

TALENT INCLUSION – LOOKING BEYOND THE QUALIFICATION FILTER

“Those of us without a degree are not second class – we’re not a consolation prize for employers when they can’t find a grad. On A Level results day, it’s about time we stopped telling non-grads that they’re only smart enough for junior roles”.

Claire Paul MBE, formerly Director of Leadership and Career Development at the BBC

The Pandemic is a once-in-a-century event that has disproportionately impacted upon our young people. So, on A-Level results day it is important that we celebrate the achievements of those who will now progress into Higher Education, whilst ensuring there is parity of through-career opportunity for those who today choose an alternative pathway into the workplace. In her article also released to today, Claire Paul¹ makes some very powerful and deeply personal observations of the workplace and recruitment practise, which she perceives to still be biased towards the graduate population – supported by a mix of her own experience and high-level review of the credentials required by some of our most influential employers.

Our call of Employers today:

Stop, take a moment and “sense check” the qualifications and levels of experience you are defining as essential for your roles.

By doing so, you may well increase your Talent Pool and access communities and talented individuals which you need, but which you may well be inadvertently excluding.

Why is this important?

Custom & Practice. if you do what you’ve always done, you get what you’ve always got! From Claire’s experience at the BBC, it could follow that many employers are stipulating essential criteria based on “custom and practice”. Some will have carefully considered the requirement for their roles, with Occupational Psychologists cautiously setting the criteria through informed analysis and judgements. Many may well just be “doing what they’ve always done” and may have not given the matter that much thought – they simply dust off the specification used the last time. Worse though, others could be using qualifications and other credentials as a coarse filter to minimise the volumes of applications, introducing potential bias, and limiting access to all our national talent; they risk using qualifications as a sole measure.

Qualifications versus Skills. Recent research published by McKinsey² has identified 4 main groupings of skills associated with likely success in the workplace, today and into the future – Cognitive, Interpersonal, Self-Leadership and Digital. Unsurprisingly, those with a degree performed slightly better across the 56 sub-elements as a whole; but, when focusing on those skills most strongly linked to workplace proficiency, the link with educational achievement all but disappears. The key skills here tending to be softer or based on attitudes. The report goes on to recommend the introduction of skills-based certification system, supported by through-career continuous investment and development of these skills across a working lifetime. In sum, there is a strong suggestion that employers should

¹ “Non grads are not second-class citizens ...”, Claire Paul published 10 August 2021.

² “[Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work](#)”, McKinsey (Marco Dondi, Julia Klier, Frederic Panier and Jörg Schubert), June 2021.

shift their focus from qualifications towards identification and development of attitudes and skills, whilst understanding how these skills can be used in progression – either upwards or across into new roles as the workplace transforms.

Social Mobility. Prior to the pandemic, the UK had a poor record in this area, being ranked 21st by the World Economic Forum and number 5 in the G7 (just above the US and Italy). As the proportion of “professional jobs”³ increases, they now comprise almost half of the jobs across the UK, with the highest share in England. As reported by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC)⁴, this increase has to some extent been positive and has led to an increasing percentage of professional roles being filled by those from a working-class background (up from 32% in 2014 to 38% in 2020). But – and despite this positive trend – there is still a tendency to sustain inequality in our society through our educational system and recruitment practise, with those whose parents were employed in professional roles still twice as likely to be employed at that level compared to those from a working-class background. The SMC has also highlighted the worrying intersection here with the protected characteristics and the compound effect that Furlough or Homeworking have added to the disproportionate impact on females, ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities.

Educational disadvantage & “Levelling Up”. In a separate report⁵, The SMC reports that the “educational disadvantage gap” faced by those from working class backgrounds continues to grow, despite interventions to remedy the situation. And this increase has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic, which continues to impact disproportionately on the levels of qualifications achieved by those from the lowest socio-economic background – most stark as they leave full-time education and transition to work. Reliance on credentials and qualifications in recruitment practise will limit their access and ability to compete for many roles. This to the detriment of national social mobility goals and employers’ access to the widest talent pool. As the Prime Minister highlighted in his recent levelling up speech⁶, the key to making change is “in post 16 education where the differences across our society are the starkest. It cannot be right that Bath has 78 per cent with a level three or a level equivalent qualification and Bradford has only 42 per cent, and that is why this government is obsessed with skilling up our population. We love our universities, and we believe they are one of the glories of this country, but we need to escalate the value of practical and vocational education that can transform people’s lives”.

Graduate “underemployment”. The current bias towards the degree pathway is also highlighted in the recent statistics published by ONS⁷, which still shows that 25% of graduates are employed in roles that do not require a degree – they are underemployed. This has fallen slightly, but still highlights that many young people go to University, when they might be better suited to a different pathway. Clearly they are encouraged to do so because so many roles still unnecessarily stipulate the need for a degree.

The 5% Club. In our paper of last summer⁸, we highlighted the likely disproportionate impact COVID-19 would have on our Young People. Within our proposals, we:

³ Professional Jobs are those officially classified as “professional or managerial jobs”, as opposed to “routine and manual jobs”, which are defined as working class jobs (see [State of the Nation 2021](#) report) .

⁴ “[State of the Nation 2021](#)” The Social Mobility Commission, 20 July 2021.

⁵ “[Against the Odds – Achieving greater progress for secondary students facing socio-economic disadvantage](#)”, The Social Mobility Commission, 30 June 2021.

⁶ Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s “[Levelling-up Speech](#)”, 15 July 2021.

⁷ [Graduates’ labour market outcomes during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic: occupational switches and skill mismatch](#), ONS, 8 March 2021.

⁸ “[We can’t let our young bear the economic brunt of COVID-19](#)”, The 5% Club – 18 May 2020.

- Highlighted the need for a “COVID Premium” to supplement the pupil premium and arrest the increase in educational disadvantage.
- Outlined the benefits of “earn and learn” routes in fighting back and increasing skills, growth, and social mobility.

And,

- Highlighted that the most successful recruiters were using “in the round” techniques to identify potential aptitude and positive attitude through approaches such as aptitude/attitude testing, assessment days, video interviews and gamification.

So, what can we do?

On A-level results day, The 5% Club is keen that the ambitions and potential of all who are leaving education do not become constrained or narrowly channelled by determinations based solely on the qualifications they have achieved today and the route they now choose. They each have multiple paths available to them and we must collectively act to ensure every individual is able to realise their full potential.

This remains a complex issue, but The 5% Club wishes to place further emphasis on our previous calls for action:

- We now ask employers to sense check the qualifications and experience levels being used on job adverts and role descriptions. We will work with our members to help them challenge unnecessary use of qualifications and credentials – as has been seen in large employers such as the BBC, Apple, Google, and IBM.
- We encourage the creation of a national skills/attitude assessment framework, utilising research such as that mentioned in this paper which has been published by McKinsey. Such a framework having tremendous benefit in terms of recruiting, as well its obvious utility for inclusive progression.
- We seek parity of esteem for all educational pathways and the removal of bias towards higher education. That way: we will ensure every individual can achieve their full potential, without fear of negative judgement or prejudiced and outdated opinion from others; we will encourage the creation of a balanced and effective eco-system that delivers to meet our national skills need; and, we encourage the pursuance of educational pathways matched to follow-on careers, which will do much to address the spectre of “Graduate Underemployment”.

Results day is a defining moment for many and live long in the memories of those receiving their results today. The 5% Club (www.5percentclub.org.uk) is driven to improve the inclusiveness of workplaces across the UK, to reduce inequality and poverty, and to optimise our national prosperity. As part of this journey, our movement is keen to ensure everyone achieves their full potential, and that they do not become defined by or constrained by the school-years performance. We are keen that an individual’s capacity and skills are encouraged to grow across a lifetime of “earning and learning” and we will continue to pursue this purpose with our growing membership, who number more than 560 and represent over 1 million employees.