

## **Summary of our Policy Seminars Held in June and July, 2016**

We held three policy seminars to expose some of the challenges facing individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds in terms of progression to employment. In the first two seminars we heard evidence from leading academics (Dr Daniel Laurison, Dr Sam Friedman, Dr Louise Ashley, Prof Anna Vignoles) exposing the extent of the problem: even when those from lower socio-economic backgrounds enter high-status professions, they earn less than those from privileged backgrounds and experience differential career outcomes. Graduates from privileged backgrounds earn significantly more than their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, even after completing the same degrees from the same universities. The power of elite universities to give currency to graduates in the jobs marketplace was evident.

The two seminars exposing the extent of the social inequality facing graduates in the workplace were followed by a seminar focused on student employability with ideas and experience shared by Prof Deborah Eyre (Director, High Performance Learning) and Tom Banham (Director, Employability and Careers, University of York). The latter seminar looked into the need to establish a clear and common understanding of the term ‘employability’ whilst also reviewing the extent to which the development of soft skills, at school and university, aids students’ chances of career success. Is being employable substantially different from being cognitively successful? It urged the need for caution over any singular treatment of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as ‘lacking’ or deficient.

Given the extent of the inequalities facing individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in graduate employment, it is vital that there is greater coordination between stakeholders: schools, universities, and employers.

### **Policy recommendations emerging from the policy seminars**

#### For schools

1. Schools need to become more accountable for the success of their students beyond school. This issue was raised in the latest State of the Nation Report and we support its recommendation of a destination measure which relates to all students’ outcomes post-18 against their secondary school.

2. Schools need additional support and resource to improve careers information, advice and guidance. Currently, students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not have the same trajectory in the employer sector and they need additional support to be able to navigate the system, make astute choices, and harness their experience and competencies effectively.
3. Schools need to expose students to a broad understanding of professionalism to prevent certain professions appearing exclusive. This may help to reduce the numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds self-selecting themselves out of certain professions.

#### For higher education institutions

1. Improving access to opportunities shown to improve employability by embedding experiences, such as internships, into the curriculum. This will ensure that students cannot self-select themselves out of work experience that is highly regarded by employers.
2. Careers services need to do more to equip students from low socio-economic backgrounds with the kind of knowledge of the professions that is often perceived to be implicit. They can play a role in introducing students to a more inclusive model of professionalism.

#### For employers

1. Data collection is vital to understand the challenges that firms are facing, to open the way for constructive conversations, and to enable them to design evidence-based interventions. While macro-analysis has uncovered a pay gap, we need information at the level of the firm to fully grasp the scale of the disadvantage facing those from low socio-economic backgrounds and to begin to find ways of explaining it and therefore overcoming it.
2. At executive level, firms need to embrace the business case for diversity to promote organisational reform while also better understanding arguments for contributing to greater levels of social justice. This drive needs to be cascaded throughout the organisation.
3. The concept of meritocracy needs to be treated with caution as it can obscure the existence of social inequality; in particular, differentiation and bias.
4. Firms need to avoid using language that naturalises professionalism - discarding the notion of a 'natural fit' - and, instead, take steps to create more inclusive versions of

professionalism. This, in turn, may weaken the pressure on employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds to assimilate into an alien culture which can impact negatively on their performance.

5. Firms must recruit more broadly and end the practice of focusing on a small group of highly selective institutions. Until firms develop strategies to identify and recruit talent from a wider pool and reduce the emphasis on prior achievement, then it is vital not to overlook the problems surrounding access to higher education and the urgency of raising attainment.

6. Firms need to reflect on their recruitment practices and remove criteria that disadvantage those from low socio-economic backgrounds, such as work experience. In addition, strengths-based methods need to be adopted more widely to open the way for different kinds of candidates to succeed.

#### Cross-sector

1. Greater emphasis needs to be placed upon equality of outcomes rather than equality of opportunities.
2. Regular cross-sector discussions need to take place to ensure that there is consensus over the meaning of the term 'student employability' and a clear sense of purpose about how each sector can best operate to support students in developing skills and attributes.