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Widening the gate? Advancing Social Mobility in 2021-22

Key Findings from the UK Social Mobility Awards 2022
Executive Summary

Organised by: **Making the Leap.**

About the executive summary

This executive summary presents headline findings from *Widening the gate? Advancing social mobility in 2021-22*. The full research report examines the work done by employers and educators to advance social mobility in the UK in 2021-22. Drawing on evidence submitted to the 2022 UK Social Mobility Awards, the report examines employer activities in three main areas: building the foundations, doing the work, and taking the lead. The report also explores social mobility activities among schools, colleges and universities to bridge the gap between education and employment, and to support transitions into work. Overall, we find that employers typically focused on 'widening the gate' and creating more socio-economically diverse workforces in 2021-22. A smaller number of employers worked to improve equity and inclusion for people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs).

About the UK Social Mobility Awards

The UK Social Mobility Awards (SOMOs) have recognised and celebrated UK employers and educators working to improve social mobility since 2017. The SOMOs are organised by Making The Leap, a London-based societal change charity which was founded in 1993 and works with schools, young adults, charities and employers to advance social mobility and race equity in the UK.

To learn more about the UK Social Mobility Awards, including the 2022 winners, please visit:

www.somo.uk.

About the author

Dr Padmini Iyer is the Head of Research and Advocacy at Making the Leap. A mixed-methods social researcher, her work has focused on inequities in education related to gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status in countries including the UK, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. Before joining Making The Leap, Padmini led UK-based research at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and worked on international research projects at the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford.

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Introduction

The UK Social Mobility Awards

Recent evidence indicates that there is a long way to go before socio-economic diversity, equity and inclusion are a reality in the UK.^{1,2,3,4,5} However, there are reasons for hope – awareness and engagement with social mobility is growing, and in 2022, more employers and educators than ever before entered the UK Social Mobility Awards (SOMOs).

Since 2017, the SOMOs have recognised and celebrated UK employers and educators working to improve social mobility. The SOMOs are organised by [Making The Leap](#), a London-based societal change charity. Founded in 1993, Making The Leap works with schools, young adults, charities and employers to advance social mobility and race equity in the UK.

Who entered the SOMOs in 2022?

In total, employers who entered the SOMOs in 2022 employed over 1 million people across the UK. These employers represented 15 employment sectors, with the highest proportion of entries from finance, law, media and professional services. This is consistent with previous years (with an increase in entries from the media industry), and reflects the sectors in which people from less advantaged SEBs are typically underrepresented.⁶ Importantly, there were also entries from employers in sectors where high numbers of people from less advantaged SEBs are employed, such as retail, facilities management, hospitality, and real estate. While they may not need to focus on increasing socio-economic diversity, employers in these sectors still play a vital role in advancing social mobility by delivering equitable outcomes and inclusive workplaces for people from less advantaged SEBs. This is particularly important since people from less advantaged SEBs are often underrepresented at senior levels in these sectors.

Among educators, the majority of entries came from schools and colleges, followed by universities and other organisations in the education sector. Entrants included non-selective state schools serving less advantaged pupils, grammar schools and independent schools. University entrants included post-1992 institutions which largely serve students from less advantaged SEBs, and Russell Group universities which typically have more advantaged student populations.⁷

Key findings from *Widening the gate? Advancing social mobility in 2021-22*

In our annual Key Findings Report, we examine *what* employers and educators did to advance social mobility in 2021-22, as well as *how* they did it – the challenges overcome, and the enabling factors that supported effective social mobility work. Findings are based on thematic analysis of all eligible entries to the 2022 SOMOs. In [the full report](#), we take an in-depth look at the work done by employers to **build the foundations** for effective social mobility work (through SEB data, strategy and leadership), to **do the work** across the employee journey (through outreach, recruitment, retention and progression activities), and to **take the lead** with advocacy work to raise awareness and encourage action social mobility. We also explore the work done by schools, colleges and universities to **bridge the gap** between education and employment, and improve outcomes for young people from less advantaged SEBs. Below, we present summary infographics and headline findings to highlight employers' and educators' activities to advance social mobility in 2021-22.

¹The Bridge Group (2022) [Bridging the gap: socio-economic diversity in the engineering sector: access, pay and progression](#). London: The Sutton Trust.

²Social Mobility Commission (2019). [Elitist Britain: the educational backgrounds of Britain's leading people](#). London: Social Mobility Commission.

³Department for Opportunities (2022) [The class pay gap: data and analysis 2022](#). London: Social Mobility Foundation.

⁴BDO UK (2022) ["Who you know" still impacting success at work](#). London: BDO UK.

⁵Levon, E., Sharma, D. & Ilbury, C. (2022) [Speaking up: accents and social mobility](#). London: The Sutton Trust.

⁶Social Mobility Commission (2019). [Elitist Britain: the educational backgrounds of Britain's leading people](#). London: Social Mobility Commission.

⁷The Sutton Trust (2021). [Universities and Social Mobility: Summary Report](#). London: The Sutton Trust.

What did employers do to advance social mobility in 2021-22?

Taking the lead

Just under half of the employers who entered the SOMOs reported **advocacy** activities to promote wider awareness and action social mobility in 2021-22. This included working with peers through sector-based initiatives, influencing wider audiences through events and campaigns, and producing resources to support other employers. Employers also demonstrated their commitment to social mobility through community-based action by supporting local businesses, social enterprises, and initiatives to address food poverty in 2021-22.

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Doing the work

The majority of employers focused on social mobility at the early stages of the employee journey through **outreach** and **recruitment** activities in 2021-22. This reflected continued efforts to 'widen the gate' and improve socio-economic diversity, particularly in sectors where people from less advantaged SEBs are underrepresented.

A growing number of employers reported activities to improve **retention** in 2021-22. This indicated an increasing awareness that socio-economic inclusion must be promoted alongside socio-economic diversity. Improving social mobility through **progression** initiatives was much less commonly reported by employers. Best practice in this area included more transparent promotion structures, internal recruitment, and targeted training and development opportunities.



Building the foundations

Nearly two-thirds of employers built the foundations for their social mobility work through **strategy and leadership**, through dedicated plans and/or governance structures. Social mobility was often incorporated into existing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Around a third of employers collected socio-economic background (SEB) **data** from their employees to inform their social mobility strategies. Where SEB data were collected – typically through annual DEI surveys or via HR systems – employers were able to identify gaps, prioritise key areas for intervention, and track progress towards social mobility targets.

In examples of best practice, employers published their SEB data in external DEI reports or class pay gap reports.

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Advocacy 47%

Progression 23%

Retention 53%

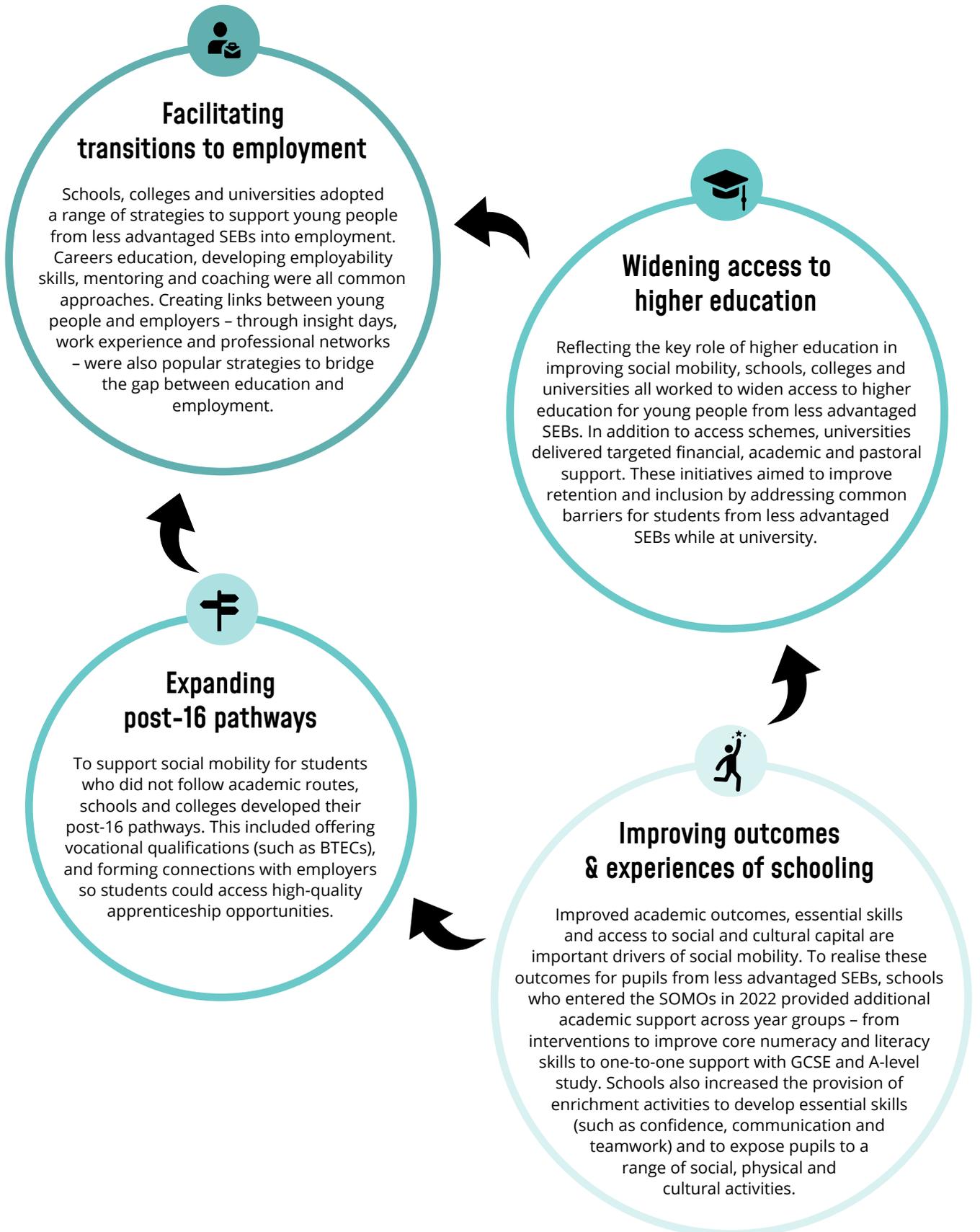
Recruitment 75%

Outreach 79%

Strategy & Leadership 63%

Data 39%

What did **educators** do to advance social mobility in 2021-22?



Key findings

Socio-economic diversity

Employers are focusing on ‘widening the gate’ through activities to reach and recruit people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs).

As in previous years, outreach activities were highly popular in 2021-22. Outreach work was reported by the majority of employers (79%), and reaching people from less advantaged SEBs was a priority in sectors where these groups were under-represented – from law, finance and professional services to media and technology. These employers worked with schools, colleges and universities to raise awareness about career pathways, develop employability skills, and offer exposure to workplaces.

A higher proportion of employers (75%) focused on recruitment activities to advance social mobility in 2021-22 compared to previous years. This reflected commitments to ‘widen the gate’ and increase socio-economic diversity across sectors which have traditionally employed those from more advantaged backgrounds. Key recruitment activities included targeted pathways for young people from less advantaged SEBs (social mobility apprenticeships, paid graduate programmes), and employment schemes for specific groups (care leavers, refugees and asylum seekers, and prison leavers). Employers also worked to make their hiring practices more inclusive. Strategies included removing academic entry requirements, and increased transparency and support during the application process. In examples of best practice, employers used a combination of contextualised and anonymised recruitment approaches. This facilitated positive action for people from less advantaged SEBs, while minimising bias during the hiring process.

Socio-economic inclusion

A growing number of employers are working to create more inclusive workplaces for staff from less advantaged SEBs.

Just over half of the employers (53%) who entered the SOMOs in 2022 reported activities to improve retention of staff from less advantaged SEBs. While employers were more likely to focus on socio-economic diversity than inclusion, activities to improve retention reflected a growing awareness that social mobility matters throughout the employee journey. This was true in sectors where people from less advantaged SEBs are under-represented, and sectors that typically employ high numbers of people from these groups such as retail, facilities management, construction, and hospitality. To create more inclusive workplaces, social mobility networks and employee resources groups (ERGs) were increasingly common. These groups were often staff-led, and provided spaces for employees from less advantaged SEBs to share experiences and seek support. Social mobility networks also acted as hubs for internal events and activities to raise awareness and understanding of social mobility across workplaces.

Socio-economic equity

Further action is needed to ensure fair progression opportunities, stable employment, and financial security for people from less advantaged SEBs

People from less advantaged SEBs continued to be underrepresented at senior levels across almost all UK sectors in 2021-22. However, less than a quarter of employers who entered the SOMOS (23%) focused on employee progression as a way to advance social mobility over this period. Data on employees’ SEB was essential to progression activities – all employers working on progression also reported collecting and using employee SEB data. These data played a key role in identifying underrepresentation at senior levels, and then taking action. Examples of progression initiatives included more transparent promotion structures, internal recruitment processes, and targeted training and development opportunities for people from less advantaged SEBs.

Good working conditions – including financial security and stable employment – continued to act as a key driver of social mobility in 2021-22. Ensuring decent living standards for employees became all the more important in light of pressures from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, cost of living crisis, and energy crisis. While not commonly mentioned by employers who entered the SOMOs in 2022, there were employers taking action in this area. Examples included becoming accredited Living Wage Employers, increasing transparency around pay, and improving parental leave provisions. Employers also increased pay, introduced bonus schemes, and increased (or introduced) pay for those on work placements, apprenticeships and graduate schemes. Employers also increased pay, introduced bonus schemes, and increased (or introduced) pay for those on work placements, apprenticeships and graduate schemes.

Social mobility enablers

The most effective social mobility work is driven by employee SEB data, clear strategies to prioritise action, and committed leadership to drive change.

Employers' work to improve socio-economic diversity, equity and inclusion was increasingly driven by social mobility plans and strategies. Nearly two-thirds of employers (63%) developed or continued to implement social mobility plans in 2021-22, which were often embedded within existing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies. Employers also put leadership and governance structures in place to drive action and ensure accountability for achieving social mobility-related goals and targets. Examples of leadership included appointing senior sponsors to actively champion social mobility internally and externally, dedicated social mobility leads or teams to 'do the work', and more junior employees (often from less advantaged SEBs themselves) driving grassroots action on social mobility.

Employee SEB data was vital to drive evidence-based social mobility work – however, only 39% of employers reported collecting SEB data in 2021-22. This may have reflected employers' uncertainty about how to measure SEB in the workplace, and employee reticence about providing this information. To overcome these common challenges, employers used the [Social Mobility Commission's 'one question'](#) as a simple, reliable SEB measure and established trust by explaining why data were being collected and how they would be used. When collecting SEB data for the first time, anonymous one-off surveys helped to improve employees' comfort and familiarity with the process. Later on, employers introduced optional SEB questions linked to HR systems, which provided ongoing insights into retention and progression of employees from less advantaged SEBs. Once collected, SEB data supported effective social mobility work by allowing employers to understand where people from less advantaged SEBs were under-represented, more effectively target interventions to address identified gaps, and monitor the outcomes of these interventions. Consultations with staff from less advantaged SEBs were also an important mechanism to ensure social mobility work was informed by their experiences and priorities for change.