CAREER GUIDANCE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social mobility and graduate employment outcomes:
Risks and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic

September 2020

Dr William Donald is a [Research Scholar at the Ronin Institute, USA](#), and a Visiting Research Academic at Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, UK. He previously worked as a Graduate Recruiter for an Investment Bank in London before retiring on health grounds. He holds a PhD in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management. His research interests (from home when his health permits) include graduate employability, graduate employment, and sustainable graduate careers. His published works have more than [7,000 reads in 94 countries across 6 continents](#) and [92 citations.](#) You can contact Will via [LinkedIn](#) or by email at w.e.donald@gmail.com.

Introduction

A decade of fiscal austerity in the UK has seen [increased levels of inequality and reduced levels of social mobility](#) following the financial crisis of 2007-2008. This is despite flagship commitments from successive Prime Ministers during this time to tackle inequality and promote social mobility under their respective terms of office. Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in March 2020. What began as a public health crisis quickly became an economic crisis with record levels of government borrowing. As I previously wrote, I expect the impacts of such borrowing [to last for a decade or more](#).

This short article outlines some of the risks and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic presents to social mobility in the context of graduate employment. I draw on recent formal and informal discussions with stakeholders from across the graduate recruitment ecosystem and I am grateful to these individuals for sharing their experiences, expertise, and opinions with me.

Risks to social mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily forced many schools and universities to halt or significantly reduce their provision of face-to-face education. Where feasible, these educational institutions sought to offer online education as an alternative; however, digital poverty meant that some students lacked the necessary technology (e.g. laptop, fibre broadband) to participate. The students whose educational development suffered the most tended to come from [more ethnically diverse and/or lower socioeconomic backgrounds](#). Additionally, findings from before the pandemic indicated that higher education tends to [promote immobility rather than facilitating mobility.](#) As more people graduate, the percentage of their peers who hold a degree increases, and the value of the degree certificate itself diminishes accordingly. This is at odds with the expectation that participation in higher education acts as a vehicle for social mobility and leads to enhanced employment outcomes and increased lifetime earnings for all graduates.

The next risk comes from the potential for organisations to focus their attraction efforts on smaller in-person events at fewer universities than before the pandemic due to social distancing guidelines. If

decisions concerning target universities are decided based on league table rankings and existing relationships then it is highly likely that the students who are denied access to networking opportunities the most will be from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds due to an underrepresentation of diverse students at some high-ranking universities. This could lead to further inequality than has already been seen following a decade of fiscal austerity and the reduction or closure of key career support services for young people.

Another risk comes from the increased competition for graduate vacancies, as demand will continue to rise while short-medium term opportunities decline. Internship opportunities reduced as 61% of employers cancelled all or some of their vacancies and there were fewer entry-level roles available as companies put workers on furlough or made people redundant. Those from the poorest backgrounds are likely to suffer the most due to reduced opportunities to gain experience as social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, market-value capital and wider skillset become even more important to determining ones' employability and employment outcomes. Furthermore, if organisations seek work-ready interns to operate in a virtual work environment then existing levels of experience may carry greater weight. Those applicants from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to have had opportunities to gain work experience through family connections or the private education network of contacts, particularly if these opportunities were unpaid and not officially advertised. The cruel thing here is that as these more affluent applicants avoid deselection and form a larger part of the internship cohort, the greater their access to further contacts and experience becomes, thus locking out applicants from less advantaged backgrounds from future graduate vacancies. Reductions in temporary work opportunities will also disproportionately affect those students who rely most on such income to fund living costs during their degree studies.

A final risk comes from the application and hiring process being stacked against less affluent applicants. As application numbers rise, applicants from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to be discriminated against, whether this is the name on their CV, algorithms that unintentionally discriminate, a lack of diversity on the hiring panel leading to unconscious bias, or a myriad of other aspects. Unfortunately, we have already seen the A-Level algorithm debacle whereby lines of code forming algorithms lead to clear discrimination against students from less advantaged schools. Thankfully, on this occasion, public pressure against such discrimination saw teacher-based predicted grades awarded instead. However, what happens when organisations apply algorithms more aggressively and unconscious bias goes undetected and unchallenged? For applicants that progress through the application phase, the transition to a virtual assessment process is likely to present further barriers to equality of opportunity. Applicants may not have the necessary technology (e.g. laptop, broadband internet connection) and therefore either be prevented from participating or undergoing assessment while attempting to participate using a mobile phone and a 3G internet connection. Finally, virtual working from home may further disadvantage people living in larger households and lacking privacy or a suitable workspace.

Opportunities to enhance social mobility

However, not all is lost in the ongoing battle for social mobility because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Opportunities to enhance social mobility exist and perhaps encouragingly 29% of employers reported that social mobility and socio-economic diversity would be more of a priority in the next two years (compared to 11% saying less). Organisations that embrace social mobility in their attraction and hiring processes are likely to benefit from increased levels of innovation, a better reflection of their client base, a greater number of role models to facilitate future attraction. This greater diversity of views

and life experiences within the workforce is likely to lead to retention of staff, increased profitability, and thus a greater chance of sustainability within the marketplace.

From an attraction perspective, a virtual setup offers graduate recruiters the opportunity to provide support and coverage to a wider range of university students. Organisations could redirect some of the resources saved in terms of time and money of not having to travel around the UK towards tailored targeting and advertising directed at students from areas where the organisation has traditionally lacked representation in their intern and graduate hires. There is also the opportunity in a virtual world to work with specific groups of students from across multiple universities. For example, targeting students from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, from the LGBTQ+ community, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or students who live in specific postcode areas or cities through social media campaigns and collaboration with organisations that represent these specific groups. This would facilitate social mobility.

From an assessment perspective, as the Head of a University Careers Service said to me a couple of weeks ago, the purpose of an internship should be for students to gain experience. So stop looking for and hiring people who already possess the necessary skills and experience, and instead actively focus on broadening the reach and purpose of internship programmes to offer such opportunities to a wider diversity of applicants. Participation in the internship process moulds and develops these interns and offers the organisation a pipeline of diverse talent. This pipeline can then translate into graduate hires and future leaders of the organisation, as well as aiding the attraction of additional applicants from similar backgrounds and life experiences.

In an article for the Summer 2020 Edition of the Student Employer, I called on employers to provide feedback to rejected candidates to help them to improve their future chances of securing employment and for organisations to review at the end of each recruitment cycle each of the stages at which a candidate can be rejected. Is there is a particular stage or stages in the application and assessment process where diverse applicants are being disproportionately rejected? If so, is this part of the process essential? What changes can address this? For example, name-blind CVs, relax A-Level criteria, promote diversity on the hiring panel (both in terms of assessment and development of materials) to reduce unconscious bias.

Applicants, and subsequently employees, can also benefit from the short-medium term transition from a face-to-face to a virtual setup. Candidates no longer need to travel multiple times to a specific office location during the assessment process, removing previously existing barriers of travel costs, overnight accommodation, and time taken away from casual work or studying. Virtual online internships also open up access to participation by removing the costs of commuting or living in expensive cities (e.g. London). Finally, organisations must make sure that internships are paid and the funding for this can again come from cost savings in terms of trains, planes, catering, hotels, freebies, printed materials, etc. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing organisations to adapt rapidly, now is the time to ensure that the changes made offer a net benefit to social mobility. For organisations that embrace such opportunities, I believe that the rewards will pay for themselves, and then some!

Over To You

Please let me know your thoughts in the comments section on whether you feel the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a lesser or greater level of social mobility and what you base your views on. What other opportunities exist for social mobility following the COVID-19 pandemic?