

Elitist Britain: We need a better understanding of the routes through which those from more advantaged backgrounds access top careers

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A new report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission finds that elitism is deeply embedded in Britain. [Lindsey Macmillan](#) looks at the report and discusses her own research which explores the role of networks in perpetuating elitism and how we can help in widening access to elite professions. Unfortunately, a common problem in this field is a lack of data quality and availability.



Some people feel Britain is ruled by a privileged few: the wealthy, the privately educated and the well-connected. A new report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty commission, [Elitist Britain](#) suggests they might be right. The report looks at the education of people working in the top jobs in Britain today. The findings demonstrate why the issue of who gets the top jobs is such an important one – they find elitism ‘so stark that it could be called ‘Social Engineering’.

The report considers the type of school and university attended of those working in a range of careers across a number of different definitions of elite occupations: the wealthiest, those with the most power and influence, those in the top institutions in the country and those with the most influence on cultural life in Britain. These include the type of careers that we might typically associate with elite professions including senior judges, Cabinet ministers, Local Government CEOs and Lords, and some which we might less typically associate with elite professions such as pop stars and Rugby Union professionals.

Of course, there are many ways to measure top job status – nowadays most commonly measured in social sciences using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification ([NS-SEC](#)), based on the original Goldthorpe Social Class Schema. The NS-SEC is constructed to measure employment relations and conditions of occupations with those at the top working in the best conditions with the most autonomy. There is likely then to be a fair amount of overlap between those in the higher NS-SEC groups and the careers that the commission have chosen to focus on.

One of the key strengths and lasting benefits of this new report is the amount of data that the commission have collated from various sources. When asking research questions about who gets access to the top jobs one of the first problems we run into as academics is a lack of data on the family background of those working in elite professions. The commission report uses a range of sources to measure the education of those working in elite jobs including Who’s Who, Linked In, DODS People, internet searches and direct communication. Given the data collection methods, the response rates are surprisingly high, comparable with standard longitudinal survey response rates.

[77 per cent for type of school attended and 81 per cent for type of university attended. Of course within occupations there is quite a range with response rates for local government leaders, newspaper columnists and the Sunday Times Rich List below 50 per cent for school type and responses for local government leaders and British Rugby Union teams below 50 per cent for university type. For others such as the Cabinet and the England cricket team, there is 100 per cent coverage (Appendix A and B of main report)].

Updating previous evidence by the Sutton Trust, the report finds that 71 per cent of senior judges, 55 per cent of permanent secretaries, 36 per cent of the cabinet were privately educated compared to just 7 per cent of the population. On university attendance, 75 per cent of senior judges, 59 per cent of the cabinet and 47 per cent of newspaper columnists were Oxbridge educated compared to less than 1 per cent of the population. Alan Milburn,

chair of the Commission, writes “Locking out a diversity of talents and experiences makes Britain’s’ leading institutions less informed, less representative and, ultimately, less credible than they should be”.

This new report therefore raises the usual concerns over equity and efficiency. A productive economy must tap into all resources at its disposal – we all lose out if over 90 per cent of the population are excluded from important posts. It also highlights a concern that is often ignored in the social mobility debate. This isn’t only a question of fairness and efficiency but also of democracy. How is it possible for our entire society to be represented if those in power, making decisions, writing the news and influencing debate have a narrow set of experiences that are so unrepresentative of the experience faced by everyone else?

The Commission highlights key reasons as to why this problem exists: how wealth is distributed, how children are parented, how students are educated, how young people move from school to work/university and how staff are recruited and promoted. Setting out a challenge to government, parents, schools, universities and employers emphasises the multi-faceted approach needed to break down some of the barriers to accessing top jobs that currently exist in the system. But more research is required to understand the routes through which those from more advantaged backgrounds access top careers.

In our [recent research](#) into access to top jobs we found that a significant advantage remains for those who are privately educated even after comparing individuals with similar parental background, the same A levels and the same degree from the same university (also see our [forthcoming paper](#) in the *Journal of Social Policy*). This finding challenges [the notion](#) that privately educated individuals simply get ahead because of their superior qualifications. It also emphasises the challenge to employers to consider their recruitment processes and the challenge to educators and parents in encouraging students to apply for these top positions.

The role of networks is often cited as a possible explanation for this advantage: ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know’. Our measure of networks couldn’t explain this additional private school advantage but the limits to our data highlight a common problem in this field: lack of data quality and availability. Work is underway with employers to access their applications data, with a number of large companies now starting to ask questions on the social background of applicants. It is only with access to more high quality data on this subject that we’ll be able to further understand where to target interventions that can help in widening access to elite professions.

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