

Closing the Opportunity Gap: 7 Evidence-Based Actions to Hire Untapped Talent

In partnership with:



UCL



Background & methodology

30% of jobs in the UK are within professional occupations, typically offering higher long-term earnings prospects and a greater economic stability than other occupations.

The business case for hiring underrepresented talent is growing ever stronger with reported benefits for innovation, decision making, profitability and growth.

However, employers lack a rigorous independent evidence base on how recruitment filters disadvantage candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups.

Entry-level roles in professional careers are the first rung on the ladder, so any inequalities of opportunity at this stage will persist and limit progression throughout adulthood.

There has been little evidence on the types of careers that people from underrepresented groups apply to or on the size of the barriers faced by these groups during recruitment processes.

This guide outlines the key findings of the UCL study and provides 7 evidence-based actions for recruitment teams to close the gap and discover untapped talent.

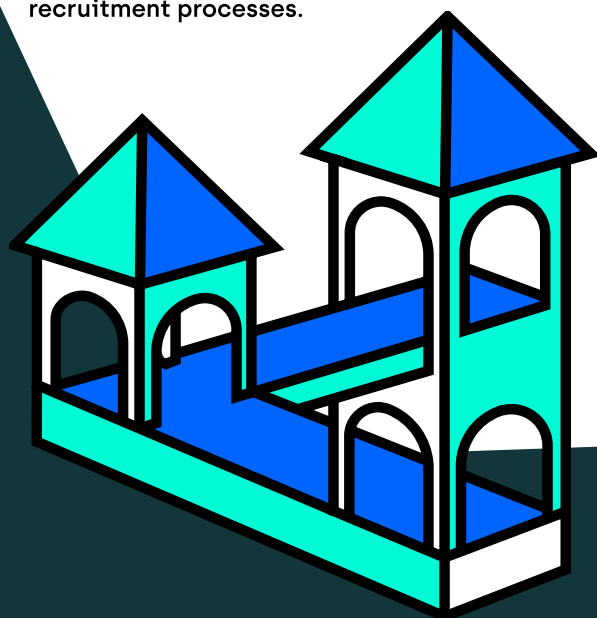
The study secured anonymised recruitment data from 17 'Times Top 100' UK employers covering accounting, law and public-sector organisations. The sample spans 253,653 graduate applications in 2023/24, while a three-year panel follows 721,863 applications submitted between 2022-2024.

Each record includes detailed diversity markers—parental occupation, school type, ethnicity, gender—plus prior attainment, university, subject and every recruitment milestone through to offer or withdrawal.

Applicant pools are benchmarked against linked administrative data on all UK graduates who attended school in the UK aged 16 to gauge representativeness.

Find out:

- How application and success rates differ for underrepresented groups
- Which factors explain the observed gaps
- To what extent inequalities have widened between 2022 and 2024
- 7 actions that employers can take to close the opportunity gap



This guide is based on research conducted by Professor Lindsey Macmillan, Dr. Claire Tyler and Dr. Catherine Dilnot at the UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

What does the study show?

The dataset of over 1 million applications mapped throughout the applicant journey pinpoints exactly where disparities arise.

01 Low socio-economic background (SEB) graduates are **32% less likely** to get a job offer than applicants from professional backgrounds.

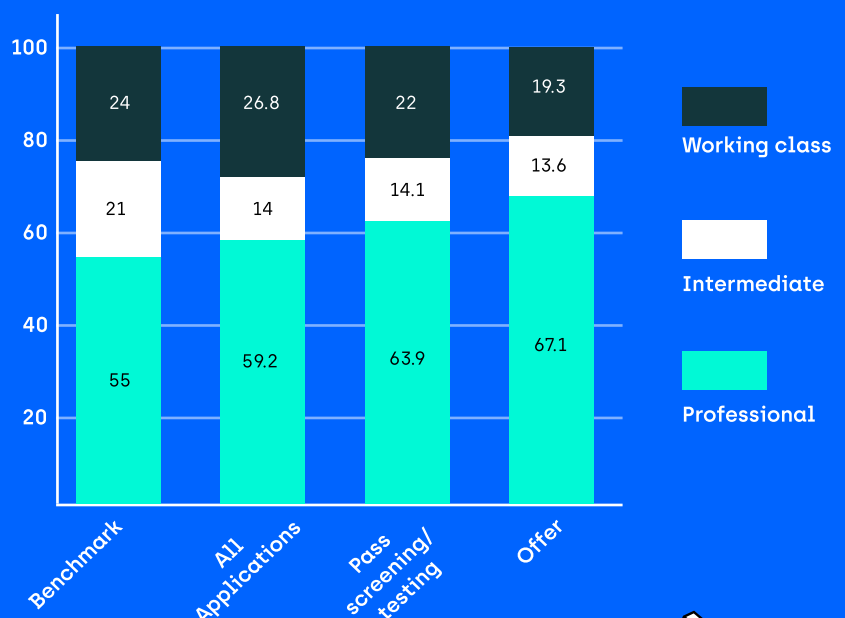
02 Half of that SEB gap appears at the **online sift & test** stage; the other half at **face-to-face** assessments.

03 When comparing applicants with similar attributes [university attended & subject studied], **working class graduates are still 18% less likely** to receive an offer than professional background applicants.

04 Privately educated applicants were **20% more likely** to receive an offer than similar state school applicants in 2024, **up from 7% in 2023**.

05 **Employer decisions, not candidate withdrawals, drive the inequality:** withdrawal rates are relatively flat across SEB, gender and ethnicity.

Graduate programmes: Percentage by parental occupation



More key findings

06 **Timing matters:** low-SEB candidates tend to **apply later**, and later applications **convert at lower rates**, driving a significant share of the class gap.

08 Applicants are predominantly from the **South and London**, and these regions are overrepresented at each stage of the application process.

07 Black applicants are **45% less likely** to get offers than white applicants, and **33% less likely** when compared like for like with white students.

09 Inequalities by ethnicity are larger at the online sift and testing stages. Black applicants are **37% less likely** to pass the online sift and testing stages than comparable peers of white ethnicity, and only **5% less likely** to pass the face-to-face stage.

Gaps are widening: from 2023 to 2024, class and ethnicity disparities in graduate programme offers grew across every entry route, despite larger applicant pools.

Guide for employers

These findings represent an opportunity for early-careers teams to make small changes to their processes and uncover hidden talent. Here are 7 actions based on the evidence for your team.

01 Capture SEB on every application

Firms that captured SEB uncovered a **32% offer gap** invisible in standard EDI dashboards.

02 Use strengths-based online testing

Employers who used strengths-based online tests had diverse talent represented throughout each stage, particularly **final assessment centres**.

03 Nudge early applications

Informing University careers teams that earlier applications have **higher chances of success** could enable them to intervene earlier with underrepresented groups.

04 Expand outreach to state-educated students for internships

Internships & spring weeks convert at **high rates to graduate roles**, but applications often open when underrepresented students are still adjusting to university.

05 Score for potential, not polish, at assessment centres

Low SEB candidates are likely to be **less experienced in face to face recruitment**. Don't penalise underrepresented applicants for skills that can be learned post-onboarding.

06 Look for potential beyond the Russell Group

70% of offers go to Russell Group graduates, but the pool of LSEB students is smaller. It is possible to target RG LSEB students, but consider **high-potential non-RG** students too.

07 As competition increases, monitor the impact on underrepresented groups

Inequalities increase as competition for places increases, pay particular attention to these metrics in competitive recruitment cycles.

Putting it into action

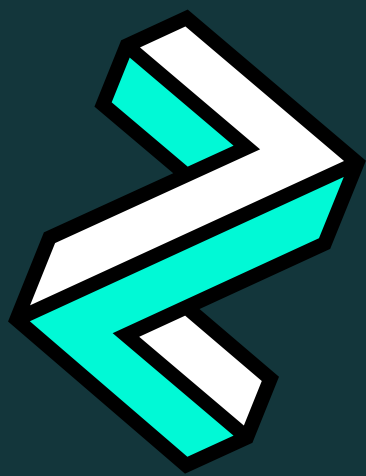
Action	Next Steps
Capture SEB on every application	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Add 3 questions recommended by the Social Mobility Commission: "Main earner's job at 14", "School type 11-16" & "Free-school-meal status".2. Make them compulsory with "prefer not to say" as the only skip option so completeness hits 95%.
Use strengths-based online testing	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pilot strengths-based testing on one role.2. Place the test before any academic screen and ask recent hires from LSEB backgrounds to provide feedback on language clarity.3. Run a live Q&A on the Zero Gravity platform so candidates who lack insider tips understand the format.
Nudge early applications	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Launch a two-week "priority review" window, with a decision in 10 days for applicants who apply.2. Push WhatsApp reminders to student societies with high proportions of LSEB members when roles open.3. Publish an infographic on your careers page showing that late applications under-perform.



Putting it into action

Action	Next Step
Expand outreach to state-educated applicants for internships	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Convert an existing insight day into a remote, paid work experience day, removing distance barriers.2. Offer bursaries for in-person spring weeks and advertise it in the first line of the job ad.
Score for potential, not polish, at assessment centres	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Add a 5-min thinking time before group tasks so quieter candidates can prepare.2. Replace "presentation style" with behavioural anchors for grit, problem-solving & teamwork
Look for potential beyond the Russell Group	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Remove university names from CVs at long-list stage; rely on grades & modules.2. Offer an open-access technical challenge; fast-track anyone in the top quartile regardless of institution.3. Run virtual masterclasses offering tangible value to pull in non-RG talent.
As competition increases, monitor the impact on underrepresented groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Create a real-time social mobility dashboard showing stage-by-stage conversion.2. Set ATS alerts when LSEB proportion falls below stage benchmarks.3. Work with Zero Gravity to broadcast new roles to under-represented students the moment they go live.

Book a free 20 minute consultation with our early-careers specialists by emailing sophie.radford@zerogravity.co.uk



ZERO GRAVITY

Further reading:

- Full report '[Inequalities in Access to Professional Occupations](#)'
- UCL blog post '[Why do we see so few working class and ethnic minority young people in top jobs?](#)'
- [Project homepage](#)

