

NON-GRADS ARE NOT SECOND- CLASS CITIZENS

A deeply personal perspective and Expert Opinion from Claire Paul, former Director of Leadership and Career Development with the BBC

49% of top employers prefer graduate job applicants. On A' Level results day, it's about time we stopped telling non-grads that they're only fit for second-class jobs.

I'm a passionate champion of apprenticeships. I've long believed that too many kids step onto the university conveyor belt because it's the 'thing you do' because you don't know what to do next; ending up, three years later, with significant debt and too often no closer to work.

I'll admit upfront that I'm biased. After scraping indifferent A' Levels (my excuse being that I loved to party) I followed my dream and came to London to get a job. After a rainy morning tramping through Mayfair, I ended up knocking on the door of the Queen's florist on Berkeley Square where, miraculously, they took me on. What followed was an eclectic range of jobs (a toy tester for BHS being the most fun) before, by some further miracle, I talked my way into the BBC. I will forever be grateful to my first boss who gave me my chance, blind to his organisation's graduate-only trainee policy. What followed was a professional love-affair lasting over three decades working for 'auntie'; as a journalist and editor, ending up as the organisation's Director of Leadership & Career Development and, poetically, in charge of breaking the strangle-hold of entry-level elite graduate recruitment.

To cut a long story short, the BBC's recent commitment to support one thousand apprentices every year shows how far things have moved on since I first walked through the revolving doors of Broadcasting House. My mum and dad never got over it; their working-class, coal miner's daughter, ending up with a golden ticket to work at the BBC. I'm not sure I could ever quite believe my luck either and, in all my time on the payroll, no one ever asked me about university; it was totally and utterly irrelevant...until now.

This year, like so many others who've reflected on life during the pandemic, I decided to take the plunge and change jobs. From the moment I began to scour the market I was taken aback. The message was loud and clear; in the wider senior management world, people like me are viewed as "second-rate". Even for leadership roles designed to raise the quality and esteem of vocational education (my particular professional passion), job after job specified degree-required or degree-preferred. Take the examples of a leadership position in education which was entirely focused on vocational learning, an FE College CEO (beyond irony) and the CEO running a social enterprise devoted to breaking down the barriers to social mobility. Then there was the executive search consultant who tapped me up to apply for a vacancy. I advised her I wasn't eligible because her selection criteria regarded me as not bright enough. Even on zoom I could see she had the good grace to look embarrassed. Her reply was, "Oh, we don't mean people like you". She could have fooled me!

I wondered if I'd just been unlucky so decided to put my journalist's hat on and do some research. For one week I waded through the careers websites of all the FTSE 100 employers looking at the selection criteria for their mid and senior career level jobs. After discounting the specialist roles where it was pretty obvious that a degree in e.g. physics would be useful, the results were depressing. 49% of employers advertised jobs that filtered candidates on the basis of educational background - e.g. regional transport managers, a manager in a printing department, project managers (lots of these), business managers and marketing managers. All sitting on careers websites with branding messages shouting out undying corporate commitments to diversity and inclusion. Like the employer whose headline said, "we promote all forms of diversity at all levels in the organisation" whilst requiring their HR managers to have a university education. Clearly, they either didn't worry about excluding non-grads (who more usually come from working-class backgrounds) or they simply hadn't given this outdated selection trope much thought. Quite a few years ago at the BBC I recall raising this around the HR Directors' table after I'd spotted a degree requirement in one of our junior job ads. The fact that we did this was a genuine surprise to everyone; even in the HR senior team we didn't realise what was happening at the coal-face as generic selection criteria was cut and pasted into job ads

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down the years. I remember smiling to myself at the madness of an organisation disqualifying its HR Directors from applying for a job many layers below.

The executive search consultants were most culpable. I selected five at random and looked at their senior management job ads. Every single one asked for a degree. It's not good enough as a defence to say that it's only 'preferred'. It instantly marks out those of us who didn't go to university as not-wanted second-class citizens. This isn't hyperbole; if a job ad said, "we'd prefer to receive applicants from people who are able bodied" or, "we require people to come from middle class backgrounds" I know what the reaction would be. Yet, if it's *so* wrong in other contexts, why do otherwise fair-minded employers fail to notice this pervasive and invidious form of thoughtless discrimination running riot through mid and senior level recruitment? It's an eye-watering level of bias. When I was at the age to go to university only 14% did so – simple maths tells you that 86% of people now in their 50s are being routinely disqualified from mid-level and senior jobs.

Consider the fundamental questions this raises about social justice. Do we really believe that those without a degree are not as bright as those with? Are those who had support / encouragement from an early age more employable? Are we comfortable completely excluding those who couldn't afford to go to university? For most employers, the answer is, "probably not" – and yet so many then apply this unthinking bias to their selection criteria.

Of course, some employers are well ahead of the game and deserve high praise. Amongst all the FTSE 100, Rightmove stood out head and shoulders above the rest. I fell in love with them when I read:

"Ultimately we care much more about the person you are, how you think and approach things, than a list of qualifications and buzzwords on a CV" – bravo RightMove, you've got my business next time!

So here we are again on A level day and up and down the country young people are making their choices. They'll be inundated by well-meaning politicians, educationalists and journalists all extolling the benefits of high quality earn-while-you-learn apprenticeships – and I couldn't agree with them more. This advice is spot on for the country's skills needs as we grapple to rebuild our economy after the shocks of Covid 19. But this grad vs non-grad nonsense is a massive elephant in the room and it must be expunged forever from our recruitment lexicon. As it stands, when our sons and daughters look at what's needed to succeed in the job market, they can be forgiven for thinking they're much better off (albeit not financially!) if they hop on the university conveyor belt – however much the economy is crying out for more vocational skills.

This really, really matters; we all know that the country's skills gaps are acute and urgent and we need to nurture every ounce of talent we can find. And I mean ALL the talents, not just those fortunate enough to have benefited from a university education. Those of us without a degree are not stupid or second class – we're not a consolation prize for employers when they can't find a grad. Some of us (so many of us) go on to senior careers in the UK's leading organisations and become world-beating entrepreneurs like Jo Malone, Jamie Oliver, Simon Cowell and Richard Branson. Some of us even end up at the BBC!
