

Neil talks about social mobility

Neil McNulty is a Research Officer at the Office for National Statistics (ONS). He is a member of the ONS Social Mobility Network and of the Analysis Function Diversity and Inclusion working group. Prior to joining the ONS, and twelve years after leaving school with no A-levels, he obtained a Ph.D and then worked in Higher Education.

Neil's story

The former Chair of the [Social Mobility Commission \(SMC\)](#) Alan Milburn, argued in 2009 that “there is not equality of opportunity” and that “many elite professions remained a ‘closed shop’” that were not doing enough to “open themselves up to a wider pool of talent”. Those who start out ahead in life are the ones most likely to succeed. Less than 20% of people in top, higher paying jobs come from working-class backgrounds. In contrast, half of those occupying these positions had parents who did similarly high-status work.

People with parents who are doctors are 24 times more likely to need a stethoscope in their future career than those whose parents did any other type of work. Children of lawyers are 17 times more likely to present cases in court in future. And those whose parents work in television and film are 12 times more likely to make it into these fields. My dad worked in the same factory as his dad, and my first job required me to wear a hard hat, steel-toe boots, and overalls. Downsizing following the 2007-08 financial crises prevented me from getting a job in the same factory and I instead worked on construction sites.

Even when those from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘get in’, research shows they struggle to ‘get on’. In other words, social mobility does not finish at the point of occupational entry. Evidence has found that those from working class backgrounds, having successfully entered an elite workplace, do not seek out leadership positions as readily as those from privileged backgrounds. They engage in a process of ‘self-elimination’. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often do not apply for promotion because they believe that they do not belong in such positions.

Such inequalities are not confined to the private sector. A [recent report published by the SMC](#) (PDF) found that civil servants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (SEBs) are underrepresented across the organization. This is most acute in the upper echelons of the Civil Service where fewer than one in five (18%) senior civil servants (SCS) derive from lower socioeconomic groups. The figure of SCS from lower SEBs in 1967 was 19%.

So, what can be done?

Evidence suggests that there is not one solution that will enhance social mobility. I believe several interventions are needed. This is reflected in the [SMC's Action Plan](#) (ODF), which lists 14 action points required to improve social mobility in the Civil Service. I would like to highlight and discuss

two action points, as well as work ongoing to support social mobility within the AF.

Action point four: “Use apprenticeships to drive your strategy”.

Apprenticeships are a brilliant alternative to ‘classic’ university study and, I believe, should be more highly valued. Embracing the ‘learn while you earn’ pathway follows the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s recommendation to make ‘better use of paths combining education and training’. There are several apprenticeships available across the AF and wider Civil Service in both professions and departments. The Government Statistical Service (GSS) offers two programmes – a Level 4 Data Analyst Apprenticeship and a Level 6 (degree level) Data Science Apprenticeship.

There are currently [42 Level 6 and 20 Level 4 apprentices working across government](#), with a new intake due to join both schemes in September. I would encourage all AF members to take a look at this [elevator pitch from Vondy Smith](#), a current data science degree apprentice, and consider whether there could be a role for an apprentice in their business areas. While un-targeted apprenticeships do not automatically boost socioeconomic diversity, resolving the data issues outlined in the Action Plan and adopting the Social Mobility Commission’s soon to be released apprenticeship toolkit will help.

As a personal reflection, I was lucky to recently interview individuals for ONS Business Administration Apprenticeships and was greatly impressed by the calibre of candidates, none of whom had attended university. Each will add value to the Civil Service by providing new perspectives to improve decision-making.

Action point six: “Increase access to accelerator roles”.

I’d like to highlight the [Civil Service Summer Diversity Internship Programme \(SDIP\)](#) and ask members of the AF to consider integrating SDIP roles into their business areas. The SDIP is open to lower SEB, disabled or ethnic minority candidates, and offers the opportunity to experience what a career in the civil service is like. Importantly, those who successfully complete the programme are invited to undertake Fast Pass, a quicker route to Fast Stream selection.

As the SMC’s report highlights, certain roles can accelerate careers by increasing exposure to senior colleagues or giving access to high profile work or informal sponsorship opportunities. With four Fast Stream programmes in the AF, wider use of the SDIP would help support a more diverse talent pipeline into entry level roles across the function. The AF will be running an event for the current SDIP intake on 10 August. If you are an intern, or have an intern in your team, please contact analysis.function@ons.gov.uk for more information.

The AF is committed to understanding the current make-up of our function to identify ongoing under-representation, including of analysts from lower SEBs. The [AF Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#) outlines how we will begin to achieve the function’s vision to create a truly diverse and inclusive analysis

community that is reflective of the UK society we serve. A key aspect of this is the annual [AF D&I Survey](#), launched last month by Professor Sir Ian Diamond ([read more from Sir Ian about why this is so important](#)). I would encourage you to participate in this survey, which will help shape the AF's approach to inclusion, inequality and opportunity going forwards.