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Managing Uncertainty and Risk in Access to the Solicitors' Profession in England: Classed Pathways?

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Abstract

Despite decades of diversity and widening participation initiatives, access to elite professions for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds remains a troublingly persistent issue. Degree apprenticeships present an alternative to the traditional university pathway and an opportunity to increase social mobility into professional occupations. Yet, uptake of this pathway has so far been from more advantaged individuals. This article explores the dispositions of key stakeholders towards alternative pathways. It asks whether professional apprenticeships are perceived as legitimate and, if not, what are the likely consequences? Using the solicitors' profession in England as a pertinent case, interviews with 23 participants on the degree apprenticeship and university pathways were asked about their social and educational backgrounds, exploring the influences on their career and pathway decision making. The analysis demonstrates differing perceptions of risk and legitimacy among those from different social and educational backgrounds, with implications for equity, inequality and social mobility.

Keywords

decision making, degree apprenticeships, higher education, inequalities, legal profession, social class, social mobility, socio-economic background

Introduction

Social mobility continues to challenge policymakers as the gap in incomes between the least and most advantaged in society has widened over successive decades (Dorling, 2019; Major and Machin, 2018). Several government reports, for example, *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (Cabinet

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Office, 2009), highlight social closure in the professions and call for new on-the-job training routes, for instance, apprenticeships. The introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015 seeks to tackle social disparities between those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in access to work, wages and skills opportunities through the promotion of vocational education and training (Cook et al., 2021), and feature in the UK Government's levelling-up agenda (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). Degree apprenticeships offer a flexible alternative to the traditional university pathway (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020), which could disrupt existing inequalities in access to the solicitors' profession if sufficient opportunities were available and taken up by socially mobile individuals (Casey and Wakeling, 2022). Yet, uptake of degree apprenticeships (all sectors) among under-19-year-olds has been dominated by individuals from advantaged backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2020) with worrying implications for social mobility. Moreover, professional occupations, including law, are highly institutionalised and access (and progression) tends to favour those seen as possessing 'legitimate' forms of cultural capital (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Giazitzoglu and Muzio, 2021; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Rivera, 2016), which favours those from more advantaged backgrounds, especially the privately educated and those attending particular universities (Savage, 2015). Consequently, alternative pathways may only be successful if accepted and endorsed by those commanding other forms of 'legitimacy'.

The focus of this article is on the perceptions of alternative pathways into the solicitors' profession among aspiring solicitors from different social and educational backgrounds, and the influence of background on pathway decision making. This article extends existing scholarship on social mobility and the reproduction of inequality in access to elite professions in England by exploring the influence of social background, parental expectations, social networks and institutional status on perceptions of pathway legitimacy.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: first, literature concerned with the relationship between higher education and access to elite professions is considered to argue that inequalities based on social background have implications for understanding the perceptions and experiences of aspiring solicitors. I then bring together different theoretical perspectives on decision making and social inequalities. Then, the university and degree apprenticeship pathways to qualification as a solicitor are outlined. This is followed by the methods section, which introduces the research sample and methods of data collection and analysis. Next, the findings are presented and analysed, followed by a discussion of how participants from different social backgrounds understood their pathway choices and the influences on their decision making. Finally, the article concludes with implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

Higher Education and Access to Elite Professions

The global expansion of higher education (Schofer and Meyer, 2005; Trow, 2007) has, arguably, democratised access to graduate careers and increased upward social mobility into the professions (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 6). It has also changed the nature of universities, the relationship between the university and students, and devalued the currency of a university degree (Trow, 2007). An informal hierarchy and published league

tables of university rankings bestow varying degrees of prestige and symbolic capital on university graduates, placing a significant graduate premium on those attending particular universities, especially Oxford, Cambridge and those in London (Boliver, 2015; Britton et al., 2016; Wakeling and Savage, 2015). As higher education is the dominant pathway into the professions, including law, the decision to go to university is important (Casey and Wakeling, 2022). However, where to go also has increased significance, as ‘it is access to the elite institutions which conveys the glittering prizes’ (Savage, 2015: 257). This particularly applies in relation to access to elite law firms, as recruitment strategies favour a small number of elite universities that seek to appoint graduates with markers of high-status cultural capital (Ashley, 2022; Ashley et al., 2015; Rivera, 2016; Sommerlad, 2016; Zimdars, 2010).

Several scholars highlight the risks of higher education participation and the implications for social mobility. For example, Reay (2015) highlights the troubling issues in widening access to higher education, where greater numbers of students from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds go to university, but specifically to lower-status and less well-resourced institutions, which intensifies inequalities based on class (also ethnicity) between different strata of higher education. Where those from lower socio-economic backgrounds do access university they are less likely to attend more selective, elite universities, more likely to discontinue their studies, less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities and less likely to achieve the degree classification typically required for a good graduate job or post-graduate study (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Boliver, 2013, 2015; Purcell et al., 2013; Reay, 2015), with consequences for their positioning in the competition for entry to higher-status occupations, such as law (Ashley et al., 2015; Rivera, 2016; Sommerlad, 2016; Zimdars, 2010).

The Role of Social Networks

Research by Friedman and Laurison (2019: 34) highlights the relative social exclusivity of various professions, including law, finding that the children of lawyers are 17 times more likely to go into law than those whose parents worked in other occupations. They argue that parents in such occupations, being familiar with the ‘rules of the game’, are particularly well placed to provide their children with essential knowledge, and to broker opportunities for internships and career openings (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 35). This has implications for social diversity in the professions, as those with access to relevant social capital have an advantage in access to opportunities for sponsorship, privileging those from middle-class backgrounds (Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Savage, 2015).

The concept of sponsored mobility is premised on a perspective of upward social mobility. Here, entry into an elite is facilitated by the careful and controlled selection by those who belong to the establishment (Turner, 1960: 855). Aspirants wishing to join the elite must find a sponsoring agent who will induct them into the profession. The dynamics of upward social mobility are governed by the established elite, and it is this structure, or set of rules, that directs and constrains aspirants’ agency and decision making. Aspirants must demonstrate their merit on terms defined by the established elite, and secure sponsorship from one of its members (Turner, 1960: 856). This suggests that for those aspiring solicitors without relevant professional connections, the risks of the university pathway are both complex and subtle, however, even a tenuous connection can be helpful.

'Weak ties' to those who can provide information or assistance have been emphasised as a powerful form of social capital (Granovetter, 1973, cited by Savage, 2015: 132). Those with a wide network of weak ties are potentially in a stronger position to find out about opportunities by bridging 'structural holes' (Savage, 2015: 132). Savage (2015) argues that the use of weak ties can benefit individuals from a range of social backgrounds. However, Abrahams (2017: 631) argues that students from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to use their social networks, with working-class students potentially more sensitive to values of meritocracy and honour, having to prove themselves in a middle-class field and 'present themselves as individuals of value and moral worth' (2017: 632). This suggests that working-class students are disadvantaged in finding and securing opportunities to access legal work experience or sponsorship.

Decision Making and Social Inequalities

Research seeking to explain social inequalities in access to more prestigious educational and career opportunities argues that maintaining the same social status as one's parents is an important motive in decision making (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). The concept of relative risk aversion (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997) holds that individuals try to minimise the chance of intergenerational downward social mobility and seek to achieve at least the same class position as their parents, with those from different class backgrounds behaving differently in their decision-making approaches, such that those from more advantaged backgrounds are 'more likely to engage in financially costly, status-seeking behaviour than those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who will prioritise the minimisation of financial risk' (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018: 985).

Other research exploring the influence of socio-economic background on career decision making has focused on individual dispositions and how these are shaped by habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus is defined by Bourdieu (1977: 72) as comprising 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structuring structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'. This can be understood as an evolving process through which individuals' disposition – how they think, perceive and act – is embodied both individually and collectively (Costa and Murphy, 2015). Bourdieu (1977) identifies the key sites for the development of habitus as the family and the education system. The concept of habitus is not universally accepted, and some scholars argue that it is structurally deterministic in accounting for social actions (see Archer, 2007; DiMaggio, 1979; Goldthorpe, 2007). However, an interesting and potentially significant feature of habitus is that, although durable, it is also malleable as an 'open system of disposition' (Bourdieu, 1992: 133) and can be modified through experiences. Although, as noted by Burke (2015), people are more likely to engage in experiences that reinforce, rather than modify, their existing habitus.

Research by Hodkinson (1998) suggests that personal disposition and perceptions have a strong influence on how young people make career decisions. According to Hodkinson (1998: 558), decision making involves 'dispositions in a combination of the tacit, intuitive, discursive, and rational and [mostly] pragmatic use of information, advice and opportunities perceived to be available and relevant at the time'. Decisions are 'bounded by the person's "horizons for action" in an inseparable combination of educa-

tional and labour market opportunities and the person's perceptions of what was available and/or suitable' (Hodkinson, 1998: 558).

Studies by Ball et al. (2002) and Reay et al. (2005) explore decision-making processes and how social background is implicated in access to various forms and sources of knowledge about pathways and opportunities, shaping individuals' choices. Ball et al. (2002) contend that young working-class individuals tend to rely more on 'cold knowledge', for example in the form of prospectuses. The concept of choice has been extended by Ball et al. (2002), distinguished on the basis of social class, to identify what they call 'contingent' and 'embedded' choosers. 'Contingent' choosers, they argue, are constrained by uncertainty and characterised by a lack of social capital and support, relying heavily on a small network for 'hot' knowledge but end up relying more on 'cold' knowledge (Ball et al., 2002: 337). Choices for 'contingent' choosers are vague and expectations unrealistic, loosely connected to imagined futures, rather than part of a long-term strategy (Reay et al., 2005). Conversely, 'embedded' choosers have direct links with parents, other relatives and friends with relevant experiences, accessing a combination of both 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge to inform their decision making (Ball et al., 2002). The implication of this for the 'embedded' chooser is that career aspirations are 'often longstanding and vividly imagined, part of a coherent and connected personal narrative' (Reay et al., 2005: 119). This advantages middle-class individuals, where access to relevant social networks has a developmental role on the habitus, inculcating dispositions and values that match the institutions and occupation aspired to (Reay, 2015).

These arguments raise questions about the influence of social background among aspiring solicitors seeking to access the solicitors' profession in England and the implications of this for social mobility through alternative pathways. Specifically, how are perceptions and experiences of alternative pathways influenced by social background? How do perceptions of the legitimacy of alternative pathways vary between aspiring solicitors from different social class backgrounds? What does this mean for reducing class-based inequalities in access to the solicitors' profession in England?

Comparing University and Degree Apprenticeship Pathways

An overview of the university and degree apprenticeship pathways into the solicitors' profession is helpful in understanding the respective features that may influence the decisions of aspiring solicitors (see Figure 1).

University Pathway

The university pathway is the dominant and increasingly popular route to qualification as a solicitor in England and Wales. For instance, the most recently available data indicate the number of UK-domiciled students accepted onto a law degree at a university in England and Wales has increased from 18,850 in 2017/2018 to 20,905 in 2020 (The Law Society, 2020). These figures indicate an increase on the numbers graduating in law (see Table 1).

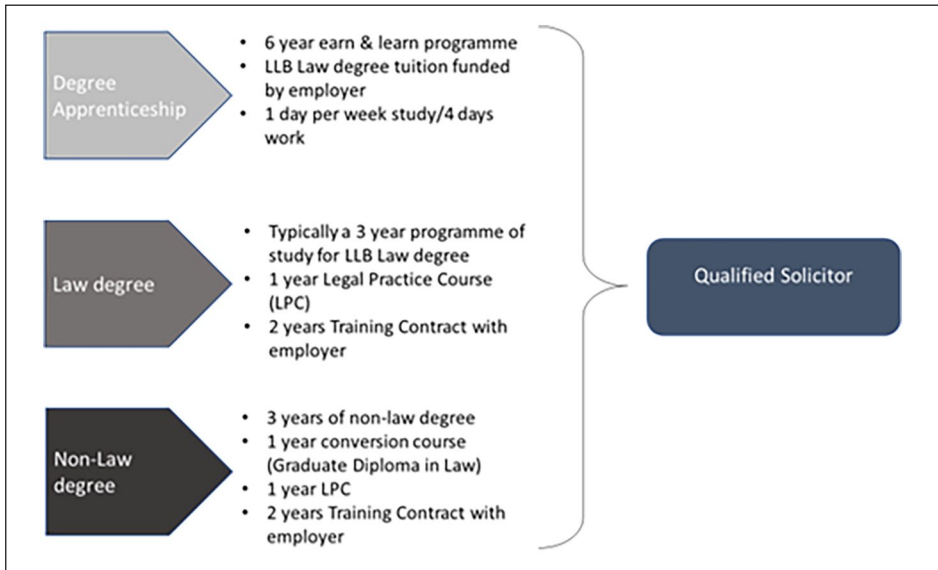


Figure 1. Outline of university and apprenticeship pathways to the solicitor qualification in England and Wales.

Source: Casey and Wakeling (2022).

However, registrations of training contracts, the traditional pinch point of qualification, increased from 5719 to 6344 for the same period (The Law Society, 2020).

Tables 1 and 2 indicate a clear over-supply of law graduates, compared with the number of available training contracts, highlighting the nature of the competition for those on the university pathway.

The university pathway from undergraduate (law) through to the qualification stage is a six-year commitment, similar to the degree apprenticeship pathway in timescale.

Degree Apprenticeship Pathway

The alternative degree apprenticeship pathway provides certainty of progression to full qualification as a solicitor through a combination of off-the-job study for professional qualifications, including a degree, and on-the-job training over a six-year period with the apprentice having 'employee' status and earning a wage. The cost of training and qualifications is paid for by the employer through the Apprenticeship Levy.¹ This pathway is quite new, and the number of available places limit it as an option for many, being used by employers as just one of several tracks, rather than replacing traditional graduate recruitment.² For instance, the total solicitor apprenticeship starts in the period 2016 to 2019 were just over 300, with a further 242 starts in 2020 (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2021a).

While the degree apprenticeship pathway is still new, relative distinctions in prestige, pay and career progression between pathways remain to be seen. However, the degree apprenticeship pathway is gaining some traction among even the most elite law firms,

Table 1. Number of students graduating in first degree in law from universities in England and Wales for 2009, 2014, 2019.

Year of graduation	Men	Women	Total
2009	5102	8331	13,433
2014	6056	10,063	16,119
2019	5652	10,846	16,498
% CHANGE:			
2019 ON 2009	10.8	30.2	22.8
2019 ON 2014	-6.7	7.8	2.4

Source: The Law Society (2020).

Table 2. Number of training contracts registered in 2008–2009 and 2018–2019, by gender.

Year	Male	%	Female	%	Total
2008–2009	2227	38.3	3582	61.7	5809
2018–2019	2196	34.6	4148	65.4	6344
% CHANGE:					
2018–2019 OVER 2008–2009	-1.4		15.8		9.2

Source: The Law Society (2020).

with Allen and Overy recruiting six solicitor apprentices in September 2022, a small proportion of the previous intake of 41 trainee solicitors through traditional graduate recruitment route (Hussain, 2021).

Method

The data for this article come from a wider qualitative study of 23 aspiring solicitors. The aim of the research was to understand perceptions of alternative pathways among aspiring solicitors from different social and educational backgrounds, and the influence on pathway choices and experiences. This article extends existing scholarship on social mobility and the reproduction of inequality in access to elite professions in England by exploring the influence of social background, parental expectations, social networks and institutional status on perceptions of pathway legitimacy.

In seeking to access individual perceptions and experiences, approaches emphasising criteria such as causality, generalisability and replicability were not appropriate (Tracy, 2013). Instead, a qualitative, ideographic approach, emphasising the unique features of each case was apt (Waring, 2012). This approach allows the unravelling of the complexities of a situation and more biographical detail and nuance than quantitative approaches can achieve (Bryman, 2016). The research design (see Table 3) adopted a purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy to seek out the richest information and make the most appropriate comparisons within the resources available (Emmel, 2013: 38). This

Table 3. Summary of participants.

Pathway	Elite	Non-elite
Apprenticeship	6	3
University		
Trainee solicitors	2	3
Student	4	5
Total (n)	12	11

ensured a wide range of possible voices were heard. Furthermore, Tracy (2013) proposes credibility as a marker of quality in qualitative research, which can be achieved through the multivocality of participants by the inclusion of a variety of participants' points of view. The sample of 23 was a small and self-selecting proportion of the overall population of aspiring solicitors, which limits the claims to knowledge. However, this provided meaningful insights from information-rich cases (Emmel, 2013; Patton, 2002).

The sample was divided into two broad categories: (1) apprentice solicitors on the six-year degree apprenticeship pathway; (2) those following the university pathway, which included undergraduate law students at any stage of their three-year degree and trainee solicitors, that is, those who had completed their undergraduate university education and were at the training contract stage. Participants were further categorised by the type of institution in which they worked or studied (law firm³/university, elite or non-elite, based on Russell Group⁴ membership) to give a maximum-variation sample of possible perspectives and experiences.

Recognising the complexities in providing a definition of social class, individuals were classified using a combination of self-definition and proxy indicators, based on the type of school attended, the highest level of parental education and parental occupation. On this basis, participants were divided into two broad groups: working class (less advantaged) and middle class (more advantaged). For those not fitting precisely within these categories, a best approximation was made to assign individuals to one category or the other.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited using a combination of invitation emails, identified from university websites and social media. For university students, using email and LinkedIn, university Law School heads of department and lecturers were requested to (a) provide a pre- or post-lecture time slot for a call for participants to be made in person, or (b) to forward a link to a research webpage by email to their law students – this contained information about the study and a link to the participant information and consent form. Trainee solicitors and apprentices were contacted through private university legal education providers via social media (LinkedIn and Twitter) and asked them to share a link to a research webpage. This approach was successful and allowed additional participants to be recruited through 'snowballing' the sample (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Data collection occurred during 2017 and the first half of 2018. A total of 23 in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants were asked about their family backgrounds, social contacts, school background, including the type of school attended, academic achievements, access to and experiences of (in)formal work experience, motivation and influences on their career decision making, together with reflection on experiences and perceptions of their chosen route. Interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying characteristics. Following immersion in the data, which comprised close reading of interview transcripts, the data were coded using NVivo Version 12 software. Emergent codes were highlighted for in-depth analysis; these were the expectations for the future, institutional status, social networks and access to work experience.

Findings

Expectations for the Future

For some participants, going to an elite university and pursuing a professional career were longstanding goals. For example, Vic's (private school, elite university, middle class, male) pathway to university and a career in law had been cultivated within the family and the legal internship opportunities this facilitated for him, shaping his self-concept, aspirations and expectations for education and career goals, such that he felt no doubt that he would achieve his ambitions: 'I will probably be a solicitor, I would say that's 80% sure.' For Vic, the university pathway was a longstanding elaborated expectation, by both family and school, as is typical of those from advantaged backgrounds (Barg et al., 2020), influencing expectations for the future and dispositions towards career decision making. Vic explained: 'there was such a tight focus, there was never any question that I wasn't going to go to university. It was what I was expected to do.'

In contrast, some working-class participants were unfamiliar with university but, nonetheless, aspired to go to university. For example, Ulrika (state school, elite university, working class, female) commented about the influence of school: 'they were very much, like, university is the only option'. Ulrika's family had no prior experience of higher education and her parents' occupational status, and level of qualifications, as proxies for habitus (Bodovski, 2015: 51 in Costa and Murphy, 2015) indicate that going to university was not within their habitus. The habitus acts as an internalised and unconscious constraint on what individuals feel they can and cannot do (Bourdieu, 1986) and shaped Ulrika's aspirations and her disposition towards alternative pathways. Her lack of experience and connections within both university and the legal profession informed her disposition to avoid the new and unfamiliar degree apprenticeship pathway and to rely on the school habitus, which tracked academically able pupils towards university.

Other interviewees spoke of the push towards university. Harry (state school, non-elite apprentice, working class, male) explained: '[university] was sort of pushed, almost, there wasn't really any mention of apprenticeships'. Having attended a state comprehensive school up to the age of 16, he continued his education at a high performing sixth form college in a nearby northern town. Reflecting on the type of school, Harry commented: 'A lot of people from private school went there and it's sort of recognised as

similar quality but minus the fees, basically.’ Schools have a role in developing aspirations and capitals in the form of access to information about universities and knowledge of other post-school options (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). The aspirations of those attending particular types of schools can ‘override the theoretically expected habitus of the class of origin’ (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014: 474). This institutional habitus can result in working-class students having higher aspirations than they might otherwise have had (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). For a high achieving sixth form college, students are typically expected to pursue an academic (university) pathway. However, the uncertainty of the university application process, led to Harry feeling the need to have a backup plan; as he explains: ‘I was worried that I wasn’t going to get [into] uni and so I applied for a couple of different apprenticeships.’ This fear of failure presented the university pathway as a risk in achieving his career goals.

Harry’s perspective is typically associated with those from a working-class background, characterised by contingency (Reay et al., 2005). Coming across an advertisement for the degree apprenticeship route on social media led to a consideration of the costs involved in qualifying as a solicitor:

On results day I decided that I was going to do the apprenticeship – my offer was confirmed for my first choice – because I wanted to qualify as a solicitor [and would have] up to £60,000 of debt by the time I’d qualify.

Interesting here is the suggestion of rationality in calculating cost/benefits and managing his risk so that he would be able to, at least, achieve his aspiration to qualify as a solicitor and this informed his decision to apply for the apprenticeship, rather than take up the place at university.

Institutional Status

Some participants demonstrated an awareness of the different types of university. For example, Laura (state school, elite university, working class, female) talks about researching about universities using ‘cold knowledge’, typically associated with individuals from less advantaged backgrounds (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005, Slack et al., 2014): ‘I was literally looking through universities and found that the Russell Group were the best universities in the country. So, then I was like, these are the ones that I want to go to.’ For Laura, institutional status was important, challenging assumptions based on her social starting point that she would choose a lower-status pathway (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Reay et al., 2005; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993).

In a different way, institutional status was also a concern for other interviewees. For instance, Vic (private school, elite university, middle class, male) commented on his choice of university:

It was always going to be at least Russell Group . . . there was always this thing where I felt that I had a big progression because my dad went to Hull and my mum went to Plymouth, and I’ve done one better than that. It’s kind of . . . I don’t know, I felt there was a need for progression [. . .]. So, there’s always that in the back of the mind, well, try and keep it moving forward, keep moving up.

Vic's concern with social progression is interesting here, as he did not discuss the possibility of failure in achieving his career goal but, rather, was concerned with status enhancement and achieving a higher status than his family of origin, in accordance with the expectations from his social starting point (Goldthorpe, 2007). Institutional status as a measure of success was of such importance that deviation into an unknown pathway would have presented a risk to the goal of social progression. For Vic, the degree apprenticeship pathway did not fit with the expectations directed by his habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). When asked whether he would have chosen the degree apprenticeship pathway, Vic responded that he would not have considered this as an option: 'I think I would have . . . a perception of it being a lesser pathway.'

Social Networks and Access to Work Experience

Some interviewees were consciously cultivated (Lareau, 2011) through family aspirations and contacts in the legal profession, which allowed the mobilisation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) to gain access to work experience with law firms. For example, Vic had been privately educated and his family provided access to a relevant professional network. Vic talked about obtaining work experience at a large, elite, law firm through his dad's contacts:

I'd done an internship at [large international law firm] through my school, but that was only a week. This was long-term and was with [large law firm], it naturally came from my dad [. . .] one of the partners come up to me while I was there and he said – he didn't even say hello, he was known for being abrupt, and he said 'Oh, who's your dad then?', because that's the way that people ended up being interns there.

Vic's social capital had the capacity for leverage and reciprocity, through his dad's business relationship with a law firm, to create opportunities for valuable legal work experience. His account illustrates the common practice of informal sponsorship for work experience based on social connections at a law firm and shows how middle-class advantages in the graduate labour market are maintained through the support of their social networks and 'sponsored mobility' (Turner, 1960, cited by Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 109), providing access to insights, knowledge and opportunities for work experience valued by future employers (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Purcell et al., 2013). Vic's social capital had an exchange value which worked to transform 'the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group' (Bourdieu, [1986] 2002, cited by Abrahams, 2017: 635).

For other participants with prior legal work experience, access was obtained through 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973, cited by Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 110). For example, Dilys (state school, elite apprentice, middle class, female) talked about her informal work experience in a local law firm, facilitated through her mum's work colleague, over several years and how this had informed her decision to pursue a career in law:

I've been doing law work experience since about 13 years old and all of that kind of confirmed my interest and made me know that this was what I wanted to do . . . someone [mum] works with – his wife is the CEO [chief executive officer] of a personal injury law firm. So, I [. . .] went back for a few consecutive years right up till I was about 16/17 and worked for them.

For Dilys, there was a commitment to her career goal of becoming a solicitor. However, she was aware of the competition for entry to the solicitors' profession and her social contacts were not sufficient to facilitate a training contract place. Despite her middle-class background, Dilys switched pathway direction to pursue an apprenticeship, preferring the guarantee of qualification through this pathway, confounding the expectations from her habitus that she would choose an elite university and follow the traditional pathway.

Similarly, Harry (state school, non-elite apprentice, working class, male) sought out informal work experience and made the most of any social capital, for instance, he talked about his mum's boss leveraging the position as a law firm client to ask for work experience for him: 'I'd done work experience at a couple of firms in London . . . so, one was through a family member who knew a partner at a firm in London – it was through my mum's boss.'

Another participant was able to access legal work experience through her school friend. Sally (private school, non-elite university, working class, female) explained how she found inequalities in opportunities for legal work experience:

my friend's father is a managing partner at a law firm in [northern city] . . . I did feel very much like I was being looked down on and very much like 'oh god, she's a [stereotype] girl . . .', and it was all 'I don't think she should be here.' It was that everyone else there was quite well spoken and when I'd spoken to them, they said 'Oh, well my dad's a solicitor at x firm in London', or 'my dad's a solicitor at this place'. So, they all had legal connections and they'd done vac schemes [internships] and whatever and I hadn't been able to get into any of those things.

Sally's experience indicates a reliance on 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973, cited by Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 110), her awareness of her lack of privilege in accessing valuable work experience and the discomfort that this caused her.

The experiences of the above participants demonstrate how advantages through social networks vary for individuals from different backgrounds. Whereas Vic, Dilys and Harry had some starting social capital through their parents' professional networks, which were more longstanding and implied, these networks were recognisably different involving both 'strong' and 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973, cited by Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 110). However, Sally's family had no connections with the legal profession and her claim to social capital was weaker than Vic's, having no exchange value and based on acquired social capital through school.

Most interviewees following the university route had no formal work experience and tended to rely on notions of hard work in their studies as being the key to success in achieving their career goals. However, students had become increasingly aware of the competition for internships ('vac scheme') and training contracts in access to the legal profession. For example, Gavin (state school, non-elite university, working class, male), who had no access to a professional network and was the first in his family to go to university, applied to four vac scheme places and planned to apply for a further five:

I've applied to four so far. I've got another five to apply for . . . I just think that applying for vacation schemes and training contracts at the moment just brings to home really how competitive it is to get into – to become qualified for law. It's ok doing your degree but it's what comes afterwards if you want to qualify, I suppose.

It was not unusual for students to make several vac scheme applications but to not hear anything in response, illustrating the risk of the university pathway for working-class students.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article explored the perceptions and experiences of alternative pathways among aspiring solicitors from different social backgrounds. The key finding was that the degree apprenticeship pathway did not appear as legitimate to some participants from working-class backgrounds who may have benefitted the most from this pathway but rejected it in favour of university, including highly selective institutions. With respect to the sociology of education literature, this finding departs from the expectations from Breen and Goldthorpe's (1997) concept of relative risk aversion, which would anticipate that working-class participants would prioritise the minimisation of financial risk by selecting the degree apprenticeship pathway, rather than the financially costly university pathway. Although for participants from the most advantaged social class backgrounds the assumptions that they would prioritise status-enhancement (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018) was borne out.

The findings suggest that participants' perceptions of pathway legitimacy were influenced by their social class background but that a simple binary of the middle class choosing the university route and the working class choosing the degree apprenticeship route was not supported. The competition for graduate jobs, particularly highly competitive ones in the English solicitors' profession, has been recognised by those from middle-class backgrounds who responded by either drawing on their greater capital resources to secure the most lucrative opportunities, for instance, work experience and vac schemes, or adapted to the opportunities presented by the new degree apprenticeship route. These results suggest that class fractions (Abrahams, 2017; Ball, 2003) may have played a role here with those from clearly secure middle-class backgrounds able to draw on their greater capital resources and favour the university pathway and the less secure middle class being more likely to choose the degree apprenticeship route.

With respect to the literature on social class and the role of social networks in access to the graduate labour market, the present study confirms the findings of Friedman and Laurison (2019) and Savage (2015) in the advantages conveyed through strong social networks, particularly parental professional networks, in securing essential knowledge and opportunities for relevant work experience. However, the findings here suggest that opportunities for working-class students accessible through 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973, cited by Friedman and Laurison, 2019) are insecure and less likely to be converted into sponsorship (Turner, 1960).

The present study suggests that individuals from working-class backgrounds are more adapted to the university route and the expectation to go to university appears to have

become part of the habitus of young working-class individuals. The findings here differ from Reay (2015) in that the participants from working-class backgrounds were aware of the relative status of different higher education institutions, which illuminates the role played by habitus in shaping individuals' perceptions and choices, supporting the notion of a malleable habitus (Bourdieu, 1992; Costa and Murphy, 2015).

The degree apprenticeship route, in opening up access to the profession directly with employers, arguably, by-passes the institutional sorting of the higher education sector and the social processes that maintain persistent inequalities in access. Importantly, the findings suggest that underlying social processes in choice and decision making among those from different social class backgrounds weaken the disruptive potential of this new route. However, if knowledge of, and trust in, the degree apprenticeship route increases more widely then, in time, we might expect to find increased participation among individuals from different social class backgrounds, similar to patterns of participation in higher education. Yet, it has taken decades to increase higher education participation among different socio-economic groups and there are still persistent inequalities in access between the most and least advantaged groups. The issue for the degree apprenticeship route is whether it can gather momentum to achieve its disruptive potential or, more likely, become co-opted as a mechanism of social reproduction, whereby law firms recruit those who they would have recruited anyway but at an earlier stage through the degree apprenticeship route, which presents an opportunity for further research.

The implications for policy and practice from this research emerge on several levels. A more strategic approach should be adopted to inform and educate different stakeholders about alternative pathways, admission requirements and any flexibility relating to contextual offers. The proposals from the Office for Students (OfS, 2020) to adjust the university admissions application process so that students apply to university after the release of examination results would introduce greater certainty.

I am not aware of any previous studies of the degree apprenticeship route into professional occupations in the English context. Further empirical research tracking aspiring solicitors' trajectories through a longitudinal research design would be beneficial and could be applied to other competitive professions and contexts where degree apprenticeships have recently been introduced (e.g. Jones et al., 2023).

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Notes

1. Since 2017, firms and organisations with a wage bill greater than £3m are required to pay 0.5% of their total wage bill, less a levy allowance of £15,000 per financial year, into the Apprenticeship Levy. The funds generated through the Levy must be spent on apprenticeship training. The government tops up the funds paid by the employer by 10% (Powell, 2018).
2. The Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) was introduced in 2021 and a qualifying law degree is no longer a pre-requisite to qualification as a solicitor. However, the SQE was not in existence at the time of data collection in 2017/2018. There is a transition period whereby students starting their courses on or before 31 December 2021 can still qualify through the LPC (Legal Practice Course [postgraduate]) route up to 31 December 2032 or can choose to qualify through the SQE route. All students starting courses after 31 December 2021 will have to qualify through the SQE (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2021b).
3. The law firms in the study mapped on to the following law firm profiles: large corporate, regional mid-tier, city/boutique, regional niche (Aulakh et al., 2017: 34).
4. A group of 24 research intensive UK universities in which students from more advantaged backgrounds are over-represented (Ashley, 2022; Social Mobility Commission, 2015).

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