Social mobility and fair access to the accountancy profession in the United Kingdom

Duff, Angus

Published in:
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal

DOI:
10.1108/AAAJ-10-2012-1133

Published: 19/06/2017

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Social mobility and Fair Access to the accountancy profession in the United Kingdom: Evidence from Big Four and mid-tier firms

Abstract

Purpose. This paper considers how Big Four and mid-tier accountancy firms in the United Kingdom (UK) are responding to political concerns about social mobility and Fair Access to the accountancy profession.

Design/methodology/approach. Interviews were undertaken with 18 public accountancy firms, ranked in the Top 30 by fee income, operating in the UK to identify how they are recruiting staff in the light of the Fair Access to the Professions' agenda. Bourdieusian sociology is used to inform the findings.

Findings. The Big Four firms employ a discourse of hiring 'the brightest and the best' to satisfy perceived client demand, where symbolic capital is instantiated by *reputational capital*, reflecting prestige and specialisation, supported by a workforce with elite credentials. For mid-tier firms, *reputational capital* is interpreted as the need for individuals to service a diverse client portfolio. In general, most interviewees demonstrated relatively limited awareness of the issues surrounding the Fair Access agenda.

Research implications/limitations. The interviews with accountancy firms are both exploratory and cross-sectional. Furthermore, the study was undertaken at an embryonic point (2010) in the emerging Fair Access discourse. Future work considering the accountancy profession could usefully examine if, and how, matters have progressed.

Social implications. The investigation finds accountancy firms remain relatively socially exclusive, largely due to the requirement for high educational entry standards, and interviewees' responses indicate generally only limited attempts at engagement with political agendas of promoting Fair Access to the profession.

Originality/value. The paper: is the first to empirically evaluate how the accountancy profession is responding to the Fair Access agenda; documents changing patterns of recruitment in accountancy employment, including the hiring of non-graduates to undertake professional work; and augments the literature considering social class and accounting.

1. Introduction

> But the two classes (the educated and uneducated) so beheld in contrast, might they not seem to belong to two different nations?
>
> (Foster, 1820 cited in the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Quotations)

The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (US) have the lowest levels of social mobility in the western world and the gap between rich and poor in these two nations continues to widen (Björklund and Jäntii, 2009; Clegg Report, 2011; Francis and Wong, 2013). Social mobility can be thought of as the extent to which an individual's childhood circumstances mirror their future success in life, or the ability of an individual to succeed based on their talent, motivation, and opportunity. Furthermore social mobility is identified as declining in the UK, while remaining static in the US (Blanden et al., 2005; Reay, 2008).

In 2005, the then Labour government in the UK commissioned the Langlands Report focusing on access to higher education as the gateway to the professions, rather than the professions themselves. Subsequent to Langlands (2005), the New Opportunities White Paper (2009) was published that considered the role of social mobility and its role in determining prosperity and social justice. Following on from these efforts, the influential Fair Access to the Professions report (frequently referred to as the Milburn Report, 2009) identified the barriers to entry to, and accessibility of, the professions. In a similar fashion, the subsequent Conservative-led Coalition government has produced its own social mobility policy document (Clegg Report, 2011), the content of which echoes much of the Milburn Report (2009) and uses a similar evidence base [i]. Universities themselves remain the focus of social mobility debate where highly selective, elite research academies have been consistently censured for their lack of progress in encouraging wider access (Milburn Report, 2012) [ii].

Specifically, Milburn Report (2009) identifies accountancy as the profession, or occupational group, that has suffered the greatest decline in social mobility over the past thirty years. Accountants born in 1958 spent their childhood in families with an income level around that of the national average; those born in 1970 grew up in a family with an income some 40% above the national average.

This paper focuses on the concept of access to the accountancy profession, by studying public accountancy firms. Eighteen accountancy firms, classified as Big Four or mid-tier, were interviewed in 2010, one year subsequent to the publication of the Milburn Report (2009), to understand their approach to recruitment and their understanding of, and response to, Fair Access and social mobility.

The accountancy industry enjoys an influential market position as a financial intermediary with global reach and a diverse portfolio of service lines by virtue of its status as a profession allowing it to maximise rewards and exercise market control. This is accentuated by its monopoly on public interest audits of clients that are undertaken for the benefit of society, rather than the very clients who remunerate it. However, some commentators argue that the legitimacy the public interest stance requires it to remain representative of the public it purports to serve (Jacobs, 2003, Milburn Report, 2009). Consequently, the development of the Fair Access agenda represents a potential legitimacy crisis for the profession.

Accounting-related professional services have consistently been the largest recruitment sector for graduate talent. High Flyers (2015) identifies that in 2016, accountancy firms will have in excess of 4,600 vacancies making it the industry or business sector with the largest number of vacancies (compared to the public sector with 3,700 vacancies or investment banking with 1,800 positions). The importance of accountancy to the graduate employment market cannot be understated. At the same time, the accountancy industry in the UK is recruiting increased numbers of school-leavers either to: a professional traineeship or to a technician level qualification followed by professional qualification. Higher education no longer provides the sole entry route to UK chartered accountancy today.

A vigorous political debate surrounding widening access to higher education and the professions has taken place (e.g. Clegg Report, 2011; Hall, 2009; PARN, 2009; Milburn Report, 2009; Sullivan, 2010). However, despite a significant literature documenting the intersection of diversity and accounting employment, there is a paucity of work that addresses social mobility and accountancy. However, accounting history literature documents the affluent and exclusive nature of accountancy employment (Kitchen and Parker, 1980; Anderson and Walker, 2009; Parker, 1980; 1986).

The objectives of this paper are three-fold: first, to provide empirical evidence of UK public accountancy firms' early response to the Fair Access to the Professions agenda; second, to provide some contextual evidence of the accountancy field relevant to issues of social mobility; and third, to critique their response in the light of other developments within the accountancy profession. It achieves this by the use of interview-based evidence elicited from 18 accountancy practices, including each of the Big Four and the next seven largest firms in terms of fee income, in 2010. The analysis is directed at firms' recruitment practices, in recruiting graduates, school-leavers and interns and also at the different types of accounting qualification available. The paper utilises the sociological theories of Bourdieu, particularly his theory of capitals and habitus.

2. Context and theoretical framework

The public accountancy profession

In most developed countries, the accountancy profession is almost exclusively a graduate one. For example, Global Accounting Alliance (GAA) members usually require trainees to possess a degree with a substantial accounting content[iii]. An exception is the UK where the three Institutes of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), in Ireland (CAI), and of Scotland (ICAS) have a relatively small intake of non-graduates ranging from 2% to 22% in 2013 (POB, 2015)[iv]. In addition, the UK bodies do not require graduates to hold an accountancy degree: 33% of the intake of CAI, ICAEW, and ICAS possess a relevant degree (POB, 2015) although significant variation exists between Ireland and Britain[v].

Each Big Four firm recruits graduates in substantial numbers, often with two intakes per annum. In 2014, the combined intake to CAI, ICAEW, and ICAS was over 7,500 students (POB, 2015). An important selection tool historically employed by the firms is the possession of sufficient Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points, i.e., school-based rather than university-based academic performance[vi]. A consequence of the use of school-based performance measures is to concentrate recruitment within more prestigious universities and to recruit fewer trainees from lower-income backgrounds (Burkham and Lee, 2002; Feinstein, 1999, 2003). For example, the Sutton Trust (2010, p.8) identify that 'the proportion of students from poorer areas and lower social classes at top research-led universities, in particular, remains very low'[vii]. Consequently, a focus on academic performance at school results in selecting individuals from high prestige universities and a disproportionately large share from middle and high-income backgrounds with independent schooling[viii].

Major accounting firms traditionally recruit graduates on the basis of strong school performance (Gammie, 2000; Harvey-Cook and Taffler, 1987), degree classification (Gammie, 2000; Harvey-Cook and Taffler, 1987); relevant accounting work experience (Gammie, 2000), and various school-related factors, such as being a Head Boy or Girl, or participation in societies and clubs (Harvey-Cook and Taffler, 1987; Jacobs, 2003). At face value, when firms interview only 10% of applicants (Gammie, 2000), selection on the basis of school and university performance and select extra-curricular activities may appear equitable and meritocratic. However, in the case of applicants from lower social classes and under-represented groups, biometric selection leads to significant disadvantage, expressed by limited access to resources and effective teaching (Reay et al., 2005). It is also worth noting that Gammie's (2000) study of the population of ICAS students from 1993 to 1995 did not find school performance to be a useful predictor of success in professional examinations. According to Sutton Trust (2011, p.3) 'independent school pupils are nearly seven times as likely as pupils in comprehensive schools to be accepted into Oxbridge' and 'independent school pupils are 55 times more likely than FSM (free school meals) pupils to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge' (Sutton Trust, 2010) [ix]. Cook et al. (2012, p.1755) identify that in 2006, '16% of students entering Russell Group universities and 9% entering Oxford and Cambridge were from lower socioeconomic groups'. In a similar vein, Francis and Hutchings' (2013 p.3) large scale survey of parental choices identifies that:

> Social class and income distribution remain the strongest predictors of both educational achievement and life outcomes. Despite government hopes, education does not generally predict social mobility; children from low income families tend to have lower attainment than their more affluent peers when they begin school.

Different entry routes into UK accountancy

The education of accountants has long been a contested territory. Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933, p.223) note:

> 'The present system of education', writes a Chartered Accountant of some standing, 'is far from satisfactory.'… …The universities play no part in the scheme, except in Scotland, except that graduates are exempt two years articles; and the dearth of proper places of instruction makes the accountancy profession the happy hunting ground of coaching institutions.

In some ways, the problems identified eighty years ago still persist. Much professional accounting education required by accountancy 'qualifying bodies' (Millerson, 1964) is delivered outside universities by private training companies and to increasing numbers of non-relevant graduates: a stark contrast to most other GAA countries. Gammie and Kirkham (2008) document ICAS' move to re-open a school-leaver entry route, previously closed by the Institute as a consequence of ICAS (1970) (the Charles Report). Indeed Gammie and Kirkham (2008, p.357) consider it 'a retrograde step for an Institute wishing to position itself at the forefront of the accountancy profession'. and identify the commercial motives behind the school-leaver entry in protecting its future income stream (p.358). In an analysis of the English chartered accountancy profession with its relatively low intake of accountancy graduates, Annisette and Kirkham (2007) view the separation of academy and practice as mutually beneficial to universities and the profession. The profession benefits from universities as a major user of graduate talent, while university departments of accountancy remain relatively free from the constraints of accreditation.

In modern times, recruitment into professional positions in the UK accountancy industry has focused largely on graduates. Table 1 reports the percentage of student members of the three UK chartered accountancy institutes, focusing on training in professional practices, holding a degree. Graduates represent the largest group for all three professional bodies, especially those institutes located in Ireland and Scotland. However, the English and Welsh institute (ICAEW) reports a declining proportion of graduate student members from 95% in 1998 to 78% in 2014 (POB, 2015) The decreased proportion of graduate entrants reflects the rise of modern apprenticeships and the increased profile of the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) that provides a vocational route into accountancy[x xi]. AAT has produced a steady increase in student applications over the past two decades with 27,605 new student registrations in 2015 (AAT, 2016). In turn, holders of the AAT qualification become eligible to study for the qualifications of the three chartered accountancy institutes. Although AAT are unable to provide details of the numbers of students formally undertaking a modern apprenticeship or progressing to the examinations of other professional accountancy bodies carrying chartered status, it seems likely that the decreased proportion of graduate students for the ICAEW qualification reflects increased numbers of AAT students.

Table 1 here

In essence, six routes exist today into qualifying as an accountant within accountancy practice in the UK. First, the traditional graduate entry scheme whereby after three years of self-funded university study the individual undertakes three years paid work and study, qualifying as an accountant and securing a professional accountant's salary. Second, a school-leaver scheme, whereby the participant takes four years to complete the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants' (ACCA) qualification. Third, an alternative school-leaver scheme, where the individual studies for two years for the AAT qualification and then three years for the Chartered Accountant (A/CA) qualification. Fourth, another hybrid of school-leaver scheme whereby the entrant starts to study for the A/CA qualification. Fifth, there are partnership degree programmes whereby the trainee studies for an firm-designed undergraduate degree in accountancy and then the Chartered Accountants' qualification, all in all, taking five years to qualify. Finally, firms also train school-leavers, and graduates, pursuing careers in consulting to study for equivalent financial qualifications offered by, for example, the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)[xii].

As accountancy firms generally demand excellent school results on the basis that these are correlated with performance in professional examinations but also social class in the sense that independent schools and state schools in more affluent districts produce better school results, the traditional graduate route is detrimental to the aims of Fair Access. The relationship between the Fair Access agenda and the school-leaver routes is more complex. Analysis of the Big Four's student/school-leaver recruitment literature reveals that Deloitte, Ernst & Young, and KPMG recruit school-leavers with 260 UCAS points on an A/CA training route but seek a minimum of relative 320 UCAS points from graduates; PwC seek 280 UCAS points from school-leavers relative to 320 UCAS points from graduates (Deloitte, 2015; EY, 2015; KPMG, 2015; PwC, 2015). Thus, school-leavers are recruited with a lower-level of school performance than graduates. In theory then, the school-leaver routes should have the ability to increase social mobility be recruiting cohorts from schools with a lower aggregate level of exam performance from typically less affluent locales. However, this is contentious as firms may equally hire entrants from middle-class backgrounds with poorer results relative to their peers going to university.

The first partnership degree programme ('Flying Start') was piloted by PwC, the largest accountancy firm in the UK, in conjunction with Newcastle University in 2002. Flying Start was recently extended to Nottingham and Reading universities. Essentially, partnership degrees allow firms to intervene in their employees' education at an early stage in their careers (Jephson, 2013 p.131). Significantly, the scheme came into existence when tuition fees for university students in England were capped at just £1,000 per annum (p.a.), relative to the £9,000 p.a. charged today, suggesting the motivation for the partnership model wasn't to inspire people from poor economic backgrounds to attend University, deterred as a consequence of future debt. The firm's Head of Student Recruitment comments on Flying Start's ten-year anniversary:

> For us as an employer, sponsoring degree programmes makes good business sense. The cost is 40 per cent less to train students to qualification level on our Flying Start programme than it is on our mainstream graduate programme. Cost effective recruitment enables us to recruit a larger number of graduates and makes the course sustainable year after year. (PwC, 2013)

Consequently, the historic impetus for the partnership scheme is to reduce training costs: an entirely rational motivation for a for-profit organisation. KPMG have latterly established a similar scheme with Birmingham and Durham universities, again with a mix of studying at university and work placement and taking six years to qualify [xiii]. By the same token, Ernst & Young have a comparable training programme with Lancaster University [xiv]. Notably these schemes are partnered with high status universities who are themselves under fire for the socially exclusive nature of their recruitment policies and their poor track record in Fair Access[xv].

In summary, a variety of routes now exist to training as a Chartered Accountant. Traditional graduate routes still dominate, although there is a growing trend towards school-leaver routes and partnership schemes. It isn't clear how the partnership routes have the potential to increase Fair Access, other than transferring university fees from student to employer. As university fees are believed to be a significant barrier to access to higher education for working-class students in theory it should improve Fair Access. The school-leaver routes appear to have the potential to increase access from a wider section of the population with less rigid emphasis on school-based performance that has hitherto been advantageous to largely middle-class students attending academically successful state and independent schools. An analysis of recent Big Four recruitment policies suggests school-leavers are hired with significantly lower school-results.

Social mobility mythology

The Milburn Report (2009, p.43) identifies folklore as a barrier to Fair Access and identifies five common myths they encountered during the development of their work. These myths they claim represent 'excuses for a status quo that is not sustainable or acceptable as professions expand'. As Crawford et al. (2011, p.1) identify, 'the political problems of social mobility – implying downward mobility for individuals from rich/middle class families – should not be underestimated.'

The five 'Milburn myths' are as follows. The first is that social disparities are a function of genetics; that is, the progeny of the elite are more intelligent than their less well-off peers. This assertion is strongly countered by extant literature (e.g., Milburn Report, 2009; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997, 2001; Breen and Jonsson, 2005) that suggests environmental issues are more significant and create complex interactions with genetics.

A second myth is that qualifications provide the best guide to aptitude. This is countered by significant study that suggests that non-cognitive skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication, so-called softer skills, are as important as traditional cognitive skills acquired as part of formal qualifications (e.g., Borghans et al., 2008; Bowles and Gintis, 2002). The emphasis on non-cognitive skills reflects the cultural capital these bestow on their holders which are valorised within the educational system and labour market (Wilborg and Mobørg, 2010). Contemporary research in audit skills identifies the importance of these softer skills (ICAS/FRC, 2016). A concurrent debate in the profession is that the growth of new technologies and 'big data' requires different types of audit staff:

> As a profession we have too much recruited on the calibre of individuals who can pass their exams first time. Across the board, we [now] need to have people skills as a pre-requisite. (Hywel Ball, managing partner for assurance at Big Four firm EY, cited in Economica, 2015)

Collectively these findings might suggest the rigid emphasis on technical skills assessed by professional accounting examinations that are correlated with school-based qualifications is less appropriate than was once the case.

Third is a belief that increasing social mobility is a means of 'dumbing down' where less well-qualified, less suitable individuals from diverse backgrounds are included at the expense of more suitable, traditional individuals: despite the over-representation of a social elite within the professions. The business of recruiting to an exclusive accountancy profession focuses on the necessary capital, usually evidenced by the elite education and an ability to 'fit in'. The construction of an 'old boys' network of demographically similar individuals representing a social elite assumes a narrow definition of 'what good looks like'. It is likely that moves to increase social mobility within the accounting profession are likely to be decried as a decline in standards given the prominence in prior work that considers the role of image and presentation of the self in accounting (Alvesson, 2001; Duff, 2011; Empson, 2001, 2004; Grey, 1998; Picard et al., 2014).

A concern that 'bright people lose out to less bright people' is the fourth Milburn myth. Any move to encourage diversity, in its various forms, reflects positive discrimination. Using quotas or other artificial means to provide opportunities for people from less affluent backgrounds is believed to create inequality and resentment and be counter-productive in the medium-term (see Fitzsimmons, 2013; Jonsen *et al*., 2011 for recent reviews).

The final issue relates to professional self-regulation. The Milburn Report (2009 p.45) states that professions should take 'ownership and responsibility for self-regulating and maintaining their high ethical standards' to deliver 'high quality services'. It implores professions to make themselves more representative of society, as professionals with varied life experiences are better placed to address the challenges of an increasingly complex society. It proposes there is a strong 'business case' for professions acting to encourage Fair Access, suggesting that this is in their own best interests.

Bourdieusian social analysis

To understand the nature of change in the accounting profession a Bourdieusian social analysis is adopted. In particular, the social perspectives of Bourdieu are useful as they represent a means of bridging the gap between agency and structure issues (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992. Recently researchers have suggested that Bourdieusian perspectives have the ability to illustrate the informal mechanisms that allow professions to reproduce elites (Cook et al., 2012; Carter and Spence, 2014; Spence et al., 2014).

Bourdieu's work is described as multi-level with three distinct levels, each with their own conceptual tools: capital; habitus; and field. For Bourdieu, society is made up of social *fields*. A field represents a social space, where agents compete with varying and inequitable amounts of *capital* (stakes). The manner in which this contest is conducted is referred to as *practice*. Accounting can be thought of as a field in a Bourdieusian sense reflecting its differentiation from other fields by processes of legitimation (Bourdieu,

1998) and has been applied in the social dynamics of the accounting profession (Lee, 1995, 2001; McPhail et al., 2010).

Beyond field, *capital* represents an important element of Bourdieusian analysis, where different forms of capital combine and substitute for one another (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital is the 'energy of social physics' (Bourdieu, 1990 p.122). Notably, Bourdieu outlines the social and symbolic space that locates social and economic groupings, where their differential economic and cultural capitals will determine their lifestyle and social status (Bourdieu, 1998). Fields then have actors with different quantities and qualities of capital creating a tendency to align themselves towards conserving the distribution of capital, or campaign against this distribution (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p.108).

Habitus links the concepts of field and capitals and can be thought of as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles that organise practices and representations' (Bourdieu, 1990 p.53). The acquisition of a constellation of different capitals in different measure is equivalent to the development of a habitus. Therefore those who have acquired the requisite capitals may develop the desired habitus to succeed in a particular field. The habitus of an organisational or professional actor therefore becomes attached to the organisational or professional field in which they operate. This paper considers the habitus of trainee accountants in terms of the different constellation of capitals sought by recruiters of accountancy labour. These trainees are the future accountancy profession and, in slender numbers, will comprise the ranks of future partners (owners) of the firms. This investigation then complements recent interpretative work examining the habitus of Big Four partners on a transnational scale (Spence et al., 2014, 2015; Spence and Carter, 2014).

Specifically, Bourdieu distinguishes between three species of capital, each with their own subtypes. These three capitals are: *economic; cultural;* and *social* (Bourdieu, 1986). Alongside these lies symbolic capital, that arises from the three primary forms of capital and is closely linked to habitus. Economic capital is represented by tangible financial and property assets and material wealth (Bourdieu, 1998). Cultural capital is described by a gamut of cultural knowledge and possessions such as educational qualifications and informational resources. Cultural capital in the form of speech, dress, and behaviour is used as distinguishing between those able to present a professional demeanour and those deemed unsuitable for professional work (Sommerlad, 2008). Social capital consists of an individual's social network and their identity within that social network.

These elementary forms of capital then create a compound form of capital usually specific to an individual field, e.g., scientific capital (Bourdieu, 2004) or journalistic capital (Bourdieu, 1998). The three elementary forms of capital combine to create a compound form of capital specific to the field being studied. In this sense, capitals represent a form of 'transubstantiated bundle of social energy' (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013 p.125) which have the ability to be converted into economic capital. This capital conversion is dependent of factors such as: the dominant agents and gatekeepers; the relationships between social fields; and the existence of specific circumstances. In the context of accountancy, the ability of a firm to charge premium fees is a function of its reputation. Consequently, the creation of reputational capital (Hanlon, 1998), a form of symbolic capital and conceived of as an intangible asset, is significant to the success of the firm and its partners (Hanlon, 2004). That is reputational capital converts to economic capital in terms of profit per partner or other similar metrics.

For the purposes of this paper, two elementary forms of capital are identified: social; and cultural. However, the role of economic capital should not be underplayed as to acquire either cultural or social capital, often the individual requires economic capital to be able to afford school fees and participate in the kinds of extra-curricular activities that provide access to social capital.

Accountancy firms are knowledge-intensive organisations where the majority of its assets occur in intangible or intellectual forms expressing the abilities and knowledge of their people (i.e., partners and employees) and the quality of their knowledge infrastructure. In turn firms use these intangible assets to create *reputational capital* (Hanlon, 2004) allowing them to charge premium fees for professional services relative to other suppliers with lower levels of reputational capital. Furthermore, recent work in the accountancy field emphasises that 'not all capitals are equal' with the supremacy of the commercial (making money) over the technical (possessing exclusive knowledge) (Spence et al., 2014 p.910).

Social capital

Social capital reflects how social agents relate to each other or create productive networks. In particular, prior work in accountancy documents the importance of networking to the acquisition of social capital and consequent career success (Carter and Spence, 2014; Dirsmith and Covalski, 1985).

The employment experience within accountancy firms is structured by institutional forces that emphasise the role of shared values, trust, and homology (Hanlon, 2004). In this sense the firm reproduces itself in that the children of those who occupy privileged and dominant positions, such as partners of leading accountancy firms, naturally ascend to similar positions, while the offspring of the dominated remain in less privileged positions (Bourdieu, 1973). So the forces of reproduction remain established (Webb et al., 2002).

The significant temporal commitment required of staff and partners in public accountancy has been identified (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001, Grey, 1998). Traditional outsiders such as women and ethnic minorities may not fit within the firm unless they undergo an identity transformation (Crompton and LeFeuvre, 1992; Hanlon, 2004).

Cultural capital

Cultural capital exists in three forms: an embodied state, i.e., in the mind and body; in an objectified state, e.g., in cultural goods such as books, photographs, and pictures; and an institutionalised state such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). In particular, social mobility theorists conceptualise cultural capital as being instantiated by non-cognitive traits that are highly regarded in the workplace (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). In the context of the accountancy firm, successful employees will be expected to display embodied states of cultural capital exemplified in speech, dress and sense of style (Haynes, 2012), technical expertise and client management skills (Carter and Spence, 2014) and possess institutionalised states by the possession of academic qualifications from the 'right' universities (Anderson-Gough et al., 1998, 2001; Grey, 1998). The person who invests time in the creation of institutionalised states of cultural capital in the form of education is rewarded with better remuneration, higher status, and the opportunity for greater self-actualisation (Coleman, 2000). Over the past quarter century such institutionalised states of cultural capital creation through educational initiatives are said to 'have been transformed' to now represent 'a prime area of government activity' (Keep and Mayhew, 2010 p.565) where education and training have become a panacea for a range of social and economic woes (Leitch Review, 2005, 2006), beyond social mobility.

The socialisation of professional accountants' literature documents that firms value the importance of dress sense, appearance, and the people with whom one may converse (Alvesson, 2001; Empson, 2001; Grey, 1998). Public displays of peer-regulated behaviour and appearance in the accountancy firm are considered more important than displays of technical ability (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001, Grey, 1998).

Symbolic capital

Symbolic capital in the form of prestige and reputation is acquired by those who have 'successfully accumulated those forms of capital most highly valued by the surrounding field' (Spence *et al.*, 2015, p.949). A belief that a firm possesses these qualities allows it to charge premium fees in relation to other suppliers and compete profitably with other firms and alternative suppliers such as consultancies or investment banks. In particular, the nature of modern-day financial services market places 'reputational capital at the apex of selling complex products in professional markets' (Hanlon, 2004 p.190).

Historically reputational capital related to an individual, but during the first few decades of the twentieth century when the annual audit became a steady fee earner or 'cash cow' for accountancy firms (Anderson and Walker, 2009) the market for accountancy services separated into high and low status providers. Consequently, reputational capital moved its locus closer to the firm rather than individual partners (Hanlon, 2004). Companies keen to signal their financial quality to sceptical investors did so by appointing high status auditors and accountants. The high-low status dichotomy has been a continuous feature of all professions and has been proposed as the motivation for professional organisation in the nineteenth century (Larson, 1977). MacDonald (1995) notes that between 1879 and the outbreak of the First World War, 26 bills were drafted concerning the registration of accountants or protection of the term 'Chartered Accountant'. The commercial importance of auditing to the firms, had the effect of placing greater focus on the reputation of the firms, rather than individual partners (Hanlon, 2004). This process was accentuated by a steady process of consolidation within the industry in the twentieth-century to create the eventual Big Four.

Collectively these three capitals, informed by the critical and interpretative literature, are summarised in Figure 1. Specifically, the social and cultural capital possessed by entrants to the profession are used to create a field-specific symbolic capital, reputational capital that may be conferred on those with access to the correct social networks and their embodied and institutionalised cultural capital. That is a constellation of capitals that allow the development of a successful habitus in the field. Prior studies of the accountancy field allude to cultural differences between Big Four and mid-tier firms (e.g., Empson, 2004) suggesting that this symbolic reputational capital may be experienced in different forms. That is, the habitus of the Big Four and mid-tier is likely to be different.

Figure 1 here

Methodology

Interviews were undertaken with senior officers within UK accountancy firms between July 2010 and October 2010. Interviews were from 18 different accountancy firms, with interviews arranged by making direct contact with the firm. The intention was to gain perspectives from Big Four and mid-tier firms, identified from the AccountancyAge survey (2010) – see table 1. Job titles have been anonymised for the purposes of confidentiality.

The market for accountancy services suffers from significant market concentration. For example, the firm ranked 20th according to AccountancyAge (2010) has only 1.2% of the fee income of the firm ranked first. Interviews were arranged with 18 of the largest 25 accountancy firms as classified by AccountancyAge (2010). All of the eleven largest firms were interviewed. These include the Big Four and the seven largest mid-tier firms, described as upper mid-tier. Six of the remaining seven firms were located in those firms ranked 12 to 20 per AccountancyAge (2010). The residual firm interviewed was categorised by AccountancyAge (2010) as within the 21-30 ranking by fee income category. These seven smaller firms ae defined as lower mid-tier. Table 2 provides a key to the firms interviewed.

Table 2 here

Interviews were conducted at the interviewees' own offices. Initial contact with the interviewee was by telephone followed up by email. Typically interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcriber. Prior to the commencement of the interview a statement of the objectives of the project and a list of possible discussion points and questions were provided to the interviewee. Interviewees themselves were largely drawn from a population of human resource managers or directors in the Big Four and largest mid-tier firms while in the smaller mid-tier firms, interviewees where largely the managing partners or chairmen of the firms involved in making policy decisions about recruitment. Consequently interviewees were directly involved in recruitment decisions and recruitment policy.

Findings

The findings of the investigation are presented under five related themes that came out of the interviews relating to the three objectives of the study and the Bourdieusian theory. The six themes are: (i) possession of capitals describing the qualities accountancy firms seek in trainees; (ii) firms' understanding of Fair Access to professions agenda; (iii) entry to the field describing training opportunities available to inexperienced hires; (iv) the social backgrounds of trainees; and (v) firms' involvement in schemes designed to enhance the employability of local school children.

Possession of capitals

In general, the largest firms tended to recruit the majority of their intake from a small band of universities. For Big Four firms a premium was set on Oxbridge students. The need to 'recruit the brightest and the best' (firm 1) talent or people, i.e., possessing institutionalised cultural capital, was frequently mentioned as the reason to recruit from 'leading' universities in order to remain a 'leading' firm. Alongside a good degree from a highly regarded institution, successful candidates needed excellent A-level performance, which skews intakes towards the privately-educated (Sutton Trust, 2010). This effect was most marked with the Big Four but the philosophy trickled down to the mid-tier as well. At the time interviews were undertaken, firms were trading in the wake of a global economic crisis whereby graduate employment had contracted in the previous two years[xvi]. This created a position whereby the Big Four could recruit 'high-flyers' normally aiming at more lucrative employment in investment banking and where mid-tier firms could hire the sorts of graduates that might normally hope for a training position in a Big Four firm. For example:

> An interesting dynamic of course which is playing at the moment which means that we can compete currently but we need to be alive to the fact that as and when markets do change and when things get more affluent and there are more jobs available etc., we may of course need to change our view on that. (firm 8)

The need for high levels of academic achievement was presented as axiomatic or taken-for-grated. Or put simply, without high educational attainment recruits could not pass the professional qualification and progress. A quality firm needed quality people as accountancy services are concerned with people, a 'brains business' (firm 13). Delivering a knowledge-intensive service to a client is an essentially anthropocentric process.

At the same time students with high educational attainment were not always seen as a wise investment by mid-tier firms; as a training contract became a means to a marketable qualification and a springboard to well-remunerated 'sexy' employment in an investment bank. Graduates from elite universities were not always seen as the most commercially-minded or gifted with the necessary 'common sense' or 'personality' to deal with a diverse portfolio of clients frequently encountered in mid-tier firms. Consequently the social and cultural capital created in elite universities could be at odds with the qualities required to make a good 'commercially-minded' accountant in the language of the mid-tier firm. For example:

> I suppose in the past we've found that Oxbridge students would typically tend to focus on the Big Four. We have tended to find that they are more academic, and perhaps less commercial, so it's more looking at institutions where we believe there are some great courses that generate a really rounded student that has the balance between intellect but also has some common sense and also quite a bit of personality and that represent the geography of [name of firm] as well so that we do try and make sure we go to universities across the country... ...so it's a fit for us rather than the top 20 in terms of university league table. (firm 7)

The term 'commercial' was referred to by the mid-tier in the sense that they sought individuals who could fit with the firm and its clients rather personifying an elite. This 'commercial' metaphor has potential to increase social inclusivity into firms as the idea of finding a 'really rounded student' is different to the business of hiring a student with 320 UCAS points after successful completion of psychometric tests. However, it is important to identify from recent literature that being commercially successful, rather than just technically excellent, is the route to partnership in a Big Four firm (Spence and Carter, 2014; Spence et al., 2015) and the significance given to 'business acumen' in auditing in complex environments (ICAS/FRC, 2016), the domain of the Big Four. All the firms interviewed needed to recruit considerable numbers of new entrants each year from universities, or in the case of an increasing number of mid-tier firms, direct from school. In the case of the Big Four firms, the annual university recruitment exercise would lead to the selection of over 1,000 graduates to commence training in several intakes. This was depicted as a time-consuming and exhaustive search, in competition with other firms and financial services employers for the best talent. The Big Four would benchmark themselves against each other to compare, for example, their relative Oxbridge intake, for example:

> Right well we, there is something called the professional services sub group of the London Benchmarking Group… …So the professional services get together, we look at how can we ensure that we have the same charge out fees that we charge, that we equate because it's costs to the firm rather than charge out fees so that we are using the same model so we do a lot of work on that. Similarly we can compare recruitment from Oxford and Cambridge universities. (firm 1)

However, it is important to recognise the mid-tier firms did not believe themselves to be inferior to Big Four firms in terms of the personnel they hired or made partners. Although the market for accountancy services in some respects means that, for example, assurance work for large corporates will only be conducted by Big Four firms, in other sub-fields, e.g., advisory work for non-profits, the mid-tier will compete with the Big Four. It is important then from the evidence of this study not to view the mid-tier in a deprecatory light. Thus the 'commercially-minded' are not inferior to the 'academically-gifted'. For example:

> We are very clear what we expect of our people. We have to operate in a very competitive market and we are competing against Ernst & Young and PwC and they are very demanding of the people they recruit and we are again pitching against them to get the same clients so we only win those clients and keep those clients if

> we do what we do at least as well as Ernst & Young and PwC. You can't achieve that unless you are recruiting people of a similar quality. (firm 17)

The implications of the concept of the 'commercially minded accountant' should facilitate greater access to the accountancy profession as commercial skills are used in all walks of life, e.g., market traders, self-employed tradesmen and shop-keepers possess such skills. Increasingly too such skills are now taught in schools and universities in enterprise education and training.

Understanding of Fair Access to the field

When the concept of Fair Access was broached with interviewees, relatively little understanding existed of what the term meant. Only one firm (firm 3) knew of the Fair Access to the Professions agenda, having a partner who served on its working group. The others had relatively little knowledge of the concept, although the majority understood it related to social mobility, employability of individuals from lower socio-economic groups, or - incorrectly - diversity in wider forms. So there was significant heterogeneity is the understanding of the concept.

Consideration of interviewees' responses suggested the existence of three loose clusters of firms, based on their familiarity and willingness to engage with the mission of the Fair Access Agenda, namely to increase the proportion of individuals from poor social backgrounds in professional employment. These groupings are by their nature exploratory, and even judgemental, but form a useful means of understanding different levels of engagement with the concept. In addition, they relate to an assessment of the interviewee's responses, rather than the organisation's response. Organisations by their very nature are fragile and dynamic entities. In part, it is found that in many of the firms, especially outside the Big Four, local offices enjoyed degree of autonomy from the (limited liability) partnership or company.

The first grouping saw the concept of Fair Access as an irrelevance or an undesirable external imposition. Typically accountancy firms receive hundreds of applications for a few places and consequently they can be highly selective. Therefore, the suggestion that firms should fish bigger pools for talent seemed inappropriate. For example:

> I personally have a personal problem with positive discrimination, but that's a different matter. Because I still think it's deep discrimination as a result... ... If I look at the graduate recruitment then we get how many hundreds it is of graduates for a very small number of places. We can be very, very selective in who we bring on board and we will be very selective because part of what we're recruiting is people who will pass the exams because people who don't pass the exams are very expensive. So actually we're interested in recruiting good brains. That's what we're after and they will tend to have, well they will always be a graduate, because we only recruit from universities, so we are trying to get the best of that graduate cream. If you haven't got a 2:1 you won't get looked at. (firm 12)

What is notable with this comment is the suggestion that Fair Access relates to positive discrimination, one of the Milburn myths. Intriguingly, this grouping with the lowest level of understanding tended to be populated by larger mid-tier firms, rather than smaller mid-tier or Big Four firms.

Beyond this category, sat a cluster of firms with a higher level of understanding that embraced the concept of hiring staff from local schools and training them using an AAT route and then onto a chartered qualification. Firms within this group tended to include interviewees from smaller mid-tier firms or larger mid-tier firms that had evolved from smaller practices. A typical motivation was:

> If there are so many graduates coming out of university looking for jobs, then we'd like to hire the best ones so why don't we get involved from the start? (firm 15)

This group had some understanding of the concept of Fair Access. Firm 14, which worked extensively with the UK charity sector, is typical in its description of Fair Access, making reference to a UK government initiative 'sector-work based academies' designed to move unemployed workers into employment [xvii].

> I think it's about helping people move out of one social level to another. And a particular area that I think we could impact there is in the academies sector. The new academies, you know, the academies. We had to do quite a few of those in terms of their clients and you can see the impact they're having on children in areas where they're third generation unemployed, they've never been out of the local town, or whatever it might be. That's something we could do. Now I totally believe it is about not, it's not about the impact there and then it's about the future, getting people from out of the situation they're in, not just. And if that is just coming to look at how an office might work which is something they've never probably experienced before, then that is a good thing in terms of that might impact on how they might decide to live their lives rather than not moving on if you see what I mean. Because that's definitely about what it's all about in terms of the mentoring. (firm 14)

Similarly, when firm 17 was probed about Fair Access:

> I think it's very difficult to do that isn't it? I mean all sorts of organisations have them [*i.e. issues concerning social mobility*]. I mean universities have this problem don't they really? And perhaps it's a bit of a copout but I'm not sure how easy it would be for us to do that. I mean at the end of the day we take people if you like from the education system and we actually do have quite an open recruitment policy so we don't necessarily even insist, we do take A level students and see them through which is probably quite unusual. We don't necessarily only recruit graduates at the training level and that has been quite successful… …I think again it's probably history. Again it's because we're formed from relatively small firms and probably some of them I think have taken A level graduates and worked for them and just sort of continued probably. So I think it probably all depends where you start from. (firm 17)

However, interviewees frequently conflated issues of social inclusion and class with other diversity issues such as employment of women and ethnic minorities. One interesting exception to extant norms and understandings of Fair Access in accountancy firms was identified in firm 13, where the interviewee had won a scholarship to university from the founder of a national chain of supermarkets. This he used as an example when speaking to local schoolchildren:

> I'm from a council estate in Leeds… … and I said to one of the schools round the corner from where I live here during the week, I'm only here because of [name of supermarket owner] came and talked to my school about becoming a retailer and I'd said, I'm going to go and do my A levels and I was only one of two people from my intake, the apple from my school that went to University out of 68 people. Why am I here? Because of him and I was what, 15? And I was going to do a normal electrician's job. (firm13)

The larger firms, including each of the Big Four, populated the final cluster that demonstrated the most familiarity with the Fair Access concept. One (firm 3) had a partner who had sat on the Fair Access report's (Milburn Report, 2009) working group and in turn the firm had established an internal working group which was taking forward the findings. When queried about whether they would reduce entry requirements, the response was:

> There's an element of not reducing our entry requirements because there is still a level of acumen that people need. But still, the bar is still going to be at a certain level but what we're trying to do and we're working on is raising the awareness amongst a bigger group of people about how they can get into the firm, what's needed at an earlier age so they can work towards that. Raising aspirations. Working with, I guess, curriculum providers so there is a better understanding that it's not seen as elite in any way. It's more open. And we are working with a number of different brokers [*i.e., partners providing work experience and access to employment, e.g. the academies described by firm 14*] and looking at different programmes at the moment to see how we can best support their work, working with young people, particularly in schools. But I think this is all just another build up to something that we've been doing for ages and ages and that we have worked with schools for a long time. Decades. (firm 3, Director (HR))

This finding might be expected as the larger firms have relatively large human resources departments and training operations. These firms, usually as part of a CSR strategy, operated various programmes working with local schools. The other Big Four firms, at the time of interviewing were less active in their engagement with Fair Access, but all still had some focus on education as part of a CSR agenda. Consider the interviewee from firm 4:

> Yes there's an element that we want the best staff, we want well educated people but on a wider society basis the UK needs well-educated, capable people to work here to make us a more successful economy which will make us a more successful society. If we have a more successful economy and society there's more business for us to do. So again, commercial reality means that some of the access to education work that we do isn't all about identifying people who might come and work for us. It's about giving more people the opportunity to get a good education than might do otherwise. (firm 4)

Undoubtedly, the largest firms invest significant resource of these activities and in many ways they are relatively sophisticated, as they work with a student, their teachers and family. However, these are CSR activities, which by their very nature aim to manage stakeholder relations, rather than widening access to the firm.

The implications of these findings for Fair Access on the basis of the 2010 data are that social mobility needs to achieve greater levels of understanding and recognition within firms. It appears the concept had relatively little traction at the time the interview data was collected. Furthermore, ideas of social mobility became entangled with CSR which is a fundamentally different idea.

Entering the field: training opportunities for inexperienced hires

Training opportunities appeared in three forms: (i) graduates; (ii) school-leavers undertaking ACCA; and (iii) school-leavers undertaking AAT then A/CA. As expected, the most common scheme was the traditional university graduate schemes as part of 'milk round' presentations to selected universities. As a consequence of the economic crisis, competition for training places had increased dramatically. This meant that most Big Four firms encountered less rivalry from investment banks and other City employers allowing them greater access to Oxbridge graduates. All firms interviewed made some use of graduate trainees and had different methods of selecting candidates. The other three routes identified in the

As expected the increased emphasis on taking on school-leavers as professional trainees, rather than just graduates, was evident. This sits uncomfortably with the notion of accountancy being a graduate profession and in stark contrast to other professions with perhaps more lofty aspirations such as engineering, law, and medicine where a degree becomes a prerequisite for entry. The desire to hire the 'brightest and the best' from the 'best' universities seems in stark contrast to the business of employing school leavers to undertake a technician-level qualification provide by AAT and then, if successful, study for the traditional Chartered Accountants' (CA/ACA) qualification or, arguably less prestigious, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants' examinations. The rationale for this change was described by firm 7:

> It's actually looking at the business requirements going forward. We think we can meet our business requirements really well by getting a better mix. So we've always taken a small number of AATs but it was probably 10% of our total intake and 90% was graduates. (firm 7)

The 'business requirements' discourse related to a perceived need for staff stability. Traditional graduate recruitment schemes that resulted in a large intake that subsequently left the firm three years later was seen as disruptive to the business. An AAT intake remained stable for five years and provided a means of getting relatively menial work undertaken at a lower cost than graduates. Most, if not all, firms were recruiting school-leavers for similar reasons.

> Yes they will be cheaper at the point they join us, at the point they qualify as a Chartered Accountant they will be able to command exactly the same business rate as anybody else who qualifies as a Chartered Accountant… … The factor is we've looked and said okay what's our requirement for work? What level is that work at? What sort of person do we need to be able to do that work? There are all sorts of business reasons. Graduates who come into accountancy, who do three years, qualify as ACA typically we would expect to lose about 50% of them at the point they qualify so it's really expensive to bring them in, train them and then they leave after three years. Whereas AATs tend to, because it takes them a couple of years to do AAT and then another three years to do ACA, they just tend to be with you that bit longer because they've been with you longer you seem to get less of a qualifying then leave being the normal track so it just provides a bit more stability for the business so. (firm 8)

The AAT route also offered a chance for graduates lacking the necessary academic entrance qualifications to gain employment in the firm. So the AAT school-leaver pathway was broader than just school leavers and suggests that AATs with school results inferior to the graduate intake might possibly remain in technician roles within the firm:

> For the coming year we are looking to cut our graduates intake by two-thirds and the two-third element will be made up of AAT trainees so which will either be 'A' level leavers or graduates who don't necessarily achieve the level of academic excellence that we would expect to get onto our ACA training. (firm 10)

As described earlier in this paper, firms made extensive use of A level results in recruitment. A-level performance is highly correlated with professional examination performance and the aim is to quickly get students through their professional exams so firms can start to charge fees for their newly-qualified trainees' time. But as A-level results are associated with social class, then selection using A-levels has negative implications for Fair Access. By contrast, the school leaver initiative has the potential to recruit cohorts from varied social backgrounds. It remains an unanswered question: do middle class young people colonise trainee posts or are they genuinely open to all?

The third category of recruits were interns. Albeit of a temporary nature, interns were frequently hired to undertake some basic tasks often under the aegis of CSR and increased employability of local school-leavers. However the employment of these beneficiaries was frequently removed from notions of inclusivity and social equality with clients' children or friends and family of the firm's partners employed. Often an internship would lead to a place as a trainee, either as a school-leaver or a graduate. For example, firm 12 referred to 'an old boys' network' which facilitated intern placements. Some of the smaller firms had a long history of working with school-leaver entrants and viewed it as a distinctive competitive advantage:

> A lot of people have grown up here. That is a huge strength that having somebody that started with us as a raw rookie 18 year old and now they're on the management board. I think it's fantastic in terms of bringing in people so you say to people you can do it because it's here as you can see. (firm 18)

The limited evidence suggests intern schemes have the potential to facilitate greater access. But that if they operate crudely in hiring 'friends and family' then the reverse will occur. So, intern schemes targeted at poorer students should have the capacity to raise aspirations and access to accountancy.

Social Backgrounds within the field

A common and consistent theme across virtually all interviewees again related to the high levels of academic attainment needed to qualify as an accountant and that:

> It's in my opinion, unethical to take people on to do accountancy training and accountancy exams if actually their chances of success are minimal when they start because it's not fair on them. (firm 9)

This frequently held view is consistent with the biodata-supported rationale of the success of non-traditional students in the technically-focused professional examinations delivered by largely private sector providers and directly assessed by accountancy professional bodies. However, information provided by the firms on their recruitment websites, where available, points to lower entry requirements in terms of school results for school-leaver entrants than graduates.

Issues of homology featured significantly in recruitment, where specific universities were targeted for recruitment to attract entrants from universities that were right for them: 'top 20 in terms of the ones that we believe are appropriate for us at [firm 7]'. As clients themselves are heterogeneous, what constitutes ability or talent is ambiguous. However, this was only occasionally alluded to:

> I would like to influence them so that every year we set our key performance indicators that we also add into the criteria other factors. So if you went to St Mary's and you got 4 'A's that's probably just as good as someone who went to the little comprehensive around the corner and got three 'C's, so whilst recognising the need to keep standards up and invest in people who are going to succeed, to be a bit more open-minded about what good looks like. (firm 6)

Similar tensions emerged when trying to identify 'exceptions to the rule' (i.e., of outstanding people with equivocal school qualifications). In particular, the concept of 'making a connection' was identified among the mid-tier with less restrictive views based on a decentralised recruitment model, trying to fill vacancies in local offices:

> It's quite peculiar that I can read the CV, if I'm doing four graduates on the following day, I'll read the CVs on the way home on the tube or on the way in and from the CVs the ones that, I like him or I like her, you know, it will be interesting to interview her, they'll the ones that for whatever reason we don't connect. And the people who I thought I might struggle with, I've connected with. So it's peculiar some days. (firm 15)

Social background in terms of recruitment was only occasionally identified within the interviews, largely because of the strong belief that interviewees held about the need for acumen or academic attainment, rather than a recognition that talent wasn't necessarily perfectly correlated with academic results. Interviewees identified two anomalies with the idealised school-results, University-attended recruitment model. First, the need for entrants to have 'the personality to deal with the client' (firm 16). Second, the problems created by a centralised recruitment model, where a national recruitment team made crude selection decisions based on clear metrics, such as academic performance and psychometric testing, assessing ability and personality:

> Some accountancy firms I think, they may be one firm, but in reality are very much a group, or a grouping of fairly independent businesses with relatively little central [control]. I mean, they will have some central functions, but not really central direction and people do things in different ways across the group. (firm 11)

For firm 11, centralised practices were oppressive means of preventing people in regional offices making the 'right' decisions about the business that were extended to recruitment. So a centralised recruitment team would be oblivious to business needs at a local level. Firm 16 saw the business of being a partnership of local firms operating as a collective as a source of competitive advantage in recruitment:

> There's no other way you can do it really so in order for it to work you've got to loosen up a bit and actually say well, you might still have the central process but you'd say actually because we know this mentoring's going on or whatever, if we get a recommendation from the Birmingham office that we ought to take these people then really broadly speaking we will or whatever but you'd obviously have

> to work that out a bit but I think that's, you know, it's all very well to say that but I think if you're a national practice doing a central, running things centrally, it's terribly difficult to do. (firm 16)

Similar issues relating to the problems of centralisation were also identified by two other smaller firms and one Big Four practice. In a similar vein, firm 18 articulated the problematic of having an entity view of 'what good looks like' whereby having access to a potentially smaller pool of talent allowed more refined decisions to be taken:

> Interestingly I think firms can get themselves hooked up on recruiting from certain institutions and actually sometimes you can completely miss where the real talent is. So we have got some 18 year old 'A' level new entrants who are brilliant. Brilliant because they have made up their mind they want to be an accountant at 18 or they say well actually this is really what I want to do. Just exactly opposite the end of the spectrum you might say we've got some Oxbridge candidates who are amazing but we haven't got a list of universities, we haven't got a list of stereotypical type of person. (firm 18)

Tensions in recruiting non-traditional applicants and supporting other staff became apparent in firms 'coming out of the kind of white, male, public-school educated population of the firm' (firm 1) in the sense that they changed the character of the firm. So there was an acknowledgement that there were forces of resistance within particularly larger firms that saw social change as undesirable and unnecessary.

Graduate employability and the exclusivity paradox

From the preceding discussion, one of the most revealing themes from the narratives related to the employment and employability of graduates and school-leavers. Many of the larger firms were active participants in employability schemes where working with local schools and school students was seen as a means of community engagement. The very notion of community was highly socially constructed in that it became difficult to define what community meant to firms but was usually seen as people living in the environs of the firms' offices. In the City of London, for example, the wealth of the intermediaries that service the City, such as accountancy firms, and their knowledge workers sit uncomfortably alongside neighbouring boroughs in south and east London, characterised by poor housing, schools with lower educational attainment, single parent families, and low employment prospects.

Six firms, including all of the Big Four, operated some form of employability initiative and link with neighbouring communities aimed at boosting the prospects of what were termed 'disadvantaged children' (firm 6). A frequent intervention was a firm's staff acting as school governors, which was identified by firms of all sizes.

> You know have we got any links with schools, I think 200 and, well we have something like 130 [name of firm] people who are school governors, at individual schools. There are links between the prime contact to the school contact, numeracy and literacy programmes where [name of firm] people will be volunteering and supporting individuals. (firm 3)

These activities extended to reading and mentoring schemes. However what quickly became apparent was that only rarely did these schemes aim to encourage participants to seek professional employment within the firm. If employment was to be gained in the firm, which was rarely the objective of the opportunity, it would be at a non-professional level. For example:

> we have an employability programme which is focused on disadvantaged young adults. We don't take many people out of the programme because they're not graduates and to be in a professional services role [you need to be a graduate]. We do take people into our IT department, finance and have various agreements with clients to interview a certain number of people. (firm 2)

For firms operating an employability initiative this this work was seen as philanthropic or as an active means of fulfilling a CSR strategy that would be rewarded by external validation in the form of CSR rankings such as Business in the Community's award schemes (Duff, 2016). Often the work experience provided was not accountancy-related and not intended to propel the beneficiary into a financial career. For example:

> So again, commercial reality means that some of the access to education work that we do isn't all about identifying people who might come and work for us. It's about giving more people the opportunity to get a good education than might do

> otherwise. In terms of work experience it's quite difficult for firms like us to run the kind of traditional work experience. I mean you bring in a kind of 16 year old into work in an audit practice, what are they going to do? Actually if you're sat next to someone who's doing an audit, you'd probably leave thinking I really don't want to do that, because you don't understand it, you can't get involved in it yourself, but what we're increasingly trying to do is run, I guess it's business work in its widest sense, experience and opportunities so we had a very good student in this summer for a week, gave them some skills around presentations. (firm 3)

That is, the respondent from firm 3 suggests that work experience opportunities are more CSR schemes than mini-internships, given the complex technical nature of accountancy work that requires some background education. Big Four firm 1 also highlights the differential nature of those taken onto work experience programmes where beneficiaries are not required to be the 'best and brightest' and quite removed from the school-leaver and graduate entry routes leading to professional qualification:

> To be quite honest the numbers that we can employ from the locality, tend to be very small because we tend to work from our suppliers, so [name of supplier] for example, who do our post room, we work with them to have people or placements in the post room. Considering graduate recruitment, we have something called graduate technicians who are coming in with 2 A levels and there's now one experience initiative that's just been launched where you don't have to be the brightest and the best from the best university if you excel in sport or IT or we'll still bring you in so we do a lot to broaden out the recruitment. (firm 1)

The implications for Fair Access are that the sophisticated employability schemes operated by firms have the potential to lift children out of poverty and propel them into meaningful employment. This work could be more worthwhile if firms themselves provided professional employment opportunity for these people.

Discussion

This paper has aimed to consider how professional accountancy firms are responding to calls to improve social mobility and critique their response. The analysis is informed by Bourdieu's concept of capitals which are used to frame findings. In addition, the paper draws on a small, but growing, literature in accounting published over the past three decades that documents the identity formation and socialisation processes that accountants undertake to become professionals. Key findings of each of the six themes are summarised in table 3.

Table 3

A benefit of employing school-leavers, rather than graduates, included the ability to cover relatively menial audit work at lower cost. In particular, mid-tier firms alluded to the problems of hiring Oxbridge graduates because of their perceived lack of commercial skills and academic baggage, which was at odds with the culture and image of their organisations. Thus for mid-tier firms, where employees and partners are expected to service a relatively diverse client base, the creation of reputational capital is motivated by a pragmatic need to sell a range of accounting services to a client, e.g., abbreviated accounts, advisory work, taxation services. Reputational capital in mid-tiers is instantiated by emphatic displays of responding to client's needs and an appreciation of the client's commercial realities. By contrast for Big Four firms, the nature of specialisation and the existence of very large clients with relatively complex needs, subject to an ever-growing regulatory burden.

A powerful force in resisting social inclusion in accountancy firms is homology, or individuals within firms deciding 'what good looks like' on the basis of their own image. Issues relating to 'the right personality' to be confident in front of clients and 'fitting in with the firm' loomed large. This sits alongside the culture of the firms where a definite schism was identified between Big Four firms and the others. Mid-tier firms claimed to operate a 'nine to five' working culture. By contrast, more temporal commitment appeared to be expected of the Big Four's people at all levels. At the same time, the market leaders painted an image of their people as 'the best', exemplified by the development of highly specialised individuals. Mid-tier firms, by contrast, emphasised the importance of being able to service a range of clients, develop a broader knowledge framework, and think commercially.

An interesting finding was the identification of tensions between regional offices and national graduate recruitment processes suggesting an unexpected heterogeneity. This variation chimes with earlier work by Spence et al. (2014 p.12) that describes Big Four firm's 'consistent rejections of global appraisal processes' where local offices were keen to retain control of who was promoted to partner and global appraisal processes were treated with some scepticism. In this investigation undertaken at a national level, we identify similar tensions between the local and national but in graduate recruitment rather than partner promotion decisions, the focus of Spence et al. (2014).

The process of homology identified the lack of available role models for widening access to the profession. The interviews identified only one such exemplar, a grammar school student awarded a University scholarship from a national supermarket chain, with its headquarters in the locale of his former school.

A potentially important way of encouraging greater access might be to make better use of intern schemes. These were widely used by many firms as a means of undertaking small pieces of work where an internal resource wasn't available. Frequently these positions would be unpaid but refund travel expenses and lunch costs. However such opportunities were often not made available to the general populous but to the children of senior staff or clients: a kind of 'friends and family' policy or 'old boys' network. In smaller firms this provided the experience to gain an entry-level post or provide the experience post-university to secure a traineeship in a competitive jobs market. Intern schemes, which have the potential to be emancipatory and make accountancy employment more widely available to a greater range of young people, tend to operate to reproduce the existing elite of dominant partners' and important clients' children[xviii].

As identified in the introduction to this paper, the Milburn Report (2009) identifies the significance of social mythology as a barrier to change and providing access to the profession. Intriguingly all five Milburn myths were identified by various interviewees during the course of this research suggesting the prevalence of the social mythology within the accountancy profession. Processes of homology and reproduction or recruiting in the recruiter's own self-image became apparent, along with the allocation of internships to members of the firm and clients. A clear focus on qualifications and cognitive skill was apparent despite the stated need among some interviewees for commercial considerations and an ability to work effectively with clients. A familiar theme from almost ever interviewee was the need for 'strong academics' in order to qualify as an accountant that acted as a barrier to consider other suitable individuals. However, as identified earlier Gammie's (2000 p.33) investigation professional examination performance of ICAS trainees in the early 1990s did not find school results a useful predictor concluding this 'calls into question the common practice of training providers setting minimum number of UCAS points before they will consider an application'. So the limitations of school results as a selection device have been known for a long time. Furthermore, the current fascination with school-leavers, rather than graduates, counters that claim with those on the AAT route possessing inferior school results to those on the graduate route. One interviewee viewed increased access as a form of positive discrimination, which was seen as 'deep discrimination'.

The final myth related to the idea that widening access infringed self-regulation. The interviews suggested relatively little effort was made to self-regulate or engage with best practice and emerging social policy. Few interviewees believed they were in the spotlight and that recruitment practice would continue as it had done for many years. A handful of interviewees demonstrated only limited awareness, suggesting responsibility lay more with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the largest representative UK professional accountancy body, which as this paper has highlighted earlier has attempted to spotlight the Fair Access agenda. However, employers hire and promote staff; professional bodies' role is largely limited to examining students and, to varying degrees, regulation of members and serving their interests.

At the time of writing, the firms continue to diversify their recruitment model. For example, a modern apprenticeship route is available for school-leavers at a level equivalent to a first-year university course. Deloitte (2010) launched its Bright Start programme in 2011 aimed at hiring 100 school-leavers per annum, relative to 1,100 graduates each year. KPMG operates a school-leaver programme in conjunction with the 'established' universities of Birmingham and Durham and ICAEW and ICAS. In addition PwC, the largest global accountancy practice, has developed a modern apprenticeship scheme with ICAEW at a level equivalent to a postgraduate masters which combines the traditional ACA qualification (or its tax equivalent) with three additional 'business skills qualifications'. How successful these initiatives are remains to be seen, but they are indicative of a desire to promote a discourse of compliance with the ideals of Fair Access.

The PwC school-leaver initiative is motivated by a recognition that 'the professional services sector is growing and there is a need for an alternative recruitment model to meet demand (PwC, 2012 p.1)' suggesting that these changes are far from philanthropic, but rather that the university sector alone is unable to provide the necessary talent pool. This is especially the case given the increased tuition fees payable by students in England which are believed to deter many students, especially those from less affluent backgrounds, attending university. These developments suggest some movement on the part of larger firms but exactly what their engagement with the Fair Access work of Milburn Report (2009) and Clegg Report (2011) is uncertain. It is entirely plausible that the Big Four school-leaver initiatives simply provide an alternative to university to those considering a financial or business career, rather than recruiting a new breed of talent from a different social demographic. However, we should tentatively welcome the developing array of entry routes, school-leaver, AAT, and apprenticeships as a means of potentially encouraging a wider range of people to work in accountancy field.

Arguably, KPMG the firm with the most knowledgeable and longstanding engagement with diversity in all its forms published its targets recently (PQ, 2014). However despite significant increases in projected for disability, ethnicity, and gender, targets for social background were strangely absent. This might point to a continuing lack of progress and action, or quantify something that perhaps threatens their competitiveness.

Conclusion

As the quotation beginning this paper suggests, the divide between the educated and uneducated remains significant in the context of the professional accounting project. Those in possession of the highest forms of institutionalised cultural capital, excellent school results followed by a good degree from an elite university, can aspire to train and develop with a Big Four firm. In the majority of instances, the successful applicant will not possess a relevant degree and at the commencement of their training have little appreciation of accounting let alone its social, organisational, or economic context.

However fair or meritocratic this divide might appear, the reality is that the requisite capital profile is associated with attendance at an independent school, or a highly-rated state school in a middle class locale, family links, or in Bourdieusian terms, economic, social, and cultural capitals. These capitals define the habitus of the desirable and successful trainee. In turn these capitals combine to create a field-specific form of symbolic capital: reputational capital. Possession of reputational capital allows conversion to economic capital: instantiated as an economic advantage through the creation of market share and the ability to charge premium fees relative to lesser suppliers – see Figure 3.

Figure 3 here

Theoretically, many of the findings of this study are as expected. The link between Big Four employment and economic, social and cultural capitals is as expected. In larger firms, these three capitals combine to create reputational capital for the firm, attracting and retaining the best talent, evidences their superior reputation and justifying a higher fee structure. The ambiguous nature of knowledge (Alvesson, 2001) requires the holders of reputational capital to instantiate a differentiation achieved by the employment of highly-educated graduates who possess a mix of social and cultural capitals which lesser firms find difficult to imitate. The dichotomy is underlined by mid-tier firms' need for commercially-aware and adaptable individuals to produce a moderated form of reputational capital. Big Four firms by contrast emphasise specialisation. Employment in a Big Four firm is frequently a highly-specialised business, for example, documenting an audit process to satisfy an audit regulator, requiring little in the way of commercial skills, but necessitating the need to present the culture and values of the firm: its branding.

For mid-tier firms the creation of reputational capital seems equally significant. 'Commercially-aware' and versatile recruits can service a diverse client base and sell the firms varied services to typically, smaller and less sophisticated clients. Interestingly, this group is now recruiting significant numbers from schools, suggesting that reputational capital can be developed without high levels of human, social or cultural capital. This distinction found between Big Four and mid-tier firms in respect of reputational capital suggests that accounting firms represent two Bourdieusian sub-fields: multinational accountancy firms offering a global brand; and mid-tier practices offering accountancy advisory services at a national level.

The implications of this work are many and varied. Firstly, the evidence presented within the paper documents the profession's early response to the Fair Access agenda using interview evidence collated in 2010. The findings are that the quantum of the accountancy profession, proxied by interviewees drawn from 18 large firms in 2010, are at an early stage in their thinking about Fair Access and how to respond to it. This suggests a potential problem for a profession trading as operating in the public interest where the social composition of its members increasingly does not appear to reflect the very public it purports to serve.

Social mobility is subject to frequent commentary and political debate. Consequently the issue is dynamic and we could expect the accountancy profession's approach to change over time. The Fair Access agenda is unlikely to go away anytime soon and firms and professionals bodies will need to develop a coherent and credible discourse to counter critics. However, the professional examination regime remains stringent and firms need to balance issues of social inclusiveness against the investment required to complete professional examinations and the concomitant personal tragedy of the trainee failing the examinations.

What isn't clear is how people entering professional accountancy work without a university education will fare in the future. In the medium-term, what represents the best alternative for the prospective accountant: apprenticeship from school; university partnership scheme; or university education? Within the interviews, some reference was made to employability initiatives. If firms wish to hire staff from a more diverse social base, then investing in local schools could address the problem identified by both Sutton Trust (2010, 2011) and Piatt (2014) of the dearth of high achievers from poorer backgrounds.

As identified earlier in this paper, there are serious political consequences to improving social mobility. The Milburn Report (2009) presents an anodyne and incontestable view that improving social mobility is in everyone's best interest by increasing the UK's economic competitiveness. But, for every winner, comes a loser (cf., Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Creating the socially-inclusive profession isn't a zero-sum game. High income, high status families invest substantially in schooling and creating their children's capital in all forms. Moves to combat elitism and increase the capital of children from lower income groups will inevitably incur the wrath of incumbent elites and their political supporters. Increasing social mobility may represent social fairness but is unlikely to represent the 'win-win' situation the Milburn Report (2009) envisages.

REFERENCES

AccountancyAge (2010), *The Top 50*, AccountancyAge, London.

Alvesson, M. (2001), "Knowledge work: Ambiguity, image and identity". *Human Relations*, Vol. 54, No. 7, pp.863-886.

Anderson, M. and Walker, S.P. (2009), "'All sorts and conditions of men': The social origins of the founders of the ICAEW", *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 31-45.

Anderson-Gough, F., Grey, C., and Robson, K. (1998), "'Work hard, play hard': An analysis of organizational cliché in two accountancy practices", *Organization*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 565-592.

Anderson-Gough, F., Grey, C., and Robson, K. (2001), *Making up accountants: the organizational and professional socialization of trainee accountant*. Ashgate/ICAEW, Aldershot, UK.

Annisette, M., & Kirkham, L. M. (2007), "The advantages of separateness explaining the unusual profession-university link in English Chartered Accountancy", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 18, No. (1), pp. 1-30.

Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) (2016), *Annual Report 2015*, AAT, London.

Ball, H. (2015), "Profession is "sleepwalking towards a cliff", *Economia*, economia.icaew.com/news/november-2015/profession-is-sleepwalking-towards-a-cliff (accessed 4th July 2016)

Björklund, A. and Jäntii, M. (2009), "Intergenerational income mobility and the role of family background". *Handbook of Economic Inequality*. OU Press, Oxford.

Blanden, J., Gregg, P. and Machin, S. (2005), *Intergenerational income mobility in Europe and North America*. Sutton Trust, London.

Borghans, L., Duckworth, A.L., Heckman, J.J. and ter Weel, B. (2008), "The economics and psychology of personality traits", *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 972-1059.

Bourdieu, P. (1973), Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In: Brown, Richard (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*. Tavistock Publications, London, pp. 71–112.

Bourdieu, P. (1986), "The forms of capital" In *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, Ed. J.Richardson, pp.46-58. Greenwood: Westport, CT.

Bourdieu, P., (1990), *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998), *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Bourdieu, P. (2004), *Science of science and reflexity,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. (Eds.). (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (2002), "Schooling in capitalist America revisited*", Sociology of Education*, Vol. 75, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

Breen, R. and Goldthorpe, J.H. (1997), "Explaining educational differentials: Towards a formal rational action theory", *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp.275-305.

Breen, R. and Goldthorpe, J.H. (2001), "Class, mobility and merit: The experience of two British birth cohorts", *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 81-101.

Breen, R. and Jonsson, J.O. (2005), "Inequality of opportunity in comparative perspective: Recent research on educational attainment and social mobility", *Annual Review of Sociology*, pp. 223-243.

Burkham, D.T. and Lee, V. (2002), *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement in achievement as children begin school,* Economic Policy Institute, Washington D.C..

Carr-Saunders, A.M. and Wilson, P.A. (1933), *The professions,* Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Clegg Report (2011), *Opening doors, breaking barriers: A strategy for social mobility,* Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London.
Coleman, J. (2000), "Social capital in the creation of human capital", In: Social Capital: A multifaceted perspective, P. Disgupta and I. Serageldin (eds.), The World Bank, Washington D.C.
Carter, C. and Spence, C., (2014). "Being a successful professional: An exploration of who makes partner in the Big 4", *Contemporary Accounting Research*, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp.949-981.
Cook, A., Faulconbridge, J., and Muzio, D. (2012), "London's legal elite: recruitment through cultural capital and the reproduction of social exclusivity in City professional service fields", *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 44, pp. 1744-1762.
Crawford, C., Johnson, P., Machin, S. and Vignoles, A. (2011), *Social Mobility: A literature review.* Department for Business Innovation and Skills, London.
Crompton, R., and Le Feuvre, N. (1992), 'Gender and bureaucracy: women in finance in Britain and France'. In M. Savage & A. Witz (Eds.), *Gender & Bureaucracy*. Blackwell, Oxford: l.
Deloitte (2010). Deloitte ramps up investment in school-leavers. http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_GB/uk/careers/d2b27840594ec210VgnVCM3000001c56f00aRCRD.htm
Deloitte (2015), *Careers - Students*, http://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/careers/
Dirsmith, M.W. and Covaleski, M.A. (1985), "Informal communications, nonformal communications and mentoring in public accounting firms", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 149-169.
Duff, A. (2011), "Big Four accounting firms' annual reviews: A photo analysis of gender and race portrayals", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 139-157.
Duff, A. (2016), "Corporate social responsibility in UK accounting firms", *British Accounting Review* Vol. 48 No .1, pp. 74–86.
EY (2015), *Careers - Students*, http://www.ey.com/UK/en/Careers
Empson, L. (2001), "Fear of exploitation and fear of contamination: Impediments to knowledge transfer in mergers between professional service firms", *Human Relations*, Vol. 54, No. 7, pp. 839-862.
Empson L. (2004), "Organizational identity change: Managerial regulation and stereotype in an accounting firm acquisition", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 29, pp. 759-781.
Feinstein, L. (1999), *The relative importance of academic, psychological, and behavioural attitudes developed in childhood*, Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, London.
Feinstein, L. (2003), "Inequality in the early cognitive development of British children in the 1970 cohort", *Economica*, Vol. 20/277, pp.73-98.
Fitzsimmons, S.R. (2013), "Multicultural Employees: A Framework for Understanding How They Contribute to Organizations", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 525-549.
Foster, J. (1820), "Essay on the evils of popular ignorance", cited in *The Oxford Dictionary of Concise Quotations*, p.132.
Francis, B. and Hutchings, M. (2013) *Parent power using money and information to secure children's chances of educational success*, Sutton Trust, London.
Francis, B. and Wong, B. (2013) *What is preventing social mobility? A review of the evidence.* Leicester: ASCL.
Gammie, E. (2000), "The use of biodata in the pre-selection of fully-accredited graduates for chartered accountancy training places in Scotland", *Accounting and Business Research*, Vol. 31, No.1, pp. 19-35.

Gammie, E. and Kirkham, L. (2008), “Breaking the link with a university education in the creation of a chartered accountant: the ICAS story”, *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 356-375.
Goldthorpe, J.H. and Jackson, M. (2007), “Intergenerational class mobility in contemporary Britain: Political concerns and empirical findings,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 525-546.
Grey, C. (1998), “On being a professional in a Big Six firm”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 23, pp. 569-587.
Hall, M. (2009), “Socioeconomic barriers into the professions: A literature review”, EHRC/Professional Associations Research Network, London.
Hanlon, G. (1998), “Professionalism as enterprise: service class politics and the redefinition of professionalism”, *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 43-63.
Hanlon, G. (2004), “Institutional forms and organizational structures: homology, trust and reputational capital in professional service firms”, *Organization*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 186-210.
Harvey-Cook, J.E. and Taffler, R.J. (1987), “Graduate recruitment procedures in the UK accountancy profession: A preliminary study”, *Accounting and Business Research*, Vol. 17, No. 66, pp. 99-108.
Haynes, K. (2012), “Body beautiful? Gender, identity and the body in professional service firms”, *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 488-507.
High Flyers (2010), *The graduate recruitment market in 2011*, High Flyer Research, London.
High Flyers (2015), *The graduate recruitment market in 2016*, High Flyer Research, London.
Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS) (Charles Report) (1970), *Tomorrow’s CA in the Making*, ICAS, Edinburgh.
Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland/Financial Reporting Council (ICAS/FRC) (2016), *What skills do auditors need in a changing environment? ICAS/FRC Steering Committee Report*, ICAS/FRC, Edinburgh.
Jacobs, K. (2003), “Class reproduction in professional recruitment: examining the accounting profession”, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 14, No. 5, pp. 569-596.
Jephson, N.J. (2013), “Exploring trainee routes into the accountancy profession in England: A qualitative analysis of educational intervention, socialization and organizational professionalism”, Unpublished PhD thesis.
Jonsen, K., Maznevski, M. L. and Schneider, S. C. (2011), “Special Review Article: Diversity and its not so diverse literature: An international perspective”, *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, *11*(1), 35-62.
Keep, E. and Mayhew, K. (2010), “Moving beyond skills as a social and economic panacea”, *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 565-577.
Kitchen, J. and Parker, R. H. (1984). *Accounting thought and education: Six English pioneers,* Garland, London.
KPMG (2015), *Careers – students*, https//kpmgcareers.co.uk/
Langlands, A. (2005), “Gateways to the professions report”, DES, London.
Larson, M.S. (1977), *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis,* University of California Press, Berkeley.
Lee, T.A. (1995), “Shaping the US academic accounting research profession: The American Accounting Association and the social construction of a professional elite”, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 241-261.
Lee, T.A. (2001), “Sustaining a habitus in U.S. accounting research”, *Advances in Public Interest Accounting,* Vol. 8, pp. 177-194.

Leitch Review of Skills (2005), *Skills in the UK: The long-term challenge,* HM Treasury, London.
Leitch Review of Skills (2006), *Prosperity for all in the global economy,* HM Treasury, London.
Macdonald, K.M. (1995), *The sociology of the professions,* Sage, London.
McPhail, K., Paisey, C., and Paisey, N.J. (2010), "Class, social deprivation and accounting education in Scottish schools: Implications for the reproduction of the accounting profession and practice", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 31-50.
Milburn Report (2009), *Unleashing aspirations: The final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions*, Cabinet Office, London.
Milburn Report (2012), Fair access to the professions: A progress report by the independent reviewer on social mobility and child poverty, Cabinet Office, London.
Millerson, G. (1964). *Qualifying Associations,* Routledge, London.
New Opportunities White Paper (2009), *New opportunities: Fair chances for the future*, Cabinet Office, London.
Parker, R.H. (1980), *British accountants: A biographical sourcebook*, Arno Press, New York.
Parker, R.H. (1986), "The development of the accountancy profession in Britain to the early Twentieth Century". Monograph Five, Academy of Accounting Historians.
Piatt, W. (2014), *Free School Meals*, http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/russell-group-latest-news/155-2014/5545-free-school-meals/
Picard, C.F., Durocher, S. and Gendron, Y. (2014), "From meticulous professionals to superheroes of the business world: A historical portrait of a cultural change in the field of accountancy", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 73-118.
PQ (2014), "KPMG makes bold diversity promise", *PQ Magazine,* p.1.
Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) (2009), *PARN's summary report to the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions,* www.parnglobal.com
Professional Oversight Board (POB) (2015), *Key facts and trends in the accountancy profession*. FRC, London.
PwC (2012), *A new Higher Apprenticeship for the professional services.* pwc.co.uk/higherapprenticeships
PwC (2013), "PwC and ICAEW celebrate 10 years' success of unique degree at Newcastle University Business School", PwC Press Release.
PwC (2015), *Careers students*, http://www.pwc.co.uk/careers.html
Rawolle, S. and Lingard, B., (2008), "The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and researching education policy", *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 23, No. 6, pp.729-741.
Reay, D. (2008), "Tony Blair, the promotion of the 'active' educational citizen and middle class hegemony", *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 34, No. 4-5, pp. 391-418.
Reay, D., David, M.E. and Ball, S.J. (2005), "Degrees of choice: Social class, race, gender and higher education", Trentham Books, Stoke-on-Trent.
Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013), *Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge*, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, London.
Sommerlad, H. (2008), "'What are you doing here? You should be working in a hair salon or something': outsider status and professional socialization in the solicitors' profession", *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-15.
Spence, C., Carter, C., Belal, A., Husilios, J., Dambrin, C., and Archel, P. (2015), "Tracking habitus across a transnational professional field", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 6, pp. 946-962.
Spence, C., Carter, C., Husilios, J., and Archel, P Sullivan, R. (2010), *Barriers to the legal*

profession. Legal Services Board, London.

Sutton Trust (2010), *Responding to the new landscape for university access*. Sutton Trust, London.

Sutton Trust (2011), *Degrees of success: University chances by individual school*. Sutton Trust, London.

UCAS (2014). http://www.ucas.com/how-it-all-works/explore-your-options/entry-requirements/tariff-tables

Webb, J, Schirato, T. and Danaher, G. (2002), *Understanding Bourdieu*, Sage, London.

Wilborg, O.N. and Moberg, R.J. (2010), "Social origin and the risks of disadvantage in Denmark and Norway: the early life course of young adults", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 24, No.1, pp.105-12.

TABLES

	ICAEW (%)	CAI (%)	ICAS (%)
1998	95	93	97
2003	87	90	96
2014	78	93	98

Table 1: Proportion of graduates in student population of three UK institutes of chartered accountants (POB, 2015)

Firm	*Firm Type*	*Job Role*
1	Big Four	Director (HR)
2	Big Four	Partner
3	Big Four	Director (HR)
4	Big Four	Director
5	Upper mid-tier	Manager (HR)
6	Upper mid-tier	Director (HR)
7	Upper mid-tier	Director (HR)
8	Upper mid-tier	Director (Operations)
9	Upper mid-tier	Partner
9	Upper mid-tier	Partner
9	Upper mid-tier	Director (Administration)
10	Upper mid-tier	Director (HR)
11	Upper mid-tier	Director (HR)
12	Lower mid-tier	Chairman
13	Lower mid-tier	Senior Partner
14	Lower mid-tier	Senior Manager
15	Lower mid-tier	Managing Partner
16	Lower mid-tier	Chairman
17	Lower mid-tier	Managing Partner
18	Lower mid-tier	Partner

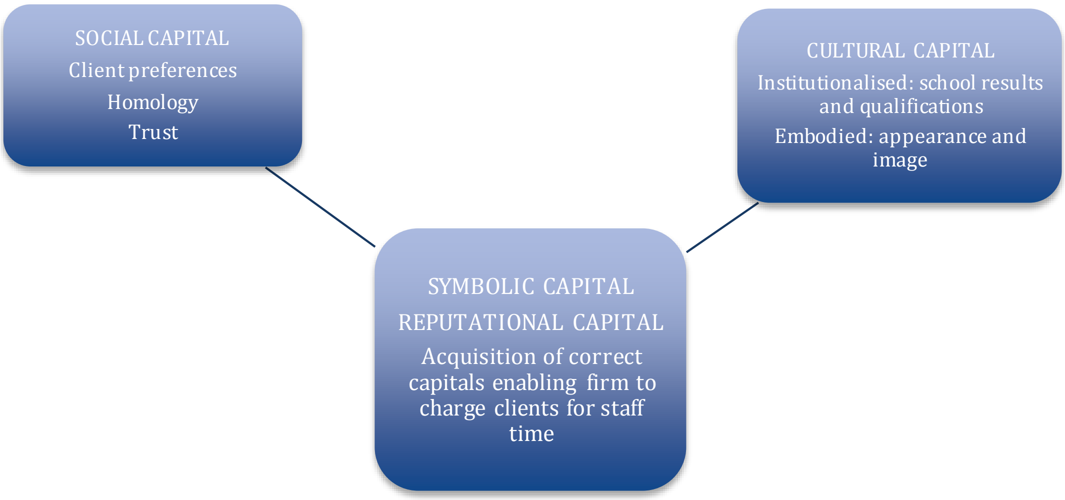
Table 2: Interviewees

Theme	*Findings*	*Implications*
1. Possession of capitals	Focus on academic qualifications (institutionalised cultural capital) Social capital of being able to deal with a diverse range of clients	Bias towards children from wealthier backgrounds attending high performing state and independent schools
2. Understanding of Fair Access	Variable levels of engagement with the concept and understanding ranging from resentment to partners serving on Fair Access to Professions panel Abundance (rather than shortage) of available inexperienced recruits Focus on elites and the best qualifications rather than heterogeneous social backgrounds	Lack of awareness of Fair Access presents significant barrier to change Focus on 'brightest and best' distracts from Fair Access agenda
3. Entering the field	Graduate focus, Big Four, hire 'brightest and the best' Increasing emphasis on school-leavers in mid-tier, hire for 'business stability'	School-leaver routes offer potential for Fair Access but this may not be realised
4. Social background	Problematic of homology and knowing 'what good looks like' Challenges created by centralised recruitment	Central recruitment with national selection procedures work against Fair Access as unable to identify 'exceptions to the rule'
5. Graduate employability	Employability links with schools and other community engagement: aimed at fulfilling CSR strategy rather than increasing social heterogeneity of the firm	Links with school shave the potential to develop Fair Access and encourage students to pursue accountancy careers

Table 3: Summary of main findings

FIGURES

Figure 1: Theoretical model of capitals



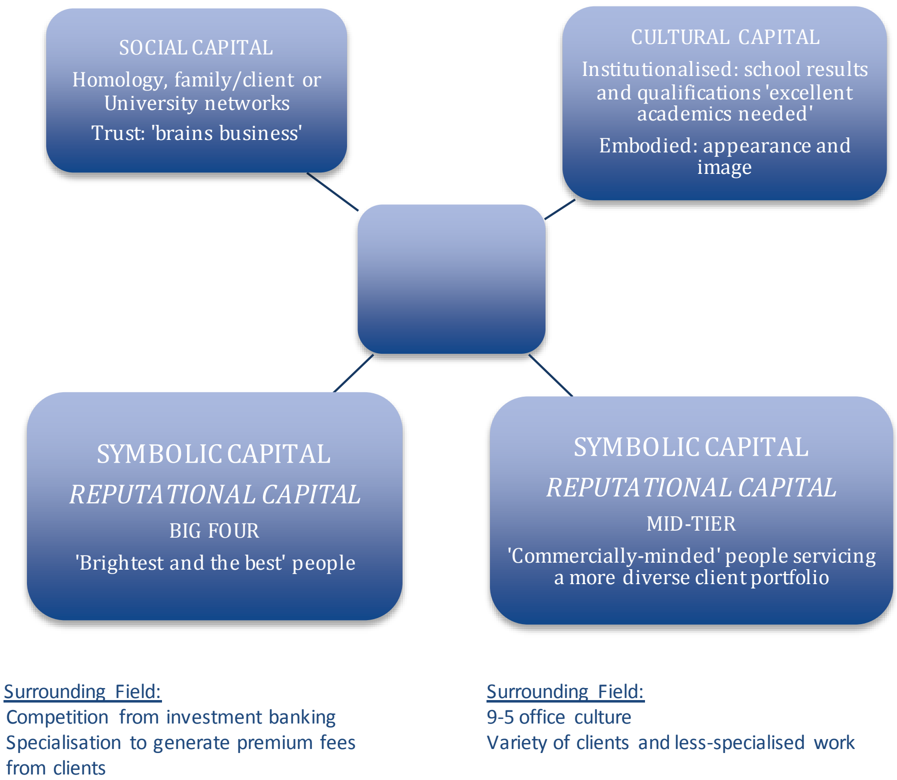


Figure 2: Empirical model of capitals

---

[i] A degree of political consensus exists in the UK concerning the need for greater social mobility and improving access to, in particular, highly selective universities and the professions.

[ii] The reasons for the lack of progress however are contested as the Russell Group, a coalition of research-intensive (elite) universities and include Oxford and Cambridge universities, identifies few school students receiving free school meals (i.e., the poorest students) achieve good school grades. Specifically: "in 2009, only 232 students who had been on free school meals (FSM) achieved 3As at A-level or the equivalent. This was 4.1% of the total number of FSM students taking A-levels, and less than an estimated 0.3% of all those who had received free school meals when aged 15. At 16 only 36.8% of FSM pupils achieve a good GCSE in Maths and English (grades A*-C)" (Piatt, 2014).

[iii] The Global Accounting Alliance is an organisation representing nine institutes of chartered accountancy in former British Commonwealth nations and the US.

[iv] The school-leaver intake varies significantly reflecting the firms that train with an institute. ICAS has an intake of 80% Big Four, who largely recruit graduates. ICAEW has a greater focus on mid-tier and smaller firms who have an appetite for greater numbers of school-leavers. CAI train students largely with a relevant degree or Masters in accounting degree.

[v] There is substantial variation in the proportion of graduates with relevant degrees, i.e., CAI (80%), ICAEW (18%), and ICAS (32%).

[vi] Each of the Big Four firms identify that for graduate opportunities a minimum of 300 to 320 UCAS tariff points are required which represents a high entry standard. For example, an A and two B's at A-level (a qualification with five pass grades from A to E) would equal 320 points.

[vii] In an analysis of the entry to the most elite UK universities (the Sutton Trust 13), the Sutton Trust (2010) identifies that in 2007, only 16% of the entry came from lower social classes and just 4% from low participation groups.

[viii] Independent schools, paradoxically frequently referred to as 'public schools' in the UK, are attended by 7% of the school population and funded by fees paid by their family; the residual 93% are educated in state schools, paid for by the state.

[ix] Oxbridge refers to the elite Oxford and Cambridge universities.

[x] AAT is a professional body for book-keepers and successful completion of their examinations conveys membership of the body and allows entry to, and a degree of exemption from, the examinations of UK professional accountancy bodies (ACCA, CIMA, CIPFA, ICAEW, ICAI, ICAS).

[xi] An accounting modern apprenticeship requires the entrant to be 16 years or older, takes three to four years to complete and combines work-based experience with study towards usually an AAT qualification.
[xii] There are variants of these routes, sometimes existing within firms, e.g., a firm that offers A/CA training nationwide, but ACCA in a specific local office.
[xiii] Other Big Four firms have some other initiatives such as Deloitte's 30-week gap year placement scheme.
[xiv] Although the payment of fees would not have been a large incentive to study on the first cohorts of the PwC Flying Start programme, today the partnership schemes represent a transfer of training/education costs from the individual to the firm.
[xv] The UK's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) identify that between 2002-03 and 2011-12 the proportion of state-educated students at Russell Group universities fell and that chance of a child entitled to free-school meals at a state secondary school in year 11 being admitted to Oxbridge, by the age of 19, were one in 2,000. The probability of a student from an independent being admitted to Oxbridge were one in 20. They conclude that (p.2): 'The proportion of students at these institutions from state schools and from disadvantaged backgrounds is lower than it was a decade ago. This is unacceptable and must change.'
[xvi] According to High Flyers (2010), the graduate employment market declined by 7% in 2008 and 18% in 2009.
[xvii] Sector-based academies are an initiative where the UK government continues to pay an individual benefits, travel costs to work, and childcare in return for an employer providing pre-employment training, a job placement and job interview after six weeks for the beneficiary. In essence, government meets wage costs in return for an employer providing some training and work experience, benefiting the individual, employer, and state.
[xviii] There is some evidence from the Big Four firms' corporate communications that there are efforts to make paid internships available to a wider audience.