

**Bridge
Group**
research
action
equality

2017-18

Access Accountancy

June 2019

Executive summary

Access Accountancy is an ambitious collaboration of employers and professional bodies, dedicated to improving socio-economic diversity in the accountancy profession.

The Bridge Group has been commissioned to deliver data analysis relating to the programme. This year's analysis (pertaining to data from 2017-18) includes over 4.8 million coded data-points across eighteen firms and professional bodies, including data relating to 186,111 school leaver, undergraduate and graduate applicants, 1,343 work experience candidates, and 8,126 professional members. This is the most ambitious collation of socio-economic diversity across a sector ever undertaken to our knowledge.

With respect to work experience, we were able to validate 1,013 (75%) candidates as meeting the eligibility criteria for Access Accountancy. With regards to impact, work experience opportunities deliver positive gains for participants, but this varies by skills area. For example, participants experienced larger positive impact on their application/interview technique skills and business skills and awareness, whereas team-working and problem-solving skills were impacted less significantly.

With respect to attraction, amongst the eleven firms that submitted data, we find the applicant pool broadly unrepresentative of the eligible candidate pool (for example, 26% of applicants are from independent schools compared to 8% in the school population), and progress against the previous year is modest.

Executive summary

Amongst professional bodies, a greater proportion of members attended state school, have parents who did not attend university, and are female than applicants at firms submitting data; however, those accessing free school meals and/or income support and those of BAME ethnicities represent smaller proportions than at participating firms.

Considering selection, candidates from higher socio-economic backgrounds (ineligible for FSM or Income Support) have a success rate that is 15% higher compared to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and those from independent schools have a success rate that is 8% higher compared to those educated in state-funded schools.

Qualitative data collection helps to contextualise and explain the findings outlined above and contributes to the recommendations provided within this report. Interviews were conducted with representatives at eight leading accountancy firms and one professional body, and focused on themes including the nature and type of work experience offered by signatories to individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds; how they are seeking to attract and appoint candidates from a wider range backgrounds; and with what success.

We advocate key recommendations for future data collection. It has been a great pleasure to work with colleagues at Access Accountancy and the cohort of signatories; special thanks should go to colleagues who prepared the various datasets and participated in interviews.

There is much to be celebrated, along with some important areas for improvement. We look forward to continuing to support this important and influential programme, and commend the continued commitment to supporting socio-economic diversity.

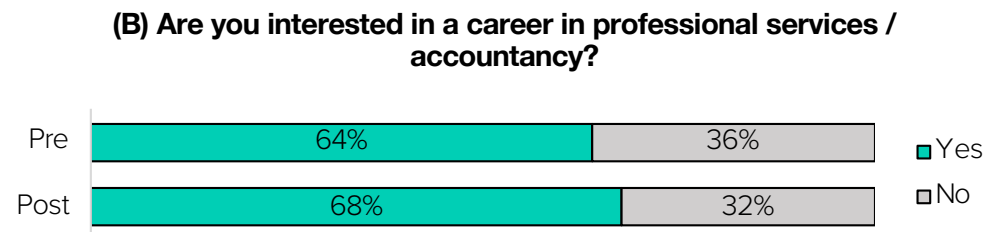
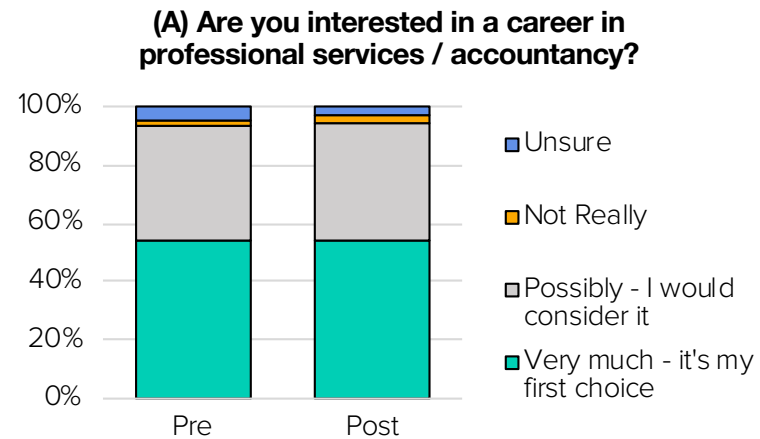
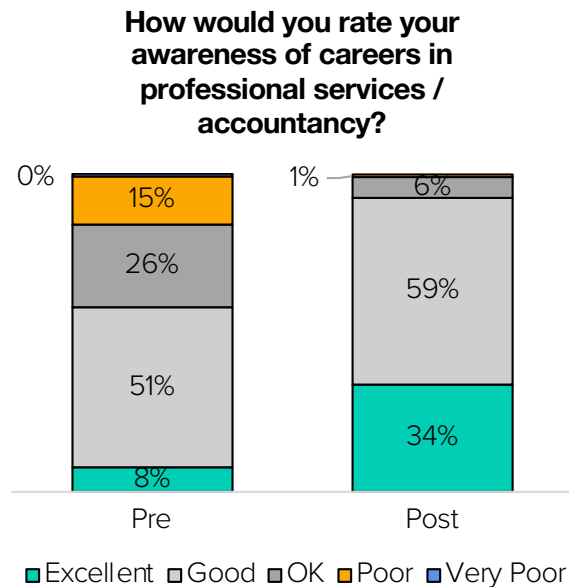
Work experience

Signatories were asked to submit data in a template designed by the Bridge Group and the Data Group to help ensure consistency in responses.

- > Considering eligibility, 1,013 have been validated as meeting the Access Accountancy eligibility criteria.
- > Work experience data are drawn from both the survey responses completed by work experience candidates and from the application and hire data.
- > 1,122 pre-work experience surveys and 864 post-work experience surveys were submitted by BDO, Blick Rothenberg, Cafcass, Deloitte, EY, Grant Thornton, KPMG, Mazars, Moore Stephens, NAO, Price Bailey and PwC.

Work experience impact analysis

After the work experience, 93% rated their awareness of careers in professional services/accountancy as 'excellent' or 'good' compared to 58% prior to work experience. Most firms used question type A (shown below) regarding interest in a professional services/accountancy career, with 94% selecting 'possibly' or 'very much' at both pre- and post-experience.



Work experience: recommendations

> **Tracking work experience participants:** Currently outcomes for work experience participants who do not apply to mainstream programmes are rarely tracked by firms beyond this point. Access Accountancy signatories could consider where they can collaborate more effectively in this area in order to share information about work experience participants in case they apply elsewhere. This could enable more consistent measurement of outcomes for work experience students across the profession rather than in relation to specific firms.

> **Conversion to apprenticeship schemes:** Not all firms currently consider work experience programmes as providing a pathway on to mainstream programmes (e.g. apprenticeships/graduate schemes). How to facilitate these pathways could be addressed by more firms as participation in work experience programmes does appear to have a positive impact on conversion rates to apprenticeship schemes for those who apply, thus offering important routes towards wider participation.

> **Maximising impact and reach:** Some interviewees suggested that a proportion of students are benefitting from multiple work experience placements, thus limiting the availability of places for others. Further collaboration between Access Accountancy signatories could aim to identify if this practice is in fact widespread and consider the response if so, in order to provide opportunities for higher numbers of students overall.

> **Informal work experience:** Increasing numbers of signatories have shut down opportunities for informal work experience or are offering one-plus-one programmes where an ad hoc/informal opportunity must be matched by one offered to a student from a lower socio-economic background. Good practice would suggest that more Access Accountancy signatories consider either reducing these opportunities and/or introducing a similar arrangement, to the extent compatible with the current culture of their firm.

Attraction: main findings

Considering diversity in the applicant pool at 11 firms, we find that:

- > The application data are almost identical to last year.
- > 41%* of applicants have no parental experience of higher education (39% in 2018).
- > 16% were on income support and/or eligible for free school meals (16% in 2018).
- > 26% of applicants are from independent school backgrounds (25% in 2018).
- > 42% of applicants are female (42% in 2018).
- > 51% of applicants identify as being of White ethnicity; 35% Asian; 7% Black, and 7% Other (including Mixed) (52%, 36%, 7%, and 5% respectively, in 2018).

* Note that all unknown / missing data are excluded from the calculation of percentages throughout.

Attraction: recommendations

> **Reporting:** Quantitative data suggests that attraction strategies are not driving significant change in applicant diversity year on year. While firms report a number of initiatives such as working with a broader range of universities including beyond the Russell Group and introducing new activities aimed at attracting a wider demographic, the precise impact of these initiatives on either the diversity of applicants or subsequent conversion rates is not clear, overall or by firm. Where firms can provide this information it would be useful to share it with other signatories for the purposes of shared learning and where they do not, close monitoring is recommended in future in order to determine the efficacy of these initiatives, and where additional or different interventions could be made.

> **Conversion rates:** One intention of current recruitment strategies is to ensure that students who have access to campus events do not have a particular advantage in the application process, as this could be one driver towards higher conversion rates for students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds. It is currently not clear how campus activities affect either applicant or conversion rates and firms could continue to monitor and report on this in additional depth.

> **Research on firm brands and appeal:** Although some research is available which indicates which firms have most appeal to individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, further qualitative research could consider in more depth why that is the case, whether historic brand associations exist, and if so, how these might be challenged and addressed.

Selection: main findings (1)

Considering graduate selection, we focus on relative success rates, which enable us to understand the effect of particular background characteristics on the offer rate.

> Overall, 6% of candidates are offered positions across the eleven firms. This is the overall success rate for all graduate candidates, and is higher compared to last year (5.2%).

> Candidates from Independent Schools are more likely to succeed, though this advantage has decreased compared to last year. Candidates from Independent Schools have a success rate that is 8% higher than State School candidates (6.5% vs 6.0%). Those from Independent Schools have a smaller advantage compared to last year (where the ratio was 24%).

Main findings (2)

> **Candidates from higher income backgrounds (i.e., not eligible for FSM or Income Support) have higher success rates than those from lower income backgrounds, and this advantage is larger compared to last year.** The success rate for those from higher income backgrounds is 15% higher compared to those from lower income backgrounds (5.9% vs 5.1%). In last year's analysis, this figure was 10%.

> **Candidates whose parents have a degree have a success rate that is 10% higher than those whose parents do not (6.1% vs 5.6%).** This is a slight increase compared to last year, when this figure was 9%.

> **Female candidates have a success rate that is 10% higher compared to male candidates (6.1% vs 5.5%).** This is a decrease compared to last year's figure of 14%.

> **Overall, White candidates have a success rate that is 46% higher than BAME candidates (7.1% vs 4.9%).** Black candidates have a success rate of 3.7% compared to 4.6% for candidates of Other (including Mixed) ethnicities, 5.0% for Asian candidates, and 6.7% for White candidates.

Selection: recommendations

> **Reducing bias:** Most firms have taken a variety of measures to reduce bias in the selection process and this is a positive development. Taking a more balanced approach (including generally de-weighting academic credentials) appears to have had a significant impact in ensuring that a relatively diverse applicant base moves beyond initial screening. Most firms check for bias at each stage of the selection process in order that they can take remedial measures where necessary. However, it would be useful to collect and perhaps share more information on precisely which interventions have had the most positive effect on reducing bias at each firm in order to provide additional shared learning for Access Accountancy signatories.

> **Intersectionality:** The data suggest that adverse affects in relation to socio-economic background are gradually being addressed, although there is more to do. However, there is less attention to the intersections between ethnicity, gender and social class. It is important to address this issue since quantitative data demonstrates that individuals with intersecting diversity characteristics encounter particular issues in the selection process.

Appendix A: Firms and bodies submitting data

Firm Name	Recruitment	Work Experience	Professional Bodies
BDO	x	x	ACCA
Blick Rothenberg	x	x	CIPFA
Cafcass		x	ICAEW
Deloitte	x	x	
Duncan & Toplis		x	
EY	x	x	
Grant Thornton	x	x	
Kingston Smith	x	x	
KPMG	x	x	
Mazars		x	
MHA MacIntyre Hudson	x		
Moore Stephens		x	
National Audit Office	x	x	
Price Bailey	x	x	
PwC	x	x	