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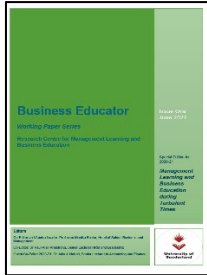
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What role do social resources play for minority ethnic graduates in the graduate employment market? A review of a targeted market intervention

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Abstract

Higher education has traditionally been a route to career entry. In the last three decades, the UK government policy to open up higher education to many more students has almost doubled the proportion of the population with undergraduate degrees. However, this has not kept pace with graduate-level employment, and many graduates find it challenging to access entry-level roles. While structurally disadvantaged graduates may possess an abundance of human capital at the conclusion of their studies, they may not possess adequate amounts of social capital, i.e. connections, which can benefit job acquisition. This paper reviews a training intervention designed to help structurally disadvantaged minority ethnic graduates access careers in one specific business management discipline, corporate communications. The intervention was designed to deliver both discipline-specific human capital and social capital. Through interviews with graduates who were accepted for training, and those that were not, the main themes addressed by the intervention were established: the challenge of the transition from university to employment, the role of connections in supporting that transition, understanding the value of connections and using them to access opportunities. Targeted training interventions may have a role to play in levelling the playing field for disadvantaged graduates and career access.

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Introduction

The opening up of UK higher education to greater numbers of students since 1992 was designed to provide equality of opportunity; nonetheless, a degree education in itself seems unlikely to create a level playing field between graduates of all backgrounds in the graduate employment market. A structural disadvantage, however, mitigated, lingers on. Male graduates are more likely than female graduates to have a high or upper-middle skill job (Office for National Statistics, 2017), and black and minority ethnic (BME[2]) graduates are less likely to be employed following graduation from university than non-BME graduates (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016). Graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently earn less upon graduation than peers from more advantaged backgrounds, based upon receipt of free school meals and the POLAR[3] geographical classification of disadvantage (Department of Education, 2019). Intersectionality means that many who have one structural disadvantage may also have others (e.g. many minority ethnic graduates also come from disadvantaged backgrounds). The most recent report by Universities UK in 2016 concluded that 'Compared to their peers, graduate outcomes are not as good for black and minority ethnic students' (Social Mobility Advisory Group, Universities UK, 2016).

Social capital – defined as an individual's access to social resources – is an instrumental part of career progression. Quantity and quality of connections are deficient in the BME population compared to the non-BME peers (Wilson, 1996), in women compared to men (VanTubergen & Volker, 2015) (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), and amongst those from a disadvantaged background compared to a non-disadvantaged background (Moerbeek, et al., 1995).

This paper discusses the results from a study of a number of BME graduates who applied to a training intervention. The results support evidence of structural disadvantage, even amongst a motivated and ambitious cohort of participants. They

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[2] Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic is the terminology normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent (Institute of Race Relations, 2020), thereby being a rather homogenous category, and may therefore obscure the differences between subgroups within this definition.
[3] POLAR is an acronym which stands for Participation of Local Areas, and is a tool derived from the UK's national census data to identify areas of deprivation

also indicate that the training intervention is addressing the social capital deficit. Finally, they identify the four key themes addressed by the intervention.

Literature Review

Graduate transitions and employability:

Recognition of a mismatch between the skills developed in UK higher education (HE) and the requirements of graduate employment can be dated to the publication of the 1997 Dearing Report (Tomlinson, 2008). Subsequently, the concept of employability received more attention in university curricula planning and empirical study (e.g. (Crebert, et al., 2004); (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006) (Wilton, 2011) (Pereira, et al., 2020). Continued expansion of students studying in HE since 1992 – or 'massification' of HE – has led to growing numbers of graduates entering the employment market (Tomlinson, 2012), and the subsequent, established, concern that there are too many graduates produced for too few graduate jobs (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004) (Tomlinson, 2008) (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020)

Employment outcomes for those of black and minority ethnic (BME) background persistently lag behind those of the white British population. While the term 'BME' encompasses a wide spectrum of outcomes, overall graduates are between 5-15% less likely to be in employment than white British individuals following graduation from university (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016). BME individuals with A-levels are more likely to be overqualified for their job (Brynin & Longhi, 2015) and as more organisations begin to voluntarily report pay figures by ethnicity, figures have emerged of the 8-13% pay gap experienced by BME employees at the 'big four' accountancy firms compared to white employees (Paisey & Wu, 2018).

Could targeted interventions could help improve equality of outcomes? This paper analyses the data collected from applicants to the Taylor Bennett Foundation (TBF) Training Programme, which aims to enhance employability for BME graduates interested in a career in corporate communications, with a focus on the development of industry-based social capital.

When developed and nourished, social capital helps to achieve personal, professional and organisational goals (Adler & Kwon, 2002) (Lin, 2002). Numerous studies have shown that individuals with little social capital are disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for gaining critical information or sponsorship ultimately leading to new positions (Granovetter, 1973; Lin & Dumin, 1986; Marsden & Hurlbert, 1988; Wayne, et al., 1999; Zippay, 2001). Job-seeking is made easier when people can access social capital and social networks, to gain information about opportunities (Lin, 1999; Zhang, et al., 2010; Fearon, et al., 2018).

Ethnic minorities, due to structural exclusion in an organisational setting, tend to have fewer connections with high status individuals and their ties can hold less instrumental value than those of their white peers (Ibarra, 1993; McGuire, 2000; Smith, 2000; Stainback, 2008). Few studies explore the context of ethnic minorities receiving assistance in developing their social capital to improve career prospects.

Social Capital:

This paper considers social capital as an aggregation of resources at the individual level (Lin, 1999). This assumes that one's connections potentially give access to beneficial resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2002). The utilisation of these resources is an established area of research surrounding social capital, in the context of career-related outcomes e.g. (Granovetter, 1973) (Lin, et al., 1981) (Kramarz & Skans, 2014).

Weak ties – individuals on the periphery of a personal network, for example, acquaintances – are particularly useful in career-related contexts, according to network theory. High within group density renders much information contained within the cluster redundant, and therefore more valuable, the original information is likely obtained from weak ties, who belong to different social clusters (Burt, 2004).

Some studies operationalise the term 'networking' within this definitional framework of social capital e.g. (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) (Wolff & Moser, 2009) (Spurk, et al., 2015). It describes the process of generating, maintaining, and accessing social capital, in the context of career management (Wolff & Moser, 2009). When networking, people report feelings of moral impurity and "dirtiness" which reduces the frequency with which they network ((Casciaro, 2014)).

Structural inequality and BME social capital:

Structural inequality manifests itself not only in the constitution of social capital (or, access to connections) but also in returns from the expenditure of social capital. Ethnicity is one of three key sociodemographic markers as signposts of this manifestation, the other two being gender and inherited social class.

Previous research finds that women experience disadvantage to men in their access to weak ties (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1982) (VanTubergen & Volker, 2015) (Verhaeghe, et al., 2013) found a significant, positive, effect of inherited social class on the ability to obtain a job through a family member for young people. Further research identifies processes of social capital deficits and uneven returns from expenditure for people of an ethnic minority background (Green, et al., 1995). The tendency to form relationships with those of similar characteristics perpetuates a cycle of social capital disadvantage (McPherson, et al., 2001) (McPherson, et al., 2006) (Verhaeghe, et al., 2015).

Two research questions are addressed by this paper (Table 1). The first (Research Question A) explores the experiences of BME graduates in transitioning from university study to early-career employment, in the context of the corporate communications industry, and reviews the likely impact of proactive intervention. The second research question (Research Question B) examines the role of social resources in shaping opportunity (or lack of opportunity) for individuals of BME origin in the graduate employment market, via the proxy of the corporate communications industry. Our hypothesis, based upon social capital literature and the hypothesis for Research Question A, therefore, was that when given access to high-quality contacts within the communications industry via a bespoke training programme, participants would better be able to visualise their path to a desired early-career position, and would feel that they had greater access to job market opportunities.

Research Questions – An exploration of BME graduates entering the communications industry:	
A – What are their experiences of the graduate employment market	B – What is the role of social resources in the graduate employment market

Table 1 – Research questions addressed by analysis.

Methodology and Method

Taylor Bennett Foundation (TBF) Training

Although there is variation within independent estimates of BME representation in the industry – the most recent studies indicate around 7% by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2017), and 11% by the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA, 2016) - both figures suggest underrepresentation, given that in the last Census in 2011, 14% of the population of England and Wales was of BME origin (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

TBF aims, via a 10-week training programme, to facilitate transitions from university for BME graduates who are interested in a career in corporate communications. TBF training delivers practical skills (e.g. how to draft a press release, how to run a social media campaign) and proactively delivers opportunities for trainees to build a network of new relationships that could support their careers. TBF consider that their programme, which is designed to both highlight the importance of, and to generate social capital, in addition to improving human capital, is a relatively original innovation, and it has won international praise (World Economic Forum, 2012) (McGregor-Smith, 2017)

Trainees are shortlisted from an open application; given limited resources, TBF is only able to offer training for six applicants per training programme. However, a mentor (up to four meetings) is offered for some selected applicants who were unsuccessful on the assessment day.

Research design

Annual feedback surveys of participants had previously suggested that the social capital elements of the training scheme had been valuable in their career progression (Taylor Bennett Foundation, 2017). In order to investigate further the critical factors in transitioning from university to employment (Research Question A)

and the role of the TBF intervention is delivering support with this (Research Question B) semi-structured interviews were undertaken with applicants who took

part in the survey at one time point (following the training scheme).

Participant group	n	Average age in years	Gender		Number of participants from a Russell Group university	Number of first-generation university students	Self-reported ethnic origins			
			Male	Female			Black	Asian	Arab	Mixed-race
Trainees	12	22.8	8	4	6	7	6	4	0	2
Mentees	5	23.0	1	4	0	2	3	2	0	0
Non-intervention participants	12	23.1	6	6	1	7	3	4	1	4
Total	29		15	14	7	16	12	10	1	6

Table 2: Demographic information of TBF training applicants. 'First generation university students' refers to applicants whose parents have not studied at a university. N = 29.

Sample

Individual interviews were conducted with 29 participants who had applied for TBF training and attended an assessment day. See Table 2 for demographic information of the 29 participants, which indicates the sub-groups studied within the broad definition that is BME.

All participants had graduated from a UK university in the prior 24 months before applying to the scheme. Out of the 29 applicants, 12 participated in both training and mentoring (hereafter trainees), 5 participated in basic mentoring only (hereafter mentees), and 12 did not receive any element of the intervention (hereafter non-intervention participants). The table indicated the degree of intersectionality, eg a relatively high number of participants (16 out of 29) were first-generation university students.

Interview Protocol

Based on the literature review, 11 interview questions were prepared to explore access to social resources and career support required or received, and were generally the same for all participants, although a small number of questions were tailored based upon the participant status as a trainee, mentee, or non-intervention.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using NVivo to organise data collected adhering to principles of grounded theory e.g. (Bryman, 2004). Four themes were ultimately identified, outlined in Table 3, and these are discussed in turn.

Number	Theme	Context
1	A challenging transition from university to employment	A – Intervention context
2	The role of connections for early-career graduates	
3	Understanding the value of connections	B – Benefits gained from intervention
4	Access to opportunity	

Table 3 – four themes identified by thematic analysis of interview transcripts, and corresponding research questions that the themes address.

Findings

Sampled graduates found transitioning from university to career-focused employment challenging, and the data indicated that a lack of access to informational resources was felt especially acutely.

Comparison of responses between trainees, mentees, and non-intervention participants highlighted how useful advice or sponsorship from social connections could make the difference between getting 'on the ladder' or getting stuck in a repetitive and disheartening cycle of applications and rejections. Support in the form of assistance with skills that help in securing employment (e.g. CV writing, interview), and well-placed sources for information within the communications industry about job opportunities, would largely not have been available to trainees and mentees prior to the establishment of mentoring relationships, and for the trainees, conditions within which industry connections could be formed and maintained.

The findings are discussed below according to the four themes identified, grouped in two contexts.

<u>Intervention context - A challenging transition from university to employment</u>

When participants were asked about their career journey since leaving university and their reasons for applying for TBF training, almost all discussed how challenging the transition to graduate employment had been. Participants reported a repetitive cycle of applications followed by multiple rejections with minimal feedback. Similar dissonances between post-university expectations and realities were a common theme amongst all categories of participants. Participants indicated that higher education was necessary, but insufficient when applying for graduate level jobs.

<u>Intervention context - the role of connections for early-career graduates</u>

In addition to experience being key to gain access to entry-level posts in the corporate communications industry, participants revealed that - in harmony with literature emphasising the importance of social capital in accessing employment-based opportunity - connections played an instrumental role for some. Most described leaving university with access to connections of only a low occupational

status. These participants' experiences are more consistent with the literature which suggests that BME graduates – through structural disadvantage - have less access to the informational benefits of social capital (Verhaeghe, et al., 2015) most associated with weak ties (Lin, 2002). Common amongst participants of all categories was a lack of relatively basic informational support. This lack of access to relatively superficial guidance led to feelings verging upon helplessness amongst some in this period:

> *"It was really difficult because at that time I just graduated from university, and there was some support from university, but it's not as direct or helpful, or as tailored as TBF's. I didn't know where to really look or what to do so I felt like I was a little bit lost."* Mentee #2

When recalling struggles experienced in attempting to begin a formal career in corporate communications, no discernible difference was found between non-intervention participants, mentees, or trainees.

Intervention benefits - understanding of the value of connections

During the 10-week training period, trainees participate in sessions where they are introduced to the importance of building, maintaining and utilising career-based networks. (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Through their interactions and reinforcement of the potential value of a well-maintained industry support network by TBF support staff, further encouragement to embed network building and maintenance is intended.

Mentees do not receive any such support by design, although a motivated assigned mentor may advise on the potential benefits of a well-developed network and provide advice towards achieving this.

In interviews conducted after the intervention, benefits associated with receiving the full intervention, in comparison with both partial-and-non-intervention, are apparent. Trainees tended to show a quite comprehensive understanding of how industry contacts could be activated to their benefit. They also understood that to be in a position to seek assistance from well-placed contacts, relationships required nourishment and maintenance (Bourdieu, 1986).

In contrast, mentees and non-intervention participants struggled to conceptualise potential benefits of contacts, within or outside of the PR industry.

<u>Intervention benefits – access to opportunity</u>

The final theme provides an identification of ways in which the intervention impacted on participants' careers. Some mentees felt that their mentors had provided them with invaluable support and advice that they would be able to beneficially utilise. For example, Mentee #3's mentor was a PR director who offered to conduct mock interviews with him:

> *"It helped a lot in shaping my interview skills because I was very naive of the questions. [The mentor] gave me in-depth knowledge of what type of questions were going to come up and what type of body language is expected from me."* Mentee #3

Not all mentors were able to dedicate as much time to their mentees as Mentee 3's mentor. This led to a varying level of benefits described by the mentees. Present data suggests therefore that the partial intervention produced mixed outcomes that were largely dependent on the availability and capacities of the mentors. In contrast to the mentees, trainees consistently felt that the full intervention had provided them with a large amount of potential informational resources. For example, upon completion of the 10-week programme, Trainee #2 had secured a job as a junior account executive with a small agency:

> *"TBF training gave me a lot of contacts. We visited so many agencies ... It's given us mentors. I think it's definitely going to be helpful in the future ... because in communications everybody knows everybody."* Trainee #2.

Like many trainees, Trainee #2 saw her new contacts as likely to be useful resources in her PR career, and the position she had secured was facilitated by a networking visit as part of TBF training.

Although data suggests that the partial intervention produced mixed outcomes, interviews suggest that the intervention facilitated access to a range of realised and

potential opportunities. Based upon our sample, such high-quality connections would not have been ordinarily accessible to the trainees.

Discussion

Thematic analysis of interview data from two TBF training cohort applicants has enabled the identification of a number of themes pertinent to relevant academic fields. An exploration of the requirement for a graduate human-and-social capital-based training intervention, and effects of the experience, provide encouragingly interesting findings that require further investigation using a greater sample and breadth of data.

Pertaining to Research Question A, interviews revealed a disconnect between expectations of graduates following completion of studies and the realities of early-career employment market navigation. Participants felt that their university degrees alone were not enough to ensure that they appealed to employers advertising internships or other training schemes in a perceived crowded market. These perceptions appear grounded in reality, which may suggest that UK universities at an aggregate level do not supply comprehensive employability support. This is surprising given the importance attached to graduate employability metrics in university league tables e.g. (The Complete University Guide, 2020); (The Guardian, 2020).

Although no comparable, white British population is sampled presently, structural deficits in social resources available to the BME population (Verhaeghe, et al., 2015), and value of returns when these resources are activated (Green, et al., 1995) suggest that BME graduates would particularly benefit from such a targeted intervention.

The effects of participation in the full and partial intervention on both available social resources and ultimately, career outcomes (Research Question B), are not comprehensively assessed by this paper. In addition to sampling limitations, the selection mechanism for the training scheme means that the most talented applicants receive the full intervention, who are likely to go on to be better at

developing social resources and have better career outcomes organically. Therefore, an empirical assessment of the impact of the full and partial interventions is particularly difficult.

Conclusion

The study reported in this paper indicates that social capital boosts the career prospects of those participants subject to the full intervention and to a lesser extent those subject to the partial intervention. These fostered connections helped develop knowledge and skills regarding important aspects of career entry, including CV writing, interviewing techniques, and further insight into how the industry is structured and functions. Analyses presented do not give insight into the specific intersection of BME graduates and social capital, due to lack of a comparable white control group. Other scholars suggest that the assumption of BME individuals' limited access to social resources in a career context is supported e.g. (Wilson, 1996) (Elliott, 1999) (McGuire, 2000) and that mentoring, in particular, is of especial help to minority ethnic individuals at different career stages e.g. (Harris & Lee, 2019) (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020; Bhopal, 2020) (Peterson & Ramsay, 2021).

Limited evidence was available to systematically unpick linkages between tie types and associated outcomes, or processes by which participants with useful connections activated their social capital and used it for personal gain. Interviews did suggest, however, that both structured (mentoring relationships) and unstructured (industry stakeholders met on visits) weak tie interactions produced a range of informational benefits. Such processes were found to occur prior to the TBF assessment day too, most commonly in hearing about the training scheme. These findings correlate with literature suggesting efficacy of weak tie relationships for gaining valuable information (Burt, 1992) such as job appointments (Granovetter, 1973) (Lin & Dumin, 1986) (Zippay, 2001) .

In summary, the themes identified by and emerging from, this research indicate that structured intervention may be able to deliver tangible social resources to support career entry. The research will be extended to additional cohorts of trainees to see if these themes continue to develop, and the employment outcomes will be monitored.

This is expected to deliver learnings for policy makers, and, given the relative lack of comprehensive employability provision in UK universities (Minocha, et al., 2017) (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020), for higher education institutions, seeking to address inequality of access to graduate-level jobs.

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