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# ‘Talent-spotting’ or ‘social magic’? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions

**Nicola Ingram (Lancaster University) and Kim Allen (University of Leeds)**

## Abstract

Graduate outcomes – including rates of employment and earnings – are marked by persistent inequalities related to social class, as well as gender, ethnicity and institution. Despite national policy agendas related to social mobility and ‘fair access to the professions’, high-status occupations are disproportionately composed of those from socially privileged backgrounds, and evidence suggests that in recent decades many professions have become less socially representative. This paper makes an original contribution to sociological studies of inequalities in graduate transitions and elite reproduction through a distinct focus on the ‘pre-hiring’ practices of graduate employers. It does this through a critical analysis of the graduate recruitment material of two popular graduate employers. We show how, despite espousing commitments to diversity and inclusion, constructions of the ‘ideal’ graduate privilege individuals who can mobilise and embody certain valued capitals. Using Bourdieusian concepts of ‘Social Magic’ and ‘Institutional Habitus’ we argue that more attention must be paid to how graduate employers’ practices constitute tacit processes of social exclusion and thus militate against the achievement of more equitable graduate outcomes and fair access to the ‘top jobs’.

**Keywords:** Graduates; Elites; The Professions; Social Class; Bourdieu; Higher Education; Social Magic; Recruitment; Google; Diversity; Employability

## **Introduction**

In the context of government agendas concerning social mobility and ‘fair access to the professions’ (Social Mobility Commission 2016), the social profile of high status occupational sectors has been subject to much debate and critique. Sectors such as law, media and politics are disproportionately composed of individuals from socially privileged backgrounds, including those who attended Oxbridge and/or fee-paying schools (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014). Furthermore, many professional sectors are beset by a ‘class ceiling’ (Friedman et al 2017) whereby those within these professions from lower socio-economic backgrounds earn significantly less than those from more advantaged backgrounds. Despite policy commitments to ‘break open Britain’s elite’, many professions have become *less* socially representative over time (Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, 2015).

Universities have been tasked with playing a key role in efforts to enhance social mobility and increase diversity in the professions, positioned as ‘gatekeepers of opportunity’ (Milburn 2012: 12). This expands beyond widening participation in Higher Education (HE) to improving graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students; a duty embedded elsewhere within HE policy, with employability forming a key metric in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS 2016: 12). Yet, whilst universities clearly have a responsibility for enhancing graduate outcomes, a predominant focus on what universities are (or are not) doing can obscure the role of employers in mediating graduate outcomes and undermining efforts to make the professions more inclusive.

This paper shifts the spotlight onto employers’ practices. We present a critical analysis of the graduate recruitment materials of two popular graduate employers in two distinct occupational sectors: Google (Information Technology) and Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC) (Finance). We situate these recruitment materials as important public articulations of the kinds of qualities employers seek from graduates. Examining how these employers market themselves to graduates through these ‘pre-hiring’ processes of attraction, we demonstrate how constructions of the ‘ideal’ graduate privilege individuals who embody certain valued capitals, and in doing so, circumscribe opportunities and limits for potential employees.

## **Graduate outcomes and social closure in the professions**

While increasing numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are entering HE, inequalities continue to persist in access, attainment and – pertinent to this paper - outcomes. Graduates from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds experience considerably worse employment outcomes than their middle-class peers, including rates of employment and earnings, even after completing the same degrees from the same universities (Britton et al 2016). These class inequalities intersect with other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability and institution. Overall white, male and middle-class graduates – and those attending more prestigious universities – have the highest employment rates and earnings (HEFCE 2015; HESA 2017; Purcell et al 2012). As both social class and ‘race’/ethnicity shape the likelihood of attending elite HEIs (Boliver 2016; UUK 2017), institutional inequalities in graduate employment are compounded by university entrance. Indeed, the advantages on graduate careers conferred by attending particular institutions are demonstrated in analysis of Great British Class Survey (GBCS) data (Wakeling and Savage 2015) which reveals a preponderance of alumni from a ‘golden triangle’ of elite institutions (Oxbridge and a cluster of London institutions) within the GBCS’s ‘elite’ class.

Although this data shows correlations between social class, institution and access to high-status occupations, it is limited in its explanatory power for *why* these patterns occur. Qualitative studies of students’ and graduates’ experiences of the labor market can partially help generate a more fine-grained understanding of *how* these inequalities are (re)produced. For example, extensive research demonstrates how middle-class students maintain their advantaged position within the graduate labour market through accessing financial support and family social networks, which provide insight, knowledge, and opportunities to secure work experience and other extra-curricular activities (ECAs) sought by employers (Allen et al 2013; Bathmaker et al 2013; 2016; Burke 2015; Purcell et al 2012).

Alongside exploring how graduates navigate this ‘employability game’, it is vital to consider how employers’ hiring practices mediate graduate outcomes. Shifting the focus to graduate employers helps to challenge policy discourses which tend to explain differences in graduate outcomes through a deficit notion of ‘attitudinal’ factors (such as students’ ‘proactivity’ in career planning), or place the onus on universities to address the problem through institutional interventions. Indeed, as the sector’s representative body, Universities UK (2017) state: ‘while

universities have a responsibility to support the progression of students from under-represented groups, employers also have an important role to play, not least in ensuring that their practices do not risk undermining the efforts in the education sector' (2017: 39). They point to 'pull' factors emerging from employers' practices, such as selecting candidates from elite universities that are less likely to have students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds than 'newer' universities. This is supported by the annual High Flyer's (2017) survey of graduate employers which reveals that most employers actively market opportunities in just 10-25 HEIs (out of over 140 nationally) based on judgments of institutional prestige. These were Warwick, Manchester, Bristol, Cambridge, Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, Oxford, Durham, and Bath.

Qualitative research into high-status occupational sectors begins to unmask the ways in which employers' recruitment practices contribute to the reproduction of inequalities in graduate outcomes. Ashley and Empson's (2013; 2016) research into law and professional service firms (PSFs) demonstrates how, despite espousing meritocratic values, firms' hiring strategies had a clear class bias which was entangled with assessments of institutional prestige. In their research, candidates were selected who could present an 'upmarket' image that signified quality and prestige, with attendance at leading universities used as a proxy for the 'very best graduates'. Recruitment processes included screening for legitimated cultural and social capital that matched that of existing staff and clients; not just in the form of institutionalised capital (e.g. a degree from an elite university), but also 'embodied cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986), manifest in reference to candidates' 'polish', 'confidence' and 'professional presentation' and made through assessments of dress or accent. This echoes Brown and Hesketh's (2004) work from over a decade ago, which argues that in a knowledge economy 'employability... has become, stylized, commodified, and ultimately embodied within individuals in such a way as to render the process of selecting individuals in the labour market process open to new levels of subjectivity' (p.92). Their important study, which included interviews with graduate employers and observations of assessment centres, highlighted the shift from 'hard' to 'soft' skills in the recruitment process as the nature of graduate employment shifted and the volume of graduates increased. Since then we have seen a further shift from soft skills and what has been termed interpersonal skills to an altogether more pernicious form of

self-presentation of capital through ‘self-branding’, an issue that requires further attention.

Rivera’s (2015) research into banking, consulting and law firms in the United States draws similar conclusions. She found that hiring decisions were made through assessments of ‘talent’ and ‘cultural fit’ that involved selecting candidates from Ivy League colleges, and screening for shared middle-class cultural capital in the form of particular lifestyle markers (leisure pursuits, dress etc). Rivera (2012) also demonstrates a disconnect between firms’ rhetoric of diverse recruitment and their hiring decisions, arguing that diversity policies function more as ‘impression management’ tools rather than practices genuinely oriented to achieving more socially-representative appointments. This is pertinent to the UK where some employers have publicly committed to inclusive recruitment by, for example, signing up to the Government’s Social Mobility Business Compact and Social Mobility Employers Index i.

Our paper draws on this important work but departs from it in several ways, substantively, methodologically and theoretically. First, studies of elite recruitment tend to focus on ‘older’, more traditional high-status professions such as law and accountancy. Yet current policy agendas identify social exclusion across a range of occupational sectors including ‘newer’ professions such as information technology (Friedman et al 2017). These are increasingly popular with graduates, conferring high material and symbolic rewards, yet they differ to PSFs in their hiring strategies and the type of graduate they are likely to appeal to and recruit. Including these sectors thus allows us to explore under-researched but increasingly attractive graduate pathways.

Second, rather than interviewing recruitment personnel or graduates, we provide a distinctive insight by analysing the outward-facing graduate recruitment material through which employers market themselves to graduates: which might usefully be called the ‘pre-hiring’ process of attraction. These not only provide insights into the hiring processes operating within these sectors, but also constitute important public discursive articulations of the kinds of qualities employers seek from graduates: from the explicit and formal criteria structuring candidate selection (such as qualifications), to the more tacit constructions of ‘fit’ that mediate entry to these occupations. This helps us to get beneath the diversity and inclusion narratives that would likely frame employer interviews (see Rivera’s methodological reflections

here, 2012). Relatedly, these materials function as a crucial ‘go-to’ source of information for graduates, and employers increasingly use online spaces to target potential graduate employees (HighFlyers 2017).

Finally, we make a distinct theoretical contribution through operationalising the Bourdieusian concepts of social magic and institutional habitus. This allows us to identify processes of social exclusion within the professions *and* their naturalisation. Before introducing this theory, we first discuss our research strategy and rationale for selecting Google and PwC.

## **The Research**

Our analysis addresses the following questions: how do graduate employers construct the ideal graduate? How are these constructions reflected in their recruitment and selection practices and marketing materials? And how do these contribute to social exclusion from the professions? To address these, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of the recruitment material of two graduate employers selected on the basis of sector recurrence and position within two national ‘league tables’ of graduate employers in the UK: *The Guardian UK 300* and *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*. Drawn from annual surveys of thousands of students and graduates across UK universities, these are positioned as a comprehensive reference for graduates and a valuable marketing tool for employers to target graduates and track their ‘brand image’.

We selected the two employers who had been ranked by students and graduates in the two surveys as the number one employer in the UK. These were from two different occupational sectors: Google (Information Technology) came top of *The Guardian UK 300* and Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC) (Finance) came top of *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*. Table 1 presents their positions for 2017/18.

*Table 1: Employer position in 'league tables' 2017-18*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Guardian UK 300 overall position</b>	<b>Guardian UK 300 subsector</b>	<b>Guardian UK 300 subsector position</b>	<b>Times 100 overall position</b>	<b>Times 100 subsector</b>	<b>Times 100 subsector position</b>
<b>Google</b>	1	IT and Technology	1	5	IT & telecoms	n/a
<b>PwC</b>	13	Accounting	1	1	Accounting & professional services	n/a



We do not claim that Google and PwC are representative of *all* graduate employers. Hiring practices vary by occupational sector and by employer size. However, they provide valuable case studies for several reasons. First, their position in the surveys indicates their significant popularity among graduates. Second, they are associated with high-status professions that promise both material rewards, and symbolic rewards of prestige, career fulfillment and glamour; especially Google as a familiar symbol of the ‘creative’ tech-economy (Littler 2017). Third, both sectors have been implicated in current policy agendas around social mobility and diversity. Relatedly, both Finance and IT have statistically significant class pay gaps (Laurison and Friedman 2016) and class pay gaps are generally larger in firms with over 250 staff (Friedman and Laurison 2017) which, as large international companies, applies to Google and PwC.

For each, we analysed publically available online material with a view to accessing information that might be obtained by graduates when considering employment pathways. In the digital age, public-facing online information becomes a key source for graduates in self-selecting and self-excluding when applying for employment. Furthermore, as already mentioned, employers are making increasing use of online platforms for recruitment, including their own websites and social media, and national graduate recruitment websites. Data were generated through a multi-stage process. We began by collecting data from the graduate recruitment pages on each company’s website, and linked social media (Facebook, YouTube) including: information about the hiring processes, evaluative criteria and person specification; the application and selection procedure; and additional information about organisational culture. We also reviewed their diversity strategies where available. We supplemented this with additional material targeted at graduates relating to these companies. We focused on the sites used regularly by graduate employers in their recruitment promotion (HighFlyers 2017), including newspaper articles, blogs, and national graduate websites (*Milkround*, *Prospects*, *Targetjobs*). Data were generated through internet searches using keywords (the company name plus: ‘graduate recruitment’, ‘graduate jobs’ and ‘graduate position’).

We apply a visual discourse analysis (Rose 2001) to this material, attending to both explicit, formal evaluative criteria and tacit signifiers of ‘fit’ within both textual and visual representations. We are concerned with how both language and visual

signifiers (for example images of employees, the workplace) construct and communicate the 'ideal' graduate employee and its Other.

### **Theory: Social magic and institutional habitus**

We appropriate the work of Bourdieu to develop a theoretical framework for disentangling the processes of social exclusion in graduate recruitment that operate within two companies. Building on our previous theoretical engagement with Bourdieusian theory we combine concepts of institutional habitus (Burke et al 2013) and social magic (Lawler 2017). This allows us to interrogate both the explicit and tacit connections, disconnections, matching and sorting occurring in graduate recruitment, that result in some bodies being read as being 'right' and others as 'wrong' in particular professions.

In her research into the elite professions, Puwar (2004) demonstrates the workings of power structures that operate subtly, yet deleteriously, to inscribe entitlement to belong or not on different bodies:

Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy...Some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations while others are marked out as trespassers who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, circumscribed as being 'out of place' (2004: 8).

Puwar explains that the 'somatic norm' as a white, male, upper/middle class body, is so naturalised within elite professions that it is unacknowledged by those who embody it and thus becomes the unquestioned way of being. The effect of this 'naturalisation' process is that classed, gendered or racialised prejudices that deny the validity of 'other' bodies are not recognised.

Our analysis attends to how cultural fit and belonging is constructed and communicated through employers' recruitment marketing materials, exploring what sort of 'ideal' graduate these bring into being. The importance of these materials in marking out 'right' and 'wrong' bodies should not be overlooked as a fundamental aspect of ex/inclusion in hiring practices. However, as we demonstrate, it is through subtlety and lack of an explicit description of what constitutes the 'ideal' graduate that

processes of discrimination are first obscured, and second, transformed into 'objective' criteria which naturalises privilege as earned and developed skills.

This process of transformation can be considered an act of social magic. Social magic is the means of obscuring the conditions in which value is constructed so that fit comes to be seen as 'natural' and the cultural arbitrary is denied. It is a useful concept for considering how value is both constructed and mobilised (as capital). In discussing social magic, Lawler highlights the fundamental importance of capital conversion. She makes the point that 'capital conversion works through a naturalization of properties, such that privilege is entrenched through being understood as a property of a person' (Lawler 2017). It is in the process of conversion of a subjective property into a symbolic capital where value is conferred, allowing, for example, the property of a 'posh' or Received Pronunciation (RP) accent to be symbolically (mis)recognised as intelligence or – conversely – a regional accent to be symbolically (mis)recognised as ignorance and lack of taste. It is in the conversion process that an accent may be magically transformed into something else. Social magic generates the belief that the person possesses capacities that are unrelated to the social world in which they developed. It casts a magical veil so that embodied forms of cultural capital become naturalised and the structures in which they were generated are denied existence. As Lawler argues, it 'works to eclipse the social relations that produce it [a valued attribute] in the first place, casting some persons as naturally bearing the distinctions that give them value' (Lawler 2017).

The concept of social magic helps us to consider the ways that an individual habitus can align with that of an institution, in that some bodies more readily connect into institutional social performances, and are more open to incorporating and internalising the structures. Bourdieu argues that:

it is through the capacity for incorporation, which exploits the body's readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social, that the king, the banker or the priest are hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church made flesh (1990: 57).

Bodies that fit, what Puwar calls the somatic norm, readily incorporate institutional structures to perform *as* the institution. They are the institution made flesh. The actor brings the institution into being. A group or organisation can assume an identity

through linguistic and bodily performances (which will be demonstrated in our discussion of Google). The institution imposes a vision of the world, which is internalised by those within. This process is easier if the person already has a habitus match with an institution. The tacit understanding of a body's readiness to incorporate the institution underlies the recruitment process, but through an act of social magic this is understood to be an objective process that sifts according to tangible and measurable qualities. Both social magic and institutional habitus will be deployed in the analysis that follows.

### **Technology: Google**

In this section, we examine how Google's ideal graduate is constructed and communicated through their graduate recruitment material and the wider discussion of the company's employment practices and organisational culture. We critically interrogate the notion of 'Googliness' that occupies a central place within their evaluative criteria for recruitment. We argue that while presented as a set of objective and assessable criteria, Googliness is embedded in subjective values and normative assumptions of 'cultural fit'. Specifically, we argue that assessments of Googliness construct a somatic norm (Puwar 2004) that is middle-class, male, youthful, and able-bodied. Through the concept of institutional habitus we consider how this norm is reproduced *and* naturalised through Google's emphasis on 'intrepreneurship' as well as the spatial-social dimensions of the Google workplace. In doing so we illustrate how social magic occurs within graduate recruitment by obscuring the social relations that enable (certain) graduates to accrue forms of capital that are read *as* Googliness.

#### ***Googliness: the 'magic ingredient'***

Google's recruitment materials emphasise the competitive and arduous nature of their hiring process. Google's website (<https://careers.google.com/how-we-hire/interview/#onsite-interviews>) lists four areas in which candidates will be assessed: General cognitive ability; Leadership; Role-related knowledge; and Googliness.

The concept of Googliness saturates Google's recruitment material and how others describe its practices as an employer.

Other companies screen for intelligence and experience in potential recruits. But Google also looks for ‘Googliness’ – a mashup of passion and drive that’s hard to define but easy to spot. (Finn 2011)

The words Googley and Googliness are not to be found in the common language. They are almost magical words however. Even at Google it’s not clear to everyone what these words mean. And that’s no surprise. You don’t get a handout with a description (Meiert 2013)

These quotes capture some of the contradictions at the heart of this concept which appears to govern Google’s assessments of ‘fit’. On the one hand, Googliness appears as something that can be identified and which a quantifiable number of Google employees possess. Yet it is also a highly ambiguous, magical, mystical quality which is ‘hard to define but easy to spot’.

Applicants are not told exactly what Googliness is: there is ‘no handout’. It is expected that they should just know what it is and naturally embody it. Googliness is constructed here as a special quality that is already possessed by certain applicants. As one executive states it ‘isn’t something you can learn at school’ (Wood Rudolph 2013). This ambiguity is important. It is this that provides the mechanisms through which classed – *and* gendered, racialised, ageist, and abelist – forms of cultural sorting are naturalised. Googliness is a ‘secret ingredient’ that comes to stand in for more tangible qualities and objective criteria in assessing applicants, and a means of justifying subjective (and potentially biased) hiring decisions.

We argue that rather than being an inherent quality residing in certain individuals, Googliness is best understood as an ability to accrue and display highly valued (and unequally distributed) capitals that are given value by Google’s recruiters. Consequently Googliness privileges certain graduates and excludes others. Yet through social magic the social dimensions of this process are denied and obscured.

***Sifting for Googliness: revealing the secret ingredient***

The last attribute is Googliness, which is how well they identify with the Google mission, how passionate they are about the job, whether they have a natural curiosity to learn and grow, and if they work as a team. (Yvonne Agyei, vice-president for international people operations at Google, in Thekkepat 2016)

Like many employers, Google requires candidates to demonstrate a combination of educational qualifications (symbolic cultural capital), and ‘skills’ (embodied cultural capital) demonstrated through ECAs and employment experience. However, as many graduates now accumulate these, differentiation within the competitive recruitment pool is increasingly difficult. How then does Google sift for Googliness?

First, Google seeks ‘strong educational credentials’, which seems, on the face of it, a reasonable ask. However, as a much-coveted employer, Google are more likely to employ a graduate who not only has a good degree transcript, but one conferred by an institution positioned at (or near) the top of global rankings. Through the process of social magic, the seemingly objective criterion of ‘strong educational credentials’ is assessed and measured by the socially structured form of capital that is endowed by the symbolic value of the (elite) institution.

Yet it is not enough to have the requisite qualifications. To demonstrate true Googliness and differentiate themselves from the mass, candidates must go further. Below, one employee explains what Google seek:

Emily, now an associate product marketing manager at Google who did internships at the tech giant during both her junior and senior years at Harvard University, says students must demonstrate an entrepreneurial spirit to stand out among the thousands of applicants for the internship program: ‘They look for people who are self-starters, who really take initiative and are very active in pursuing their passions’ (Champagne 2013)

It is important to consider what resources are required to develop the means of constructing yourself as a ‘self-starter’ with ‘entrepreneurial spirit’. A student would, like Emily, need to have already undertaken one of Google’s coveted internships – an opportunity more accessible to those with financial support and contacts within the company. They might also need to set up a small business, and perhaps take financial

risks in the pursuit of profit. The required capital investment (drawing on the economic capital of parents perhaps) is not available to all. It is therefore reasonable to argue that all but the privileged are precluded from being 'googly'. Again, we see social magic at work, transforming economic and social capital into an assessment of a special inner quality (or 'spirit').

Relatedly, candidates are expected to show 'passion' for the job and a 'natural curiosity' to learn and grow. It is difficult to conceive of how this might be displayed and judged. Undertaking ECAs may be one way, and presumably, those who have the most impressive portfolio of ECAs on their CV (both qualitatively and quantitatively) are best positioned. However, differential access to economic and social capital restricts the type of person who can embody these valued attributes. Moreover, time, as an important commodity in this exchange of capital, is differentially available. And so, to demonstrate an embodiment of Googliness one must not only invest money, but be unencumbered by personal commitments or constraints on one's time (such as caring responsibilities or part-time employment). This brings into being a youthful, 'care-free' (and gendered), privileged subject, and thus delineates who belongs.

Google's reputation for its highly competitive and challenging recruitment process is made explicit on graduate websites: 'The recruitment strategy employed by Google is designed to get only the most inspirational, creative and motivated candidates into the business, so be prepared to be challenged at every step of the way' (Graduateschemes.com). According to ex-employees and 'job coaches', this arduous process is likely to include being asked quirky questions such as 'how would you design an evacuation plan for San Francisco' or 'how many golf balls can you fit in a school bus' (Upton 2013). Google's own recruitment materials confirm this. In one YouTube video titled 'Interviewing at Google', one recruiter explains that 'some see it as the hardest university exam and others as a great day connecting with likeminded people' ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w887NIa\\_V9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w887NIa_V9w)).

Again it is important to consider which graduates might experience this as a 'great day': who would feel at ease answering these questions? What resources might facilitate a sense of confidence and entitlement in these settings? Certainly 'hot knowledge' of, and preparation for the interview process through family networks or institutional support would be invaluable. There is considerable variation in the resources that universities can invest in preparing their graduates for employers' often-complex recruitment practices, and elite institutions appear to be most adept at

this, providing for example on-campus training for psychometric testing, and using their alumni networks within these professions (High Flyers 2017).

In an attempt to summarise the analysis above, Table 2 outlines the social magic conversion process through which socially-structured capitals are transformed into seemingly objective and value-free criteria.



*Table 2: The Google Social Magic Conversion Table*

<b>'Objective' Criteria</b>	<b>Socially Structured 'Capital'</b>
Strong educational credentials	Degree from an elite global university
Passion and natural curiosity	'Good' ECAs; interesting leisure pursuits
Highly-motivated	Internship (ideally with Google); financially supported by parents and sourced through family social networks
Go-getting self starter/ entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurial activity undertaken in spare time; supported by available economic capital
Quirkiness, like-mindedness	At ease in interview setting; supported via institutional assessment preparation and family networks
Committed to the 'Google Family'	Able to participate in work social activities; unburdened by caring responsibilities or other commitments

### ***The Google Family: Google made flesh and (un)belonging bodies***

Google presents itself to graduates as an organisation that is welcoming and nurturing of talent through an image of familial collectivity. Being part of Google relies not only on displaying the ‘right’ attributes, outlined above, but on demonstrating what Google call ‘intrepreneurship’. Intrepreneurship takes the concept of entrepreneurialism – individuals seizing opportunities and taking risks to develop something new – and attempts to divest it of its individualised connotation, in order to reimagine the concept as being more about producing for ‘the greater good’. Intrepreneurs are individual workers but their creativity is owned by and oriented to the ‘good’ of organisation. This idea permeates Google discourse. One former employee describes being Googley as ‘being humble, and letting go of the ego ... thinking of the users, the company, the team, and then oneself’ (Meirert 2013). Through this collective construction of an organisational habitus based on ‘letting go of the ego’ (albeit an individualised form of collectivity), a bonded Google family is created.

Indeed, this description of *being* Google is akin to a religious philosophy of self-sacrifice, by putting others (in this case the organisation) first. Being inculcated into a ‘Google way of thinking’ – through the internalisation of the organisational culture and habitus – employees become deeply connected and loyal to the institutional family. This enables the company to minimise the risk of its employees taking their valuable knowledge and skills to competitor organisations. If technological innovations are tied up with a family identity then the employee sees their achievements as those of the institution.

Another means of attracting graduates who are open to the inculcation of the Google institutional habitus is through the company’s novel socio-spatial dimension: who ‘fits’ Google is writ large in the walls. Google is known for its quirky workplace/play-space environments; its offices are immediately recognisable by features such as giant beanbags, slides, Routemaster buses, and segways. These spaces are part of its utopian image and appear to signify Google’s informal, non-hierarchical ethos, its valuing of sociality, play and creativity, and a commitment to staff wellbeing:

It really is employee heaven over at Google... Imagine working at Google, and it’s lunchtime. Forget about grabbing a sandwich or a prepackaged meal.

At hand are professional chefs who will prepare a gourmet meal just the way you like it. No, this is not an urban legend. (Thekkepat 2016)

These constructions of work as a utopian paradise or ‘corporate cosmopolitan nirvana’ (Littler 2017: 49) are not benign. They create an illusory ‘heaven’ to which the ‘ideal’ Google worker can transcend if they are lucky to be accepted into the family home. Yet only some bodies can belong here. The physical space calls into being a particular subject: youthful, playful, mobile, able-bodied, and always available and up for fun. He/She has no constraints on their passion, drive and commitment (as highlighted above). Thus, in constructing an ideal worker, these spaces also circumscribe trespassers (Puwar 2009): those who may not welcome play, or have the freedom or desire to commit to forming a family and a family home within work. This could involve financial constraints, caring responsibilities, or physical disability or mental health conditions. Indeed these apparently ‘utopian’ workspaces – like the emphasis on social and emotional intelligence within Googliness – are underlined by logics of neoliberal ableism and capitalism’s fetishisation of the (hyper)normal (Goodley 2014).

Google’s diversity webpages present a dazzling array of initiatives targeted at women, ethnic minorities, and even ‘gayglers’ and ‘greyglers’. Conspicuously absent however is socio-economic background. Thus, whilst Google goes to great lengths to present itself as an organisation that values diversity, Google offers a home only to certain – privileged – subjects.

### **Finance: Price WaterHouse Cooper (PwC)**

While Google’s diversity strategies are marked by a conspicuous absence of attention to social class, PwC presents itself as a progressive employer that is explicitly committed to social mobility. They are official partners of the UK Social Mobility Awards and one of the top 10 employers named in the 2017 Social Mobility Index. A key part of this commitment has been the removal of UCAS scores as entry criteria for (‘the majority’) of its graduate roles in order to make their company – and the profession – ‘open to all’ (Ellis 2016)

At face value this shows a genuine and welcome commitment. However we

reveal a problematic disconnect between PwC's branding of itself as an inclusive employer and its recruitment processes and evaluative criteria. First, we show that the attributes and qualities sought by PwC are measured through an embodied performance of ones 'personal brand' which privileges graduates who possess and can package valued capitals that chime with the company. We also identify a significant conceptual messiness with regards to how 'diversity' and 'social mobility' are used by PwC, and a lack of transparency around how changes to their entry criteria translate into more inclusive hiring decisions. As such, we argue that PwC's commitments to inclusive recruitment appear to stop short of any meaningful transformation to their workforce.

### ***The Personal Brand: 'make the true you shine'***

In an unstable and flooded labour market, the imperative for graduates to differentiate themselves through CV-enhancing ECAs is mutating as graduates must become ever more inventive. Employers have moved beyond looking for interpersonal skills to a concern with an applicant's personal brand. Graduates are encouraged to stand out from the crowd by starting their own company, social enterprise or 'building a personal brand' (Kaputa 2016). This self-conscious crafting of persona as a marketable commodity (Gershon 2016) is a central theme within PwC's recruitment materials. Like Google, PwC assumes that top credentials and ECAs are a given, and therefore they want applicants with something more. That something is 'the true you', which must be cultivated and displayed through your personal brand:

In today's marketplace, it's tough to stand out. Good grades and lots of extracurricular activities won't guarantee that you'll land the job of your dreams, or that you'll even land the interview. There are many qualified candidates out there. The secret to standing out is to impress recruiters with the unique *you*—in person, on paper, and online. You need to create career marketing tools that will make the true *you* shine and leave them wanting more. It all starts with building your personal brand. (PwC 2016a: 2)

The emphasis here and in other materials is on 'being yourself'. This celebration of 'being yourself' through one's 'personal brand' is beset by a number of tensions. First it constructs graduates as being in possession of an authentic 'inner self' waiting to

shine forth and leave recruiters 'wanting more'. Yet, as Gershon (2016) argues, this demand that one has a personal 'brand', and that it expresses an authentic self, is in conflict with current economic conditions. As graduates are increasingly employed on short-term contracts, they are required to constantly (re)package a bundle of skills, experiences and competencies to several different employers and workplaces. How does one sustain a coherent and convincingly authentic 'personal brand' in this context?

The endorsement of the personal brand also implies that through their embodied performance, graduates can communicate attributes that extend *beyond* the degree certificate and CV, and importantly that these signify an objective and value-free measure of ability and skill. Specifically graduates must demonstrate the following:

- Whole leadership, the ability to lead, to make a difference and deliver results
- The ability to build genuine, trust-based relationships;
- Business acumen, the ability to bring business knowledge and awareness
- Technical capabilities, which create value for clients and PwC
- Global acumen, transcending boundaries of geography, politics, race and culture

<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/careers/campus/programs-events/personal-brand.html#overview>

The concept of social magic is useful here in thinking of the sleight of hand trick that converts a particular presentation of self (including dress, accent, confidence, tastes) into objective measures of competence. When evaluative criteria are elusive and ambiguous in specification and wrapped up in discourses of the 'right personal brand', the process of assessing candidates with objectivity becomes impossible. Therefore, selection and recruitment decision-making must inevitably resort to subjective assessments of fit. This fit relies on a three-way habitus chime between the employing organisation, the interview panel and the graduate. On advising graduates how to 'discover' and 'communicate' their personal brand and make a lasting impression, PwC encourage reflection on their hobbies and music tastes, dress, body language and tone of voice (PwC 2015). Although presented as value-free, as

previous research demonstrates (Ashley and Empson 2013; Rivera 2015), embodiment and ‘lifestyle markers’ operate as powerful class signifiers as firms seek out candidates who possess similar class capital.

Thus, while PwC presents itself as objectively assessing candidates against certain established criteria, the reification of the personal brand ensures that embodied performance becomes the differentiating means of reading these attributes. With one wave of a wand, embodied confidence may become ability to lead; relaxed friendliness may translate to ability to build trust; and an entitled middle-class cultural display of cosmopolitanism may become a sign of global acumen. In these enactments middle-class values are not just privileged but are in fact misrecognised through a denial of the cultural arbitrary (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and conveniently transformed into the measurable values of employment criteria. In this way, classed and other processes of cultural sorting can take place without recognition. As we did for Google, we have created a table (Table 3, below) summarizing the social magic conversion process for PwC’s recruitment.

*Table 3: The PwC Social Magic Conversion Table*

<b>'Objective' Criteria</b>	<b>Socially Structured 'Capital'</b>
<b>Strong educational credentials</b>	Degree from an elite university
<b>Highly motivated; pro-active career-planner</b>	Has undertaken an internship funded by parents
<b>The ability to build genuine, trust-based relationships</b>	Embodied performance which matches the cultural values of the employer
<b>Entrepreneurship</b>	Entrepreneurial activity supported by economic capital
<b>Intelligent/good communicator</b>	RP accent; deportment and dress
<b>Global acumen; mobile and cosmopolitan actor</b>	Gap year/ extensive travel supported by economic capital

### ***Smoke and mirrors: performing the illusion of social mobility responsibility***

In theory PwC's decision to remove UCAS scores as entry criteria decreases the chances of those with a privileged experience of secondary education gaining advantage in the recruitment process. Their website and annual report provides evidence of this 'success' with data showing an increase in the number of applicants from 'first generation graduates', state schools, Free School Meal backgrounds, and families eligible for income support (PwC 2017). However, crucially, they do not provide equivalent data on the *recruitment* of candidates broken down according to these class indicators. Thus it would appear that they have simply limited their endeavours to *attracting* more diverse applicants. Indeed, a closer look at what PwC present as figures on 'the social backgrounds of our latest graduate intake' reveals not just a lack of detail on class but its erasure, as social mobility is deftly transmuted into workforce 'diversity' in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and flexible working. This creates an impressive illusion of taking social mobility seriously, yet operates as a cunning substitute for meaningful organisational change in relation to the class profile of its recruits.

We see this sleight of hand trick elsewhere. The section of PwC's graduate webpages on 'diversity' presents images of attractive, smiling and able-bodied white women. This is a further clue that diversity for PwC is largely about gender. Given the historically poor performance of the finance sector in relation to gender this is not altogether surprising. Other forms of diversity that are acknowledged relate to 'multi-culturalism', religion, parenting, carers, disability, sexuality, and the military. Social class is conspicuous in its absence not only on these pages, but elsewhere. PwC's 'Diversity Journey' for example declares its commitment to 'diversity as a business opportunity' (PwC 2016b: 3) and outlines a flexible approach which allows PwC firms to focus on specific dimensions of diversity that are 'important locally' (making room for 'local flavour'). Dimensions include gender, ethnicity, LGBT, generation, disability and 'thought and skill diversity'. The absence of class here is, we argue, because class diversity is deemed risky and not in harmony with the business case driving its diversity strategy. Or – to draw on PwC's language – one might argue that social class diversity is deemed an unpalatable 'flavour'. Through a conflation of social mobility and diversity, PwC claim social mobility responsibility whilst denying



its fundamental tenets (i.e. a classed based movement from one position in social space to another) and thereby leave class inequalities within the company intact.

PwC's fanfare of pronouncements regarding their commitment to inclusive recruitment is a form of what Rivera (2012) calls 'impression management'. She found that companies would attend diversity fairs at less prestigious colleges, strategically staffing their stall with ethnically diverse employees and displaying company diversity brochures. These fairs were viewed as 'PR activities' which raised the profile of the brand but did not result in new (or more diverse) hires (2012: 80). By invoking the policy rhetoric of social mobility PwC benefit from creating an image of corporate responsibility without actually opening up their doors to a more socially diverse intake.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have shown that class bias in graduate recruitment is naturalised through processes of social magic. This is a sleight of hand trick that transforms subjective value judgments into seemingly objective assessments, without anyone recognising the illusion. Social magic is a means of theorising the capital conversion process, and goes beyond Bourdieu's thinking about the forms of capital to unpack the process of value exchange. It is through social magic that the cultural arbitrary becomes disguised, and cultural forms of capital are endowed with symbolic recognition. This conversion allows (and is necessary for) the legitimisation of privilege.

Our social magic conversion tables show how objective criteria might be 'read off' certain bodies by employers, who fall into the trap of assuming that displays of cultural capital evidences knowledge, skills and personal traits. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that these decision-making processes are a deliberate attempt by employers to maintain inequalities, but rather, they are all the more potent an aspect of social injustice because they appear as self-evident conclusions. It is clear that these companies would benefit from making connections with sociologists in order to have a more critical perspective on their policies and practices, something which policymakers should be mindful of when praising the commitments of employers. For example, companies might consider the bodily displays on their visual recruitment materials and what these convey.

Graduate employers may ‘talk the talk’ of social mobility as a means to improve their brand image and appease policymakers, but these actions do not in themselves produce a more socially-representative workforce. Employers’ pledges to improve social mobility may thus constitute what Ahmed (2006) calls ‘non-performative’ diversity talk whereby in claiming a commitment to diversity, action gets blocked. These processes could be unstuck with decisive and firm action such as actively targeting newer universities with more socially diverse intakes, rather than a handful of elite institutions. However, this must go further than simply widening the *applicant* pool, to ensuring that this translates to more socially-diverse hires, and making available this data in order to be held to account.

Our analysis of Google and PwC’s graduate recruitment material is complementary to interview-based research into graduate recruitment, rather than offered as a substitute. This analysis does not seek to tell us the ‘truth’ of what happens in the actual process of selecting and recruiting graduates, which is likely to be much messier than is conveyed on employers’ websites. However these materials are valuable not just for the insights they offer about the processes of sorting and matching occurring within professions. They are also important because they contribute to this very process, by bringing into being the ideal graduate employee. They are outward performances of the institutional self, which seek to welcome particular bodies that ‘fit’ and exclude others. Rather than seeing these as merely promotional, we see these texts as communicating and articulating professional and organisational cultures, behaviours and belongings, and thus circumscribing opportunities and limits for potential graduate employees. We hope that this paper will encourage others to attend to these materials and recognise the value of this kind of analysis. Finally, we hope that our social magic conversion tables provide useful tools for others to demystify the mechanisms by which institutions and professions continue to recruit in their own image.

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.socialmobility.org.uk/social-mobility-employer-index/> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-mobility-business-compact>