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Work experience influences who gets into Russell Group universities

Unique analysis of UCAS Personal Statements, by Dr Steven Jones of Manchester University, finds that testimonies about work experience feature prominently in university applications and may influence how places are allocated on the most competitive university courses.

Independent School applicants are found to draw on 55% more examples of Work Experience than applicants from other educational backgrounds. The nature of the work is also different: for state school candidates, it's more likely to be a 'job' (paid, unskilled, low prestige) than an 'experience' (such as a placement or internship). However, for the Independent School applicant, it's six times more likely to be the other way round.

As comparisons are restricted to applicants with identical A-level grades, the concern is that the UK's University admissions process further advantages applicants from more privileged backgrounds. Its possible young people with the grades and potential to benefit from a top University are being turned away because they have only 'Saturday jobs' to talk about while their privately-educated peers are boasting a range of high-prestige placements.

Dr Jones' research builds upon findings published last year by the Education and Employers Taskforce into the admissions requirements of the Russell Group universities. Surveying six areas of undergraduate study, the research found that work experience was listed as essential or desirable in:

- 100% of veterinary science courses offered by Russell Group universities, and
- 91% of dentistry courses
- 88% of medicine courses
- 37% of law courses
- 28% of engineering courses
- 21% of business/economics/management courses.

A 2011 YouGov survey of young adults aged 19-24 found that while 42% of former independent school pupils found that the work experience they had undertaken at school between the ages of 14 and 19 was useful in getting into higher education, only 25% of their counterparts educated at non-selective state schools agreed.

Presenting findings at an Education and Employers Taskforce seminar, held at Universities UK, Dr Jones explained: "Disparate levels of social, cultural and economic capital are in evidence, with some applicants having access to a network of individuals – friends, family members, teachers, careers advisors – who provide high quality input to the personal statement, as well as contributing to the wide range of experiences that it draws upon. There is a need for debates surrounding university access to recognise that work experience is important in the admissions process, and that Independent School applicants are at an advantage because they have both access to high quality placements and the know-how to exploit it in their personal statement. The Sutton Trust talks about 3,000 state school students being 'missing' every year – these are young people who have the A-level grades to attend the top universities, but who end up elsewhere. It's possible that a lack of

meaningful Work Experience contributes to this, and that the uneven distribution of opportunities compounds existing educational inequities.”

Dr Anthony Mann, Director of Policy and Research, Education and Employers Taskforce said: “Dr Jones’s research provides new evidence demonstrating the high importance of work experience to HE admissions. It makes a difference to who gains admission to highly competitive courses which are gateways to attractive professional careers. It is important that state schools are aware of its importance and helped to access the sort of placements which independent schools routinely source through their alumni.”

Head teacher of the Ellen Wilkinson School in Ealing, Chris Sydenham adds: “Young people want to do *meaningful* work experience but placements are often hard to find for those without family or other accessible and usable connections with the working world.”

Media contacts

For media enquiries and to interview the author please contact Carol Glover, Communications Manager, Education and Employers Taskforce on 07939 061 850 or email carol.glover@educationandemployers.org

Or Mike Addelman, Media Relations Officer, The University of Manchester
0161 275 0790 or 07717 881 567 email: michael.addelman@manchester.ac.uk

Further data is available on request.

Notes to Editors

1) About the Education and Employers Taskforce

The Education and Employers Taskforce was launched as a small independent charity on the 15 October 2009, and has seven staff. Its aim is to ensure that every school and college has an effective partnership with employers which provides young people with the inspiration, motivation, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to help them achieve their potential and so secure our national prosperity.

The Taskforce’s Partnership Board comprises the leaders of the main representative organisations from education and employment and the Trustees are principally senior business leaders with an interest in education. For more details please see www.educationandemployers.org

Inspiring the Future is a new free service which allows people from all sectors and professions to work with state schools and colleges to help young people achieve their potential. Employers and schools are connected and communicate with each other through this simple, secure website

Visit: <http://www.inspiringthefuture.org/>

2) Related research

Further unreported research on UK university admissions can be found in the Taskforce’s 2011 report *The importance of experience of the world of work in admissions to Russell Group universities: a desktop review of admissions criteria for six courses.*

<http://www.educationandemployers.org/research/taskforce-publications/the-importance-of-experience-of-the-world-of-work/>

3) Biography

Dr Steven Jones is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Manchester. His current research focuses on Higher Education, especially in relation to issues surrounding access, fairness and government policy. He is also published extensively in the field of Linguistics.

4) Forthcoming research

On 19 April, the Education and Employers Taskforce will launch a new research report on the wide-ranging value of work experience placements to young people. Shortly, a joint report by the Taskforce and the University of Warwick will set out how and why high performing independent schools engage with employers to support pupil learning and progression.