashing aspiration: the final report of the panel on fair access to the professions. *London: Cabinet Office,*

Pitan, O. S. (2016). Employability development opportunities (EDOs) as measures of students’ enhanced employability. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning,*

Pitan, O. S., & Muller, C. (2020). Student perspectives on employability development in higher education in South Africa. *Education Training, 63*(3), 453-471.

Reay, D. (2006). The zombie stalking English schools: Social class and educational inequality. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 54*(3), 288-307.

Rodriguez-Hernandez, C. F., Cascallar, E., & Kyndt, E. (2020). Socio-economic status and academic performance in higher education: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review, 29*, 100305.

Sultana, R. G., & Watts, A. G. (2006). Career guidance in public employment services across Europe. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 6*, 29-46.

Sutton Trust. (2014). Pathways to Banking: Improving Access for Students from Non‐privileged Backgrounds.

Tomlinson, M. (2008). ‘The degree is not enough’: students’ perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 29*(1), 49-61.

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 68-81.

Witteveen, D., & Attewell, P. (2017). Family background and earnings inequality among college graduates. *Social Forces, 95*(4), 1539-1576.

Wong, B., & Hoskins, K. (2022). Ready, set, work? Career preparations of final-year non-traditional university students. *Higher Education Pedagogies, 7*(1), 88-106.

Wright, E., & Mulvey, B. (2021). Internships and the graduate labour market: how upper-middle-class students ‘get ahead’. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 42*(3), 339-356.

1. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/diversity-for-a-financial-services-workforce-employers-toolkit> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-milburn-report-fair-access.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The university’s mission is to “help students and colleagues from different backgrounds fulfil their potential and contribute to a more sustainable, equitable and healthier society”. Source: [Our vision, mission and values | University of Westminster, London](https://www.westminster.ac.uk/about-us/our-university/our-vision-mission-and-values) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. To the question: “Do any of your parents have any higher education qualifications?” only 23% of students answered “yes”, 41% answered “no” and 36% answered “don’t know”. Source: University of Westminster’s Student Records System, 2022/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We also collected data about the occupation of each parent and whether their family was eligible for free school meals. This data only helped corroborate our classification. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Student Partnership team allocated £300 budget to this project which we used to compensate interview respondents for their time through Amazon vouchers. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://valueineveryone.co.uk> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)