



UK Social Mobility Awards™

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Advancing Social Mobility in the UK

FINDINGS FROM THE UK SOCIAL
MOBILITY AWARDS 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organised by **Making the Leap.**

About this report

This report examines key activities, facilitators and barriers to advancing social mobility in 2020-21, as reported by private and public organisations who entered the 2021 UK Social Mobility Awards. Findings and recommendations are based on thematic analysis of all eligible entries to the awards. Since 2017, the UK Social Mobility Awards have recognised and celebrated employers and educational institutions working to advance social mobility. The awards are organised by Making the Leap, a London-based social justice charity. Founded in 1993, Making the Leap works with schools, young adults and employers to advance social mobility in the UK.

To learn more about the UK Social Mobility Awards, including the 2021 winners, please visit www.somo.uk.

About the author

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Since 2017, the UK Social Mobility Awards (SOMOs) have recognised and celebrated employers and educational institutions working to advance social mobility. The SOMOs are organised by Making the Leap, a London-based social justice charity. We believe that the SOMOs are a vital opportunity to raise awareness and encourage action to improve social mobility in the UK. Our vision is for **every employer and educational institution in the UK to have a social mobility plan**, which guides meaningful action to ensure **people from less advantaged groups can thrive no matter what their background or occupation**. By using this definition, we understand social mobility in broader terms than ‘the link between an individual’s income and occupation and that of their parents’.¹ Our definition is connected to wider understandings of social mobility, which include having a good standard of living and financial security.² The SOMOs focus on activities to achieve social mobility in these terms for people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs), with attention to the intersections between less advantaged SEBs and other types of disadvantage.

Overview of 2021 entrants

The majority of entrants to the 2021 awards were private sector organisations (70 per cent), with 30 per cent of entries from the public sector. In terms of specific sectors, the education, legal and professional services sectors were most represented in this year’s awards. Collectively, entrants employed just under one million employees. Over 8,000 pupils and over 300,000 undergraduates attended schools, colleges and universities who entered the awards. Social mobility initiatives in 2020-21 typically engaged young people from less advantaged SEBs, but there was considerable breadth and depth to entrants’ social mobility activities. Beneficiary groups included racially minoritised people,³ care-experienced young people, women, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, military veterans, refugees, asylum seekers and prison leavers.

Key findings

Based on thematic analysis of all eligible entries to the 2021 UK Social Mobility Awards, we explore the following questions:

- What did employers and educational institutions do to advance social mobility in 2020-21?
- What were the key facilitators and barriers to advancing social mobility in 2020-21?

We examine activities to advance social mobility in the approximate ‘order’ in which employers, educational institutions and people from less advantaged SEBs are likely to encounter them.⁴ This starts with **data collection** to understand the socio-economic diversity of a workforce or student body, followed by targeted actions to **reach, recruit, retain** and **promote** people from less advantaged groups. We also examine **advocacy** activities, through which organisations share and encourage best practice to promote social mobility to wider audiences. Our key findings and recommendations are presented below.

¹ Social Mobility Commission (2021) [Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers’ toolkit: cross-industry edition](#). London: Social Mobility Commission.

² PwC (2021) [Driving social mobility](#). London: PwC.

³ While the terms ‘Black and minority ethnic’ and ‘ethnic minority’ were typically used in SOMOs 2021 entries, we use the collective term ‘racially minoritised’ throughout the report.

⁴ Social Mobility Commission (2021) [Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers’ toolkit: cross-industry edition](#). London: Social Mobility Commission.

Key finding 1**Employers and educational institutions focused on reaching and recruiting young people from less advantaged SEBs.**

Entrants' activities in 2020-21 typically focused on the early stages of the employee pipeline, to reach and recruit young people from less advantaged SEBs and other marginalised groups. This focus is perhaps unsurprising, given the underrepresentation of people from less advantaged SEBs in sectors including law, professional services, finance and the media. Outreach work was conducted virtually during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and included raising awareness about career pathways, developing soft skills, providing exposure to work environments and supporting young people from less advantaged SEBs. To promote social mobility through recruitment, entrants offered multiple routes to employment (such as apprenticeships and paid internships), implemented inclusive hiring practices and delivered targeted employment programmes.

Key finding 2**To support retention, employers aimed to create more inclusive workplaces and to promote awareness around social mobility.**

Employers' actions to support retention focused on creating more inclusive workplaces and encouraging culture change. Staff networks and targeted mentoring programmes aimed to provide focused support for employees from marginalised groups, including those from less advantaged SEBs. To improve awareness of and support for social mobility, entrants celebrated 'socially mobile' employees as role models, while internal events provided space for employees to learn about social mobility. Where implemented, these initiatives reflected an understanding that promoting socio-economic diversity must be accompanied by efforts to ensure inclusive workplaces for employees from less advantaged SEBs.

Key finding 3**Key facilitators to advancing social mobility included the drive to make a difference, motivated leadership, collaboration and resources.**

A drive to make a difference was the first key facilitator for entrants working to advance social mobility – without this, meaningful commitments to social mobility or wider diversity and inclusion (D&I) work were unlikely. Examples of 'going against the grain' included more transparent work experience programmes, removing academic grade requirements, and voluntary CEO and senior leader pay cuts to ensure financial security for employees during the pandemic. Motivated junior and senior leaders were another driver of social mobility work. Effective leaders kept social mobility on their organisations' agendas, and collaborated with employees from less advantaged groups, across departments and with external partners to get the work done. Committing resources was also essential, from funding for targeted activities to hiring full-time staff to deliver social mobility, diversity and inclusion work.

Key finding 4**Best practice to advance social mobility included intersectional approaches and advocating for wider change.**

Among 2021 entrants, law firms and professional services firms were the most likely to demonstrate intersectional approaches to social mobility and to advocate for wider change. There were also notable examples from the retail, hospitality and higher education sectors, who adopted similar approaches. Intersectional approaches were rooted in understanding that being from a less advantaged SEB and one or more marginalised groups – including being racially minoritised, female, LGBTQ+, disabled and/or part of a religious minority – leads to multiple, compounding forms of disadvantage. To put intersectionality into practice, entrants embedded social mobility within a wider D&I strategy, collected data on SEBs alongside other background characteristics, promoted an intersectional understanding of social mobility and developed actions based on intersectional analysis and transparent reporting. Examples of external advocacy included engaging clients in social mobility work, participating in sector-wide initiatives and influencing wider audiences through events and resources for employers.

Recommendation 1**Robust data collection, analysis and reporting are needed to inform targeted social mobility work.**

Before employers and educational institutions take action to improve social mobility, they need to understand and define the problem(s) to be addressed – ideally using high-quality internal diversity data. Only around a third of entrants reported data collection activities in 2020-21 – although it is possible that ongoing data collection was not reported, or that entrants drew on external evidence regarding socio-economic diversity in their sectors. When collected internally, quantitative data on employees' SEBs and other background characteristics allow employers and educational institutions to understand how diverse (or not) their organisations are, and whether those from less advantaged SEBs have equal opportunities and fair outcomes. Meanwhile, qualitative data provide insights into perspectives, experiences and priorities for change among employees from less advantaged SEBs. The Social Mobility Commission's [toolkit on socio-economic diversity and inclusion](#) provides a valuable starting point for employers looking to measure SEBs, including the 'one key question' to ask.

Recommendation 2**More action is required to support the progression of employees from less advantaged SEBs.**

Activities to support progression were the least reported 'type' of social mobility work in 2020-21. Ensuring fair opportunities for promotion – including through positive action and targeted training and development opportunities – is a crucial element of advancing social mobility. From an employer perspective, there are important implications for retention, since employees are likely to seek opportunities elsewhere if they are not able to progress and develop. There are also clear links to the wider social mobility agenda. People from less advantaged SEBs are significantly underrepresented at the most senior levels in the UK, which cannot be addressed without targeted initiatives to facilitate progression and promotion throughout their careers. We were encouraged to see entrants engaging with initiatives specifically focused on equity of progression and socio-economic diversity, such as the [City of London Socio-Economic Taskforce](#), and we hope to see more examples of progression-related activities in future years.

Recommendation 3**Further action is needed to support employees from less advantaged SEBs, including those who are leading social mobility work.**

It was encouraging to see employers implementing initiatives to foster more inclusive workplaces. However, to support and retain those from less advantaged SEBs, it is also vital to improve employment conditions by ensuring financial security, job security and safe working environments. This is crucial if employers are to support a wider definition of social mobility, in which people from less advantaged groups can thrive no matter what their background or occupation. We were encouraged by entrants from the facilities management, hospitality and retail sectors who were improving employment conditions as Living Wage employers and who supported flexible working options. We hope to see more examples in future years.

Many of the individuals driving social mobility work were themselves from less advantaged SEBs and other marginalised groups. These individuals were rightly celebrated in SOMOs entries for their commitment and passion, and they should be supported to continue their valuable work. However, it is important to acknowledge that there may be 'triple labour' involved for employees in these positions: working to advance social mobility, overcoming barriers faced as members of marginalised groups, and fulfilling their actual day jobs. Strategies to support these leaders include treating social mobility and D&I work as part of (rather than 'above and beyond') full-time jobs, creating dedicated roles for social mobility and D&I work, and encouraging allyship and action from employees in more advantaged groups.