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# Building bridges: a critical analysis of university and industry collaboration to improve diverse access to elite professions

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# Building bridges:

## A critical analysis of university and industry collaboration to improve diverse access to elite professions.

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**Abstract:** *This article explores how both universities and industry can work together to improve access to graduate opportunities for disadvantaged students. Focusing on an initiative, which involved students from a post-1992 university experiencing London's legal sector, this article analyses the factors which contribute to students' perceptions of their increased self-efficacy as a result of participating in the event. Utilising a focus group methodology, the article critically examines the barriers that can be imposed by students' socio-economic backgrounds which may prevent such initiatives from having a meaningful impact on diverse recruitment and fair access to higher professional occupations. Focusing in on 2 particular strands of the Triple Helix Model, this article also makes some recommendations as to how more effective bridges can be built between universities and industry to improve access for all to the elite professions.*

**Key words:** self-efficacy; employability; diversity; access; law; higher education

## Introduction

Despite the variety of entry points into the legal sector, including apprenticeships and graduate work-based qualifications, many graduates aiming for a career in the legal profession still choose the traditional graduate route via a training contract.[i] Given

continued competition for these opportunities, law firms are interacting with potential candidates from the first year of undergraduate programmes and, in some instances, even earlier. These recruitment initiatives include law fairs, presentations and open days; all designed to initiate early engagement with potential candidates. This article will focus on one such initiative; an insight day aimed at first and second year students from a post-1992 university.

Firstly, and by way of context, an overview of the current graduate labour market and an examination of potential barriers will be provided. Against that backdrop, the article will then examine the impact of this particular initiative on the perceived self-efficacy of the students who participated, and discuss the long-term influence that such experiences can have on improving diverse access to higher professional occupations, such as law.

Three recent Government reports are particularly relevant. Firstly, the Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission (2015) produced 'A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions' which focuses specifically on the legal and accountancy sectors. Secondly, in their report 'Understanding Employer's Graduate Recruitment & Selection Practices', the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2015) has outlined key information about the graduate employment market, and also provided an insight into the potential barriers for candidates. Both reports demonstrate how some recruiters' narrow focus on selected educational institutions, their perceptions of candidate-suitability and cultural images of 'success' all contribute to an environment which overwhelmingly favours those from privileged backgrounds at recruitment stage and beyond. Most recently, the Social Mobility Commission (2017) published their analysis of the Labour Force

Survey which revealed significant trends in pay disparity between high and low social classes.

Despite this clear interest from Government agencies, there is currently no legal or policy requirement for organisations to report recruitment data, but those who do so voluntarily demonstrate the partiality outlined in the aforementioned reports. In one self-reporting law firm, close to 40% of graduate trainees attended fee-paying schools, as opposed to 7% of the United Kingdom's population as a whole. For self-reporting accountancy firms, data showed that between 40-50% of applicants were educated at Russell Group institutions. However, this parity in application numbers was not reflected in application conversions; candidates from Russell Group institutions received around 60-70% of job offers (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015). Whilst further data-collection and analysis is needed to enable a thorough examination of this as an industry-wide issue, the similarities between recruitment practices adopted across the graduate sector suggest that recruitment figures may be comparable in other equivalent organisations.

To address this issue, the authors believe that the creation of bridges of collaboration between universities, employers and diverse student groups is key to improving opportunities for socially-disadvantaged students. Whilst the Triple Helix Model (analysed by authors including Lee, Bagchi-Sen and Poo, 2015, and Todeva and Danson, 2016) identifies universities, government and industry as the three key stakeholder groups needed to address wider economic and social development, the authors' approach puts an additional group, namely disadvantaged students, at the heart of the process with a view to addressing social justice concerns.

The recruitment initiative which forms the focus for this study comprised a two-day residential visit to London, designed to enable students to experience what life may be like as a City-lawyer. Following discussions about how to increase student-engagement with London firms, this event was devised through collaborations between an international London law firm and representatives of a post-1992 university in the North of England. The firm offered to provide an insight day for ten students who would be recruited by the university. To broaden the students' experience of the London legal sector, the programme also included a visit to the Royal Courts of Justice, together with an opportunity for students to both prepare themselves and peer-network before the event itself.

The university recruited participants from both of its first- and second-year, single honours and combined Law student cohorts, via provision of a tailored CV and covering letter submission outlining their interest in the opportunity. Facilitators from both of the university's teaching and employability teams provided the students with a preparatory session at which they were encouraged to introduce themselves to the rest of the group, develop their understanding as to what to expect and practise their professional networking skills.

The student profile of the institution includes over 96% from state schools or colleges; around 40% from NS-SEC social classes 4-7, and approximately 18% from low HE-participation neighbourhoods. In order to minimise any economic barriers to participation, whilst students did pay for their own travel, the university covered the costs of their overnight accommodation.

Students were given a high degree of autonomy outside of the scheduled programme; for example, they were expected to manage their own transportation around London.

On arrival at the Royal Courts of Justice, the students were invited to take a tour of the building, and participate in a mock hearing exercise. Students spent the following day at the international law firm; hearing presentations from both their recruitment teams and lawyers, participating in a mock contract negotiation exercise, taking a tour of the firm and networking with the firm's solicitors over lunch.

In this article, the authors will draw on this initiative as an example for examining if such types of stand-alone initiatives are fit for purpose to meet the aim of diversifying the professional workforce.

**Methodology**

Following the event, students were invited to take part in a focus group to explore their experience. There is extensive literature which focuses on quantifying the gaps between socio-economic groups and university attainment, graduate level employment, and post-graduate earnings. As such, the authors chose the qualitative research method; firstly, to enable them to understand '*why* [the participants] feel the way they do' (Bryman, 2012, p. 503), and secondly, to view the existing data through a lived perspective lens. With particular reference to the decision to utilise a focus group design, Crano et al (2015) suggest how such a group situation enables participants to 'exchange ideas with one another to stimulate greater depth of discussion and insights' (p.297). As such, Bryman (2012) notes that participants have the opportunity to either revise their views, or put forward other points that they may not have otherwise thought about, and, as a result, the authors hoped that they

would find more truth within the data. With this particular group of participants, the authors had the additional benefit of the student's existing relationships, as a result of attending the London event, to help further facilitate discussion.

As part of the literature review, the authors will explore and quantify some of the barriers that may prevent students from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds from entering the elite professions. The focus group was set up to specifically explore the hypothesis that, for meaningful change, more needs to be done by recruiters; both to improve access for diverse candidates, and also to create meaningful opportunities for students to develop their self-efficacy. The authors aimed to explore if the participants of the focus group had experienced an increase in their individual self-efficacy as a result of their involvement in the pre-recruitment initiative. The literature indicates that candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to opt out of the recruitment process because of a perception that they might not fit in with the organisation (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015). This includes those from lower-socio economic backgrounds studying at Russell Group institutions. Perhaps this points to the images projected by the firms which may be either unwelcoming and/or unappealing to candidates from working class backgrounds. As evidenced by the initiative which forms the focus of this study, firms are already engaging with candidates from more diverse institutions, and working towards developing their appeal to candidates from a variety of backgrounds. However, the efficacy of such schemes in breaking down these employability barriers, and fostering a sense of belonging for atypical candidates, is a key question which is explored in this article.

There has been much discussion about how employers can increase the diversity of their candidate pools, including examinations of the current state of the graduate

employment market in the UK. The following section will explore the literature around perceived and actual barriers faced by socially-disadvantaged candidates; including access to work experience, cultural and economic barriers, and individual self-efficacy.

**Barriers to diverse candidate pools in graduate recruitment**

Current Government policy focuses on educational attainment as the remedy to social inequality (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015). The underpinning rationale is that if all young people have equal access to educational development, the opportunities for social mobility will flourish. The following literature review will outline the reasons why such social policy does not go far enough.

In addition, the authors will suggest that the individualistic focus of current policy does not help to develop the collaborative relationships between universities and industry that are so fundamental to improving diversity in the professions.

*Work experience and employability*

Despite a Government-led, increased focus on employability, and the resultant pressure imposed on higher education institutions across the sector, this concept is poorly-defined and sometimes erratically-employed. The discourse of employability is often underpinned by human capital theory and results in an individualised pressure on students to achieve success, with potential structural barriers either hidden or erased (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Target-driven measurements of performance have resulted in graduate success being defined by Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) statistics; namely, how many individual graduates are in work or further study and how many of those are in 'professional or

managerial' level employment. Previous studies have established how students have internalised this message of individualised responsibility for labour market success. In doing so, students often overlooked the potential impact of social and economic structures (Tomlinson, 2007), despite these factors still having a significant, measurable effect on the opportunities available to them.

One result of the ubiquity of employability discourse in higher education has been an increased emphasis for students to gain work experience to increase their chances of success in a competitive employment environment. Again, evidence has demonstrated an adoption of this message, with students repeating the importance of evidencing experiences outside of their formal study and developing their personal or soft skills (Tomlinson, 2007; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Engaging in extra-curricular activities is often encouraged by higher education institutions as a method of improving the student experience although there is little existing research to demonstrate the measurable impact of extra-curricular activities. Where work experience constitutes a formalised part of a course, often referred to as a 'sandwich' course or placement year, clear benefits have been documented; including both increased student attainment (Binder et al, 2015), and an ability to gain employment in comparison to their non-participating peers (Moores and Reddy, 2012).

The report from the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2015) reinforces the importance that employers place on work experience and acknowledges how a lack of social capital can entrench inequalities:

> *[The emphasis on work experience] may also disadvantage students whose social networks or universities do not alert them to the possible importance of early employer contact in some sectors or occupations;*

*or disadvantage students who cannot afford to settle for the low pay offered (the short-term financial loss for the longer term gain).* (p. 19)

Work experience is not just important for students in an employability context (adding value to their degree and helping them to stand out in competitive recruitment cycles), it also plays a key role in developing their understanding of a specific sector and confirming their career choices. Without these opportunities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be less sure of their career goals and experience a more chaotic career path as a result. Furthermore, work experience may play an important role in the development of professional relationships between those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and existing professionals. This is where the 'interdependent' relationships (Zheng and Harris, 2007, p.253) arising from the 'double helical' partnerships between industry and higher education could prove to be a valuable tool for increasing students' social capital. An example of a well-received Scheme which currently achieves this is the Freshfields Stephen Lawrence Scheme. 'Designed to address under-representation in large commercial law firms of black men from low-income households' (Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, 2017), the Scheme, which was developed in conjunction with a number of universities, is now in its fifth year of running and offers successful candidates long-term support and financial assistance. Such schemes are directly beneficial to their participants. They may also have a much broader impact; their very existence encouraging more diverse candidates into the legal sector as a whole by providing social modelling opportunities and potentially resulting in more diverse recruitment panels. The authors believe that greater diversity at the recruitment stage could help to challenge entrenched organisational beliefs which value dominant cultural attributes. These

beliefs could be perpetuating inequalities in recruitment without awareness or acknowledgement.

As Siegel points out, partnership initiatives, such as the one which forms the basis of this study, are 'at the heart of' the 'new framework that is taking shape within the diversity movement' (2006, p. 172). Employers recognise the benefits to be gained by developing closer working relationships with higher education institutions with a view to increasing the diversity of their recruitment pool. Siegel (2006) cites the importance of developing such organisational 'multi-cultural competence' in the realisation of strategic goals; namely, opening up access to more diverse markets and reducing potential liabilities for discrimination. Yet, there is some emphasis on racial ethnicity with a potential danger that other forms of social disadvantage could be overlooked. When we consider that those from ethnic minorities often face discrimination along intersecting social categories, there is a strong case for building awareness of all facets of discrimination amongst employers. Also, whilst there are clear image-related benefits to organisations which publicise these initiatives, perhaps the real focus should be on why some of the issues are not addressed already through usual recruitment practice and procedure. The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) identifies lack of diversity as one of their 2016/17 risks in the legal profession (SRA, 2016). However, they are only able to list recommendations for solicitors and firms, rather than implementing required actions or industry standards. In addition, smaller organisations with fewer resources to draw on may be more reluctant to increase diverse recruitment as a socially-responsible endeavour alone. Noting Todeva and Danson's reference to the government's role within the Triple Helix Model (2016, p.6), the authors would suggest that nothing, besides the

introduction of regulatory government policy, is going to challenge the priorities of recruiters.

*Cultural and economic barriers*

The economic barriers to participating in work experience have been acknowledged earlier. As students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to need paid, part-time work, both during and outside of term-time (Walpole, 2003), their ability to engage in unpaid, professional-level work experience is consequently restricted. The necessity of engaging in paid work may also have a negative impact on students' capacity to devote sufficient time and energy to complete their studies to the best of their abilities.

The authors believe that this is where universities could prove to be critical advocates for their students by ensuring that their industry partners are aware of the needs of their students when designing extra-curricular activities.

For students aiming for a legal career, such economic barriers can also extend beyond graduation. The cost of undertaking the Legal Practice Course (LPC), the typical graduate route to qualifying as a solicitor, can be between £8,500 to upwards of £12,900 (Law Society, 2016) and does not qualify for the grant of a student loan. Admitting that the current training route is a barrier to social mobility and professional diversity, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) is proposing to abandon the LPC in favour of a new centralised examination, open to all (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2015). This proposal has been met with a mixed response by the legal sector; with some acknowledging the need for reform and others questioning if an examination can provide the necessary threshold standards to enter the profession (Law Society, 2016). The potential impact on improving access to the profession by

11

removing financial barriers - if this new route to qualification is implemented - remains to be seen.

In the meantime, research suggests that obtaining a degree may not be the panacea to social inequality as espoused by current policy. Studies have highlighted differences in the earnings between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds, suggesting that those from higher socio-economic backgrounds have a plethora of advantages that cannot be counter-balanced, even by equal educational achievement. Some studies suggest that there is an earning difference as high as 10% between those graduates from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds (Crawford and van der Erve, 2015; Britton et al, 2016).

One way within which the Government's policy focus, on educational attainment as the route to social justice, is discredited is through the evidence that inequalities associated with class, gender, and ethnicity persist after graduation (Laurison and Friedman, 2016; Cohen, Hoffman and Knauer, 2009; Brynin and Güveli, 2012; Crawford et al., 2016).

The authors cited above acknowledge a number of factors, typically offered as reasons for inequalities in the workplace, which may constitute disadvantaged candidates 'opting-out' of higher professional occupations. Examples include the tendency of those from working class backgrounds to seek employment in smaller firms outside of London (Laurison and Friedman, 2016), the over-representation of ethnic minorities in lower-paid service occupations (Brynin and Güveli, 2012), and women leaving the workplace or switching to part-time hours to care for their children (Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer, 2009). However, when these factors are accounted for and those with identical qualifications and professional status are compared,

'getting a degree raises earnings for graduates from all family backgrounds but it does very little to level the playing field between those from different backgrounds.' (Crawford et al., 2016. p.565)

Laurison and Friedman (2016) use data from the British Labour Force survey to examine this phenomenon in more detail. Their findings show that socially mobile individuals in occupations such as law, accountancy and finance are predicted to earn around 20 per cent less than their colleagues from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, if young people have parents in an elite profession at age 14 they themselves are more likely to progress to an elite profession in adulthood. Laurison and Friedman (2016) label this process as 'micro-class reproduction' (p. 679). They state that this reproduction is especially strong in areas such as law where such individuals are eighteen times more commonly found when compared with the general population.

Another cultural barrier occurs at the recruitment stage itself when employers advertise for talented individuals to join their firms. Both the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) and the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2015) reports acknowledge the problematic nature of employers' definition of talent. For elite employers, talent often comprises: strong communication and debating skills, confidence, and the poorly-defined term 'polish' (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015). Interestingly, recruiters themselves acknowledge that vague wish-lists, such as seeking 'talent', may be discriminatory against those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015) suggesting that, despite this acknowledgement, there seems to be little drive for change. Connected to this, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report (2015) identified clarity about the skills and competencies being sought as one

of the best practice features of recruiters who were responding well to the greater diversity of the graduate talent pool.

The inherent subjectivity running through recruitment processes extends to the selection event itself, with employers still prioritising interviews as their key recruitment exercise (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This method can allow cultural bias to creep into the process. Factors such as appearance and accent have the potential to come into play, as does the applicant's previous experience of interviews. As such, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who do not demonstrate the requisite organisational 'fit' are losing out on the most lucrative graduate opportunities. This is noted within the literature. For example, Harvey (2001, cited in Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013) outlined factors such as 'age, ethnicity, gender, and social class' (p. 214) as influential to the recruitment process. Also, Laurison and Friedman (2016) refer to Bourdieu's 'embodied cultural capital' as having implications on perceptions of 'legitimate ways of speaking, dressing, and being' (p. 683). They also refer to Rivera's (2012, 2015 cited in Laurison and Friedman, 2016, p. 683) 'process of cultural matching', where people in senior positions recognise cultural markers as being indicators of success. In other words, there is a two-way 'cultural matching' process, where candidates believe they have to behave in a certain way to be successful and employers expect those behaviours from a candidate.

*Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy is one facet of the study of human agency, and has 'many shades of meaning' (Gecas, 1989). Self-efficacy, as defined by the psychologist Albert Bandura (1977), is a person's level of belief in their ability to complete a task or succeed in

certain situations. It can have an impact on a number of areas including a person's ability to cope with adverse experiences, their motivation for learning (Zimmerman, 2000) and their likelihood of experiencing professional burnout (Gündüz, 2012). Employability discourse, with its emphasis on the individual as responsible for their own career, appears to be here to stay (Tomlinson, 2007). Therefore, strategies for developing high levels of self-efficacy could be a crucial area of exploration and a topic of interest for educators.

There are two strands of research within the concept of self-efficacy; motivational, which emphasises the experience of causal agency, and cognitive, which focuses on beliefs and perceptions of causal agency (Gecas, 1989). Motivational theories have focused on either the intrinsic desire for control or competence as driving human agency. Cognitive theories of self-efficacy also outline control as a key factor driving individual actions, in particular the desire to gain a sense of control within one's social world. Due to its emphasis on the impact of a person's social environment and experiences, it is Bandura's (1977) social-cognitive theory of self-efficacy that the authors concentrate on below.

An individual's level of self-efficacy is not static but is continually evolving based on their experiences. Bandura makes a distinction between efficacy expectations, which can be defined as an individual's expectation of performing a specific task, and outcome expectations, which refer to the individual's appraisal as to whether a specified task will lead to a particular outcome. Gecas (1989) believes this is an important distinction because 'feelings of futility may result either from (a) low self-efficacy or (b) perceptions of a social system as unresponsive to one's actions.'(p. 294). Therefore, perceptions of self, and perceptions of self in relation to social environment, are two distinct phenomena. This has significant consequences for

15

students entering an unfamiliar and challenging environment, as they may experience feelings of futility because of the social setting, which overshadow their own perceptions of their ability to complete a specific task even if their confidence is high.

Bandura (1977) categorised experiences based on the type of efficacy information that they provide and their impact on level of self-efficacy. Performance accomplishments are direct experiences and, as such, provide the most influential impact on efficacy expectations. Put simply, the more successful experience a person has in participating in a specific activity, the more likely it is that their self-efficacy expectations will be high. Additionally, high levels of self-efficacy generated through performance accomplishments are more robust to occasional failures and more likely to be generalised to other situations, resulting in an overall increase in that person's confidence in successfully completing a variety of activities. Vicarious experiences also provide a chance for individuals to increase their efficacy expectations by witnessing others successfully complete difficult tasks. Social comparison is an important element of this category; witnessing accomplishments performed by individuals comparable to themselves will provide the most reliable source of efficacy information for individuals via vicarious experience. It is important to note that efficacy information from sources other than performance accomplishments is weaker and more subject to change. In addition, for an individual's long-term development of self-efficacy, the quality of experiences is a significant factor. Experiences should be increasingly challenging and stimulating over the life course (Bandura, 1977).

There is a clear link between candidates who may have the potential to develop high levels of self-efficacy and their social status. Those with higher levels of social capital

will not only have the potential to develop their own sense of self-efficacy through access to more varied, challenging experiences, but, when considering outcome expectations, will also have the opportunity to feel more familiarity with the professional environment and their own potential within it. The relationship between social advantage and high levels of self-efficacy is reflected in the literature which illustrates how the dominant Western cultural values (favouring white, male, and middle-class individuals) have resulted in advantageous levels of self-efficacy when compared with black, female, and lower socio-economic classes (Gecas, 1989).

Low self-efficacy can have serious consequences for individual effectiveness. Seligman's (1975, cited in Gecas, 1989) concept of 'learned helplessness' results from feeling that one's actions have no effect on one's environment. Attributing inefficacy to personal failure, rather than external conditions, can lead to depression. This links with the literature on the impact of employability discourse, and its over-emphasis on individualism. Disadvantaged students experienced feelings of helplessness when their agency within the labour market was ineffectual (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Linked to this is the concept of emotional self-efficacy (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2012); an individual with high emotional self-efficacy will be more equipped to manage their feelings around negative emotional experiences and this relates to academic success and graduate employability. However, since findings also show that employability is associated with positive effects on mental health (Berntson and Marklund, 2007), it is difficult to separate the concepts of employability and self-efficacy and their individual causal effects on mental wellbeing. Berntson, Näswall and Sverke (2008) initially suggest that the relationship between self-efficacy and employability is reciprocal, but their findings indicate that employability and self-efficacy are also separate concepts. Self-efficacy levels were

too generalised to have any notable effect on participants' employability, but employability perceptions did influence overall levels of self-efficacy, suggesting that students should concentrate on developing employability skills first to see a positive change in their general level of self-efficacy.

This literature review has outlined how students from less privileged backgrounds face a number of obstacles to gaining higher-level graduate employment; from fewer opportunities for work experience to an inability to finance postgraduate training courses. Even students who can access such opportunities may also face cultural barriers, such as perceptions around their accents and educational background. Perhaps most concerning is the salary-gap that exists for those from less-privileged backgrounds, even if they are able to overcome the significant barriers to access high-level professional careers. As already discussed, many recruiters are aware of these challenges and are increasingly devising initiatives in response (such as the subject of this study); inviting students from non-typical graduate recruitment pools and engaging with post-1992 universities. Whilst their creation is to be encouraged, these initiatives have been criticised by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) for failing to have a sufficient impact by themselves on increasing the numbers of diverse candidates at the recruitment stage. Furthermore, some recruiters have demonstrated a disinclination to actively engage diverse candidates at the recruitment stage, perceiving such interventions to be too costly and time-consuming (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2016). The literature also demonstrates the importance of individual self-efficacy for the development of student confidence in their abilities. Universities and employers have a joint responsibility to provide a framework of challenging, high-level opportunities to enable students to foster their self-efficacy and to acknowledge that disadvantage

stretches beyond the recruitment stage by expanding their focus to long-term collaboration.

The research which underpins this article aimed to explore how potential candidates feel about their employability and, in order to address a specific gap in the literature, what kind of impact short-term, industry-led opportunities have on participants' concepts of their self-efficacy (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013).

**Results**

From the focus group, the following three themes emerged:

Theme 1: Anxiety and intimidation: This theme encompassed the fact that the participants were entering unfamiliar territory in terms of geographical location, professional environment and group dynamic. For example, some participants had never been to London before, travelled on the Underground nor experienced an international law firm environment. The potential impacts on participant's outcome expectations are analysed.

Theme 2: Social spaces and community creation: Firstly, despite the fact that some participants had never met each other previously, it was interesting to note the reassurance that they gained from the fact that the event was a group experience. Secondly, illustrating the modelling aspect of the self-efficacy concept (Bandura, 1977), we found that participants identified with employees whom they perceived to be more like them in terms of their educational backgrounds.

Theme 3: Confidence and motivation: Participants expressed their increased confidence to apply for other similar opportunities as a direct result of their involvement in this event, and their perceptions as to their likely success in doing so.

They also commented on how much the opportunity had had a positive impact on their motivation towards their studies. The potential impact on participant self-efficacy is explored.

Examining each of these three themes in more detail:

**Theme 1: Anxiety and intimidation**

Reflecting earlier discussion about human capital theory (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006), the sector's emphasis on employability has encouraged perception that carving out a successful career path is an individualised responsibility. Participants certainly felt the weight of expectation before the event, with many of them commenting on the anxiety that they felt in even applying for such an opportunity because of their inexperience:

> 'I'm a first year, like I've only got a little bit of experience in a magistrate's court and not in a firm, so just thought maybe I'm not the strongest person to apply for it, but I did anyway so.'

This participant suggests that they had formed an outcome expectation about their likelihood of success before they even applied. The advertisement for the event was aimed at both first-year and second-year students. Whilst there were no specified requirements for candidates to have previous work experience, this participant assumed that prior experience would be needed, which fuelled their anxiety about applying as a result. This perhaps illustrates how potential candidates may be deterred from applying for opportunities if they *feel* that they are inadequate, despite meeting the stated requirements. As this participant was successful, an increase in their self-efficacy, at least in applying for similar opportunities, could be assumed.

20

Participants admitted that such assumptions can also compound existing feelings of negativity experienced from previous unsuccessful applications. However, they appeared to accept that rejections were a necessary part of the process, and may even help to drive determination to succeed:

> 'but you know when you get quite a lot of rejection and it does put you down a little bit but that's just part of it isn't it, sometimes it puts you down but it makes you still wanna like apply.'

This particular participant's reported resilience could be explained by their social environment. Law students are often warned that the legal sector is highly competitive. In addition, it is likely that participants' peers will also be experiencing repeated rejection, suggesting that this could be an example of perception of self related to social environment (Bandura 1977, cited in Gecas, 1989) and, as a result, it would lessen its impact on the individual's self-efficacy.

There was also a suggestion of anxiety when they were told that they had been successful:

> 'I didn't think I was gonna get on and then I got on and was like, oh, I've actually got to do this!'

It might be of interest to note here that all of the students who were accepted onto the scheme continued to take part from the initial application stage right through to the actual event; a one hundred percent completion rate. Part of the process involved students participating within a preparatory event to help them to understand what to expect and to manage the activities. There are two potential inferences that the authors could draw from these high levels of student engagement; either all of

the students who applied to the scheme had an adequate level of individual self-efficacy to allow them to make a positive outcome assumption, or the preparatory event, and its potential sources of vicarious experience and verbal persuasion, acted as the foundation that they needed to encourage them to continue. The authors cannot be sure of the influence of either of these factors but the impact of the preparation event on the social cohesion of the group is examined below as part of Theme 2.

The value that the participants placed on their group situation was clearly evident from the data collected. Although many of them already had legal experience in some capacity, typically in smaller firms or courts, they felt that an international law firm's environment would be completely new to them. As one participant commented, 'it's not just a work place. It's kind of like a lifestyle'. This had implications on their sense of belonging, something that this article will explore further as part of the 'social spaces and community creation' theme.

Illustrating the Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission's findings (2015) previously referred to, participants revealed how their research into the firm led to some angst about their professional fit with such an 'intimidating' organisation. In particular, they voiced their concerns about being perceived as either different or inferior in terms of their intelligence and communication skills:

> '[…] not that I'm not confident but it's one of them things where I've been like nervous to speak because I feel like they're really smart and like even just like the way I sound like I've got quite a common accent so I just feel like everyone was gonna judge me and stuff.'

This specific apprehension reflects the conclusions from the literature review (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015; Laurison and Friedman, 2015) in that applicants who do not match employers' ideals, which were noted as being mapped to middle-class attributes, find themselves at a disadvantage. Concerns about accent are also replicated in other research; Morrison (2015) found that higher education students linked accent to legitimacy both in the job market and in the workplace. Participants were not only apprehensive about meeting people within the organisation; they also divulged qualms about how well they would connect with the rest of their group, at least some of whom they had not met before:

> 'I was a bit nervous, bit apprehensive about going, I had no idea at that point who else was going on it oh, have to meet these people and what if we don't get on.'

Whilst the programme's sequencing (attending the Royal Courts of Justice before the firm's insight day) was a logistical necessity, participants commented how it helped to alleviate some of these anxieties:

> 'If we'd gone straight in at [the firm] and we didn't know each other it would be a lot more daunting I think.'

Such feedback indicates that the participant's confidence appeared to be significantly bolstered by their group-membership status as discussed as part of theme 2.

**Theme 2: Social spaces and community creation**

Whilst the size of the group was determined by resources, its relatively small nature, coupled with its members' anxieties referred to above, seemed to help expedite the development of group-cohesion from the initial preparatory session:

> 'Yeah but luckily we'd all spoken cos we did that session in uni, we all sort of spoke on Facebook and that so we'd all arranged to meet.'

This example also helps to illustrate the importance of recognising the multi-faceted nature of the communicative toolkit that is available for building a positive group dynamic; including not only formal face-to-face events, but also more informal, technologically-accessible opportunities too.

The formal, social and organisational elements of the programme appeared to combine well together to further develop the group's 'social system' (Davey, 2016, p. 176) and foster their sense of unity throughout the event:

> '[…] a lot of us didn't know each other so we all, luckily we all got along really well and like we went out for dinner and a few drinks and stuff and it was nice to have that sort of social aspect to it as well.'

The participants reflected on how else they had developed their community:

> 'Yeah like I just felt when we were getting on the tube and stuff and we were all in suits like just looked like we were on the Apprentice, just larking around, it was really good.'

Additionally, this latter statement illustrates the impact that popular culture can have on the development of students' self-efficacy. It also demonstrates aspects of the

'modelling' concept in action (Bandura, 1977). The participant's recognition that they had dressed like someone whom they perceived to be successful in terms of their career perhaps helped to quell any anxieties that they may previously have had, and reinforce the whole group's positivity as a result.

There was also evidence of participant-modelling at the event itself. Participants seemed surprised, but pleased, to find that at least one of the solicitors at the event had shared a similar experience to them in also attending a post-1992 university:

> '[…] he went to like poly-uni [post-92 institution] and it makes you feel
> a bit better when they're all like, oh I went to UCL and I went to King's
> College and  Oxford and you're just like…*[participant grimaces]*'

They seemed particularly reassured to be told that, when it comes to applications, the firm regarded the type of university that the applicant had attended as irrelevant:

> '[…] one of them kept saying like you can still apply if you go to like
> [institution's name redacted] still, they still like take you, they don't
> judge you on what uni you go to.'

Encouraged to view external perceptions of the value of their post-1992 university experience in a more positive light, participants reflected on how the practical nature of their studies there might actually give them an advantage when it comes to making applications:

'I think like [the institution] is really good cos my friend does law [elsewhere] and like they don't really do much practical work at all… when I told her about when we were going to [name of law firm redacted] she was like how did you do that cos they just kind of make them do it all on their own and even with mooting like they don't really see mooting as a big thing whereas I think at [the institution] like, I think it's quite a big thing and a lot of people do it don't they?... whereas she never like did anything like that and I feel that's something that gives you confidence and if you want to take the bar it's like good experience into what you're gonna be doing kind of thing'.

Despite the confidence that the participants gained from attending the event, and the reassurance that they received about the value of both their educational experiences and their chosen institution, the reality, as outlined in the literature, is that far too often qualified candidates from post-1992 universities are being overlooked by elite organisations. This is reflected by the fact that none of the participants, despite making an application, were successful in securing an opportunity with the organisation at that time.

However, participants did still gain from taking part in the event; 'fired up' by their 'fantastic' experience, the participants reported that they developed real confidence in planning, and motivation for making their next career move.

**Theme 3: Confidence and motivation**

The focus group findings provided clear evidence of the participants' increased self-confidence and self-motivation. Following previous despondency, with participants

26

expressing that they 'didn't stand a chance beforehand', their participation within the event really helped to buoy their spirits. In particular, a participant recalled how one of the solicitors had disclosed that they had worked on the development of a landmark London building. The participant commented how that was:

'something I won't forget in that sense that you get to meet people who've done such big jobs and that's something that I aspire to do really in my legal career… thinking if I worked there I could be on projects like that, y'know it is inspiring and motivating'.

Reflecting back on their previous experience, participants made comparisons with other careers-related events that they had been involved with, noting how much the responsibility that had been placed on them in this event, for example for making their own travel arrangements, helped foster the development of a self-reliant approach:

'when I was at college I did like the court visits and stuff but it was like a day trip and we went with like the college so it wasn't very independent, y'know you all got shipped to a place, you did it and then you left, so it was nice to do it sort of independently, sort of getting there and all that, it was nice to do it that way'.

This illustrates how such opportunities can also complement course-provision by facilitating 'soft' skill development (advocated by writers including Tomlinson, 2007 and Moreau and Leathwood, 2006 as mentioned earlier) in tandem with the development of sector-specific knowledge. It also reflects self-efficacy theory which

encourages increasingly challenging activities as the key to enhancing levels of self-efficacy.

Participants commented how such an independent attitude had led them to be more proactive in planning their next career move; for example in keeping their CV up to date, creating tailored CVs and developing an online presence through professional networking sites such as LinkedIn.

The participants' renewed dynamism for their career-planning also spilled over into their enthusiasm for their studies too. As one commented:

> 'the trip really motivated me to kind of get my head down when we came back in September and really focus on what I wanted to do… it just changed my view completely… it just really kind of spurred me on a lot in my studies'.

There was also evidence of the event influencing the verbal persuasion support that participants received from others; in particular, one participant's mother had encouraged them to reflect back on how positive they felt during the event as a tactic that they could use to help spur them on to complete the rest of their studies.

It appears that the participants also now draw less distinction between their studies and their employability-development; making more strategic decisions in combining and developing both aspects, for example by taking up opportunities such as the WestLaw certification process to assist with the development of their practical research skills.

The participants also expressed how the event had developed their aptitude for taking up other initiatives, such as volunteering, offered by both the institution and

also external organisations. Groen's 4S Model (2011) is relevant here. It suggests that four different types of capital: social, strategic, economic and cultural are all important for developing entrepreneurialism. Drawing on this, the authors would suggest that, in addition to those four types of capital, the students' perceived increased in their self-motivation provides an essential fifth element to help them to develop their self-efficacy. In addition to increased levels of motivation, they believed that the experience had also left them feeling more empowered to attend events such as law fairs which would have previously seemed to them to be 'an absolute nightmare' and how they would have 'literally [run] away from [them]' beforehand.

Part of this increased confidence seems to stem from participants' changed perceptions of solicitors working within such prestigious firms. As one participant noted:

> 'everybody made you feel so comfortable you kind of forgot almost that you were in the company of such intelligent people and you're just kind of chatting with them like, before they did their talks and things we were talking about TV shows that we watch and things like that, that we've got in common with them…'

Drawing all of these three themes together, it is clear that participants placed high value on their experience of participating within the event and appeared to gain a resulting increase in their self-efficacy, even if just for a short-term period. The findings also suggest that participants experienced enhanced clarity in their career ambitions and personal development plans.

**Discussion**

According with the theme of the paper, the authors will now outline the metaphorical 'bridges' which need to be built between each different set of stakeholders in order to develop more equitable recruitment practices for the benefit of all.

Although there is an existing trend for these short-term insight days, the self-efficacy literature would suggest that such schemes will have an insignificant long-term impact on increasing the diversity of graduate candidate pools. This implies that if employers focus exclusively on similar schemes, they will continue to fail to reach enough diverse candidates. Furthermore, they need to provide increased and more varied support to candidates who face the social and economic barriers previously identified in the literature. Examples would include: mentoring between employees and students, work experience, financial assistance, alternative application routes and interview support. All of these opportunities would develop the bridge between employers and students through encouraging their interaction. Such relationship-building will not only assist employers to identify and nurture potential candidates, but also help to develop those candidates' self-efficacy in achieving their aspirations by removing what are substantial barriers.

The second bridge to be built relies on the creation of the first, in that the findings suggest that if students see people who they believe are 'like them' succeeding in the elite professions, that experience impacts upon own their perceptions of whether they will fit in (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). As the report points out, recruitment managers need to be 'mindful of the images, stories and ambassadors used as role models during the recruitment phase' (p. 19). This is reflected in the findings by the positive reaction that the participants had when they

met with the solicitor who had similarly studied at a post-1992 university. The presence of this role-model seemed to have a facilitating impact on the development of the participants' connection with the organisation. Participants seemed more readily willing to assume that they would be able to work there as a result. It is worth noting that, the solicitor in question attended a different post-1992 university. Therefore the connection that the participants felt with them transcended the typical, institutional-specific connection between alumni, and seems more aligned with the issue of social status. Graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds who go into the professions should be made aware of the significance of their achievements to students from similar backgrounds and accordingly be encouraged to support such students in any way that they are able.

The final bridge for establishment would be the connection between students who have similar aspirations. The findings clearly indicated the importance that they placed on the development of their group-dynamic; particularly how it helped them to face this new experience together. Universities have a key role to play in this respect; firstly, in collaborating with employers to create these types of opportunities for students to develop their work experience within a supportive group network, and secondly, in identifying students to take part and fostering connections between them.

Drawing on these elements, the authors would suggest that an additional strand is added in to the Triple Helix model as student- and graduate-engagement is also required to tackle diversity issues in recruitment to these elite professions. Historically, some employers and universities, in subscribing to employability discourse, have been guilty of expecting students to fit a specific mould rather than

being more open to the differences between candidates, and the business and societal opportunities which such a diverse recruitment pool should foster.

The authors believe that, for this approach to have any meaningful impact on increasing diverse recruitment, there needs to be an underpinning policy directive from Government. Without organisations and universities being compelled to improve their diversity strategies, the necessary cultural shift is unlikely to materialise organically.

UK businesses could be forced into such a cultural shift to deal with the implications of Brexit, the UK's decision to leave the EU. The Guardian's report on findings from Mercer show that Brexit could have an impact on labour shortages because of the predicted reduction in migration. Gary Simmons, partner at Mercer, is quoted as saying:

'companies should analyse and understand the make-up of their workforce. They should look to increase retention of current staff and be accessible: employing sectors of UK society that might be under-represented in the workforce - women, disabled and the long-term unemployed.' (Guardian, 2017)

This situation is clearly still unfolding and the implications remain to be seen, but it will be interesting to see how employers respond and if there will be any benefits for diverse candidates.

**Recommendations**

Notwithstanding these changes in the political environment, the authors believe that good recruitment practices do already exist but suggest that more could be done to improve. Although the suggestion above of providing a more comprehensive support programme seems extensive (and potentially expensive), there are clear examples that this is both possible and beneficial to all involved. One such instance is the

Freshfields Stephen Lawrence Scholarship Scheme mentioned earlier which targets a particularly under-represented demographic and provides a proactive and structured long-term support programme.

In offering such opportunities, the authors would also agree with the points from the literature which emphasise that employers need to be clearer about what they expect from candidates, avoiding the use of ambiguous terms such as 'talent' or 'polish' as referred to above. The findings suggest that candidates find this to be daunting and intimidating, even when they are already familiar with the employer. Therefore employers run the risk of isolating themselves, strongly discouraging potential candidates from engaging with the recruitment process at all. Finally, in terms of recommendations for further research, although the authors' findings appear to demonstrate that direct experience with employers results in an increase in individual self-efficacy, these findings are self-reported and not derived from an established measure of efficacy change. As such, future research is needed to establish a more explicit causal link between self-efficacy and employability initiatives. Furthermore, although the findings suggest that participants experienced a positive change in their self-efficacy, further research is needed to establish how resilient such change would be in the face of the repeated obstacles that disadvantaged candidates face.

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[i] 57.1% entered the legal profession via the QLD or CLP route in 2010/11 (Law Society, 2012)