

Accent Bias in Britain: Can accent bias impede social mobility?

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Social Mobility &
Child Poverty
Commission

A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions

June 2015

Dr Louise Ashley, Royal Holloway
Professor Jo Duberley, University
Professor Hilary Sommerlad, Uni
Professor Dora Scholarios, Unive

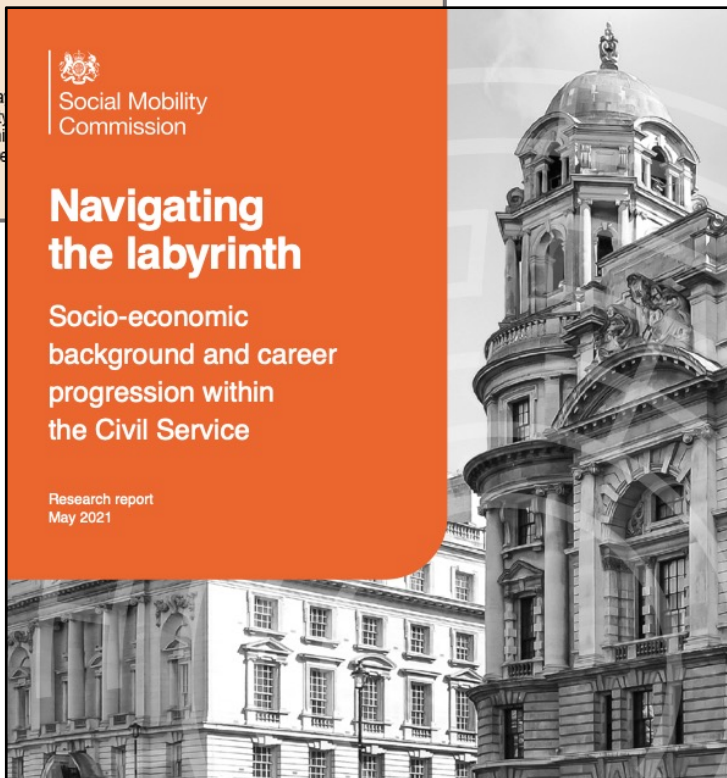


Social Mobility
Commission

Navigating the labyrinth

Socio-economic
background and career
progression within
the Civil Service

Research report
May 2021



Cultural Fit

“ individuals tend to **recruit in their own image**, or seek the characteristics most associated with professionalism, which in turn map on to social class. ”

Talent and polish

“ Many of the features which signal ‘talent’ are more likely to be possessed by individuals who have been **socialised into middle-class norms** ... ”

→ What is the role of **accent**
in these implicit biases?



Economic
and Social
Research Council



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Christian Ilbury

Advisory Board

Social Mobility Commission (SMC)

Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD)

Aspiring Solicitors

TODAY'S TALK

What is the problem?

What is the evidence?

What can we do about it?

What is the problem?

Accent All language vary in accent and grammar — we all have an accent

Bias All humans have systematic deviations in judgement, for fast processing



Accent bias

Accents naturally trigger social stereotypes, all listeners will have some initial associations

Discrimination

Reliance on such stereotypes to judge skills and competence

"The moment an Englishman opens his mouth, another Englishman despises him."

Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 1916

- Accent discrimination has long structured British society and life outcomes
- Charlene White (first black woman to present ITV News at Ten)
"I don't have the South London accent any more because my parents sent me to elocution lessons from the age of nine – I guess they had foresight."
- Self-modification by teachers (and many other professions) Baratta 2018
 - Teacher told to "sound **less** Cumbrian" after Ofsted inspection
 - One modified Mancunian accent "to speak **better** English... with a **proper** accent"
 - Another "realized how **terrible** my Glaswegian glottal stop sounded..."





Legal status

- Accent is not a protected characteristic under Equality Act 2010
- Yet signals many characteristics — ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, (class)
- Accent is a direct route for discrimination against these groups

Public awareness

- Awareness of accent bias is low
- People still openly express bias against specific social groups via accent

A 2006 survey of employers by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found the following:

Employers who admitted discriminating on the basis of accent

76%

Employers who include accent as a protected category

3%

What is the evidence?



Accent bias in Britain

- What are current attitudes to accents in the UK? Have they changed?

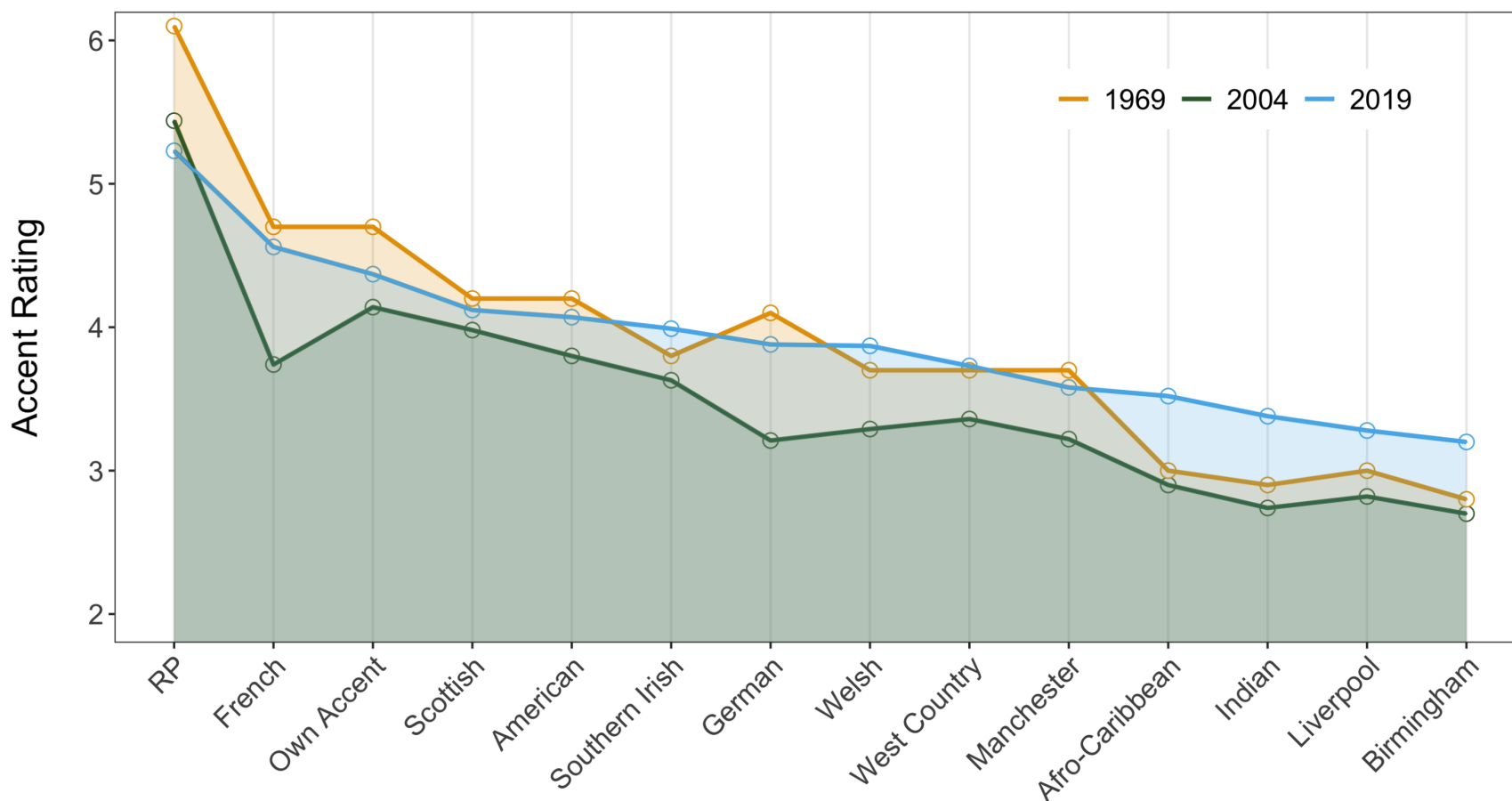
Consequences for fair access

- Do these biases influence employer judgements?
- Is an under-represented accent heard as less qualified *even if the candidate gave the same answer?*

Initial surveys with lawyers

"I hate to admit it, but I'm sure that almost every week my assessment of people I have only just met is affected by their accent. I will assume that someone with a **posh accent is better educated, more intelligent and reliable** than someone with a less smart accent. I should emphasise that I don't think it's right to do this, it's just one of a series of **snap judgements** I make about people I meet."

1: The UK has a well-established hierarchy of accent prestige.



[38 accents]

Preference for

- RP
- National standard accents
- French accent

Bias against

- Working class accents
- Minority ethnic accents

Little change over 50 years

2: These biases affect whether people hear a job candidate as sounding competent.



Received Pronunciation



Estuary English



Multicultural London English



General Northern English



Urban West Yorkshire English

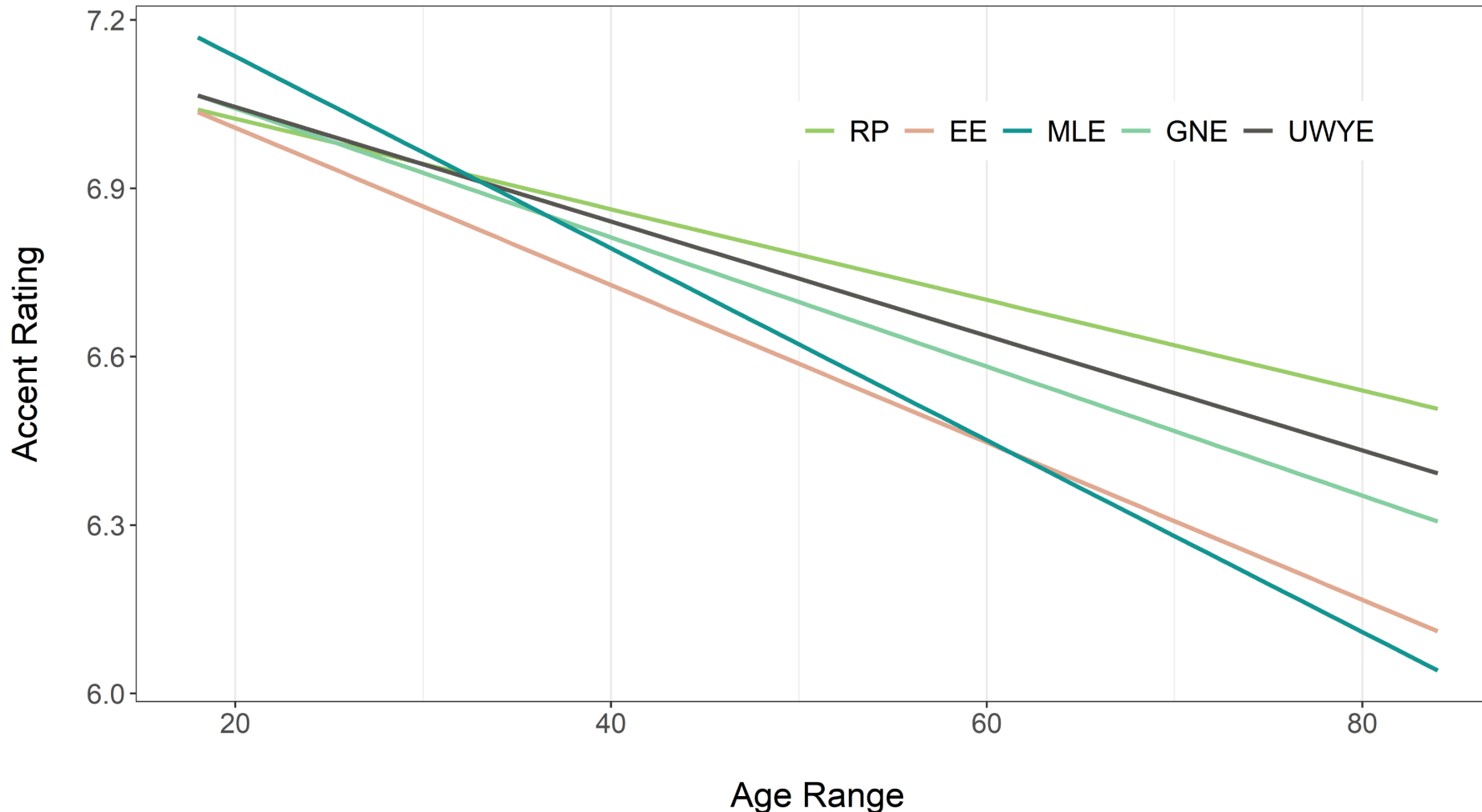
INTERSECTIONALITY OF ACCENT

	MIDDLE CLASS	WORKING CLASS
NORTH	GNE	UWYE
SOUTH	RP	EE white MLE multiethnic

Study design

- 2 “job candidates” per accent, all male
- Interviewing for trainee position at law firm
- Content and grammar identical
- Rated for competence, expertise, likelihood of success and personal likeability
- N=1062, all UK, across occupations

2: These biases affect whether people hear a job candidate as sounding competent.



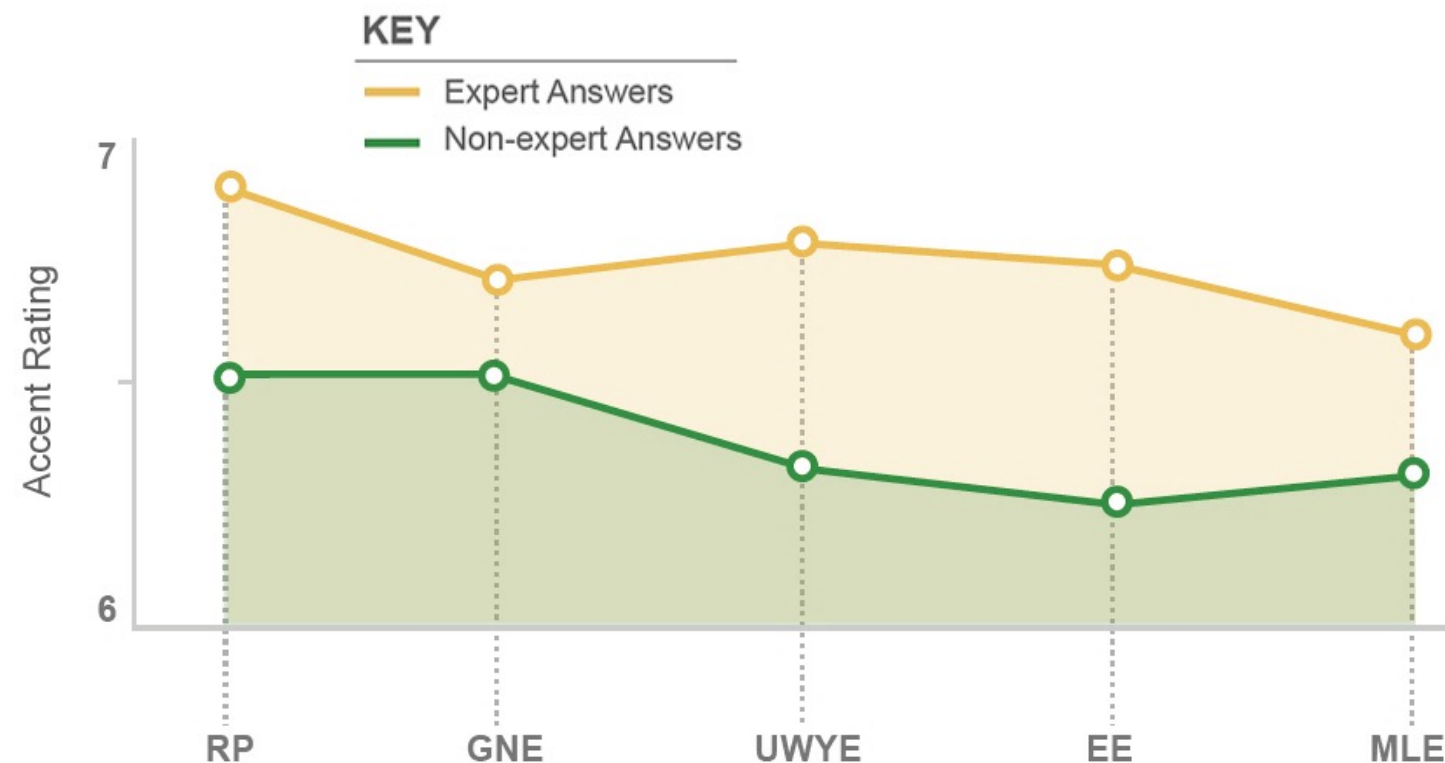
More bias

- Above age 45
- In Southern England
- In higher social classes

Context

- Big accent strength effect for Black speakers
- *But* lawyers able to suppress these biases, in a harder task

3. Bias is mitigated by expert content and by confidence.



Boost to competence ratings

- With expert content
- For all accents
- Effect also found for confidence

→ We encourage aspiring professionals to focus on knowledge and confidence, not suppressing accent



Pre-interview

- CVs with ethnic minority names received significantly fewer replies

(USA: Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004; UK: Wood et al. NatCen 2009)

During interview

- via accent-based judgements
- via conversational cues (e.g. less nodding, affirming; more awkward turn-taking)
= Higher stress for certain candidates

Post-interview

- Even if successful, bias may persist in workplace
- Can lead to isolation from colleagues
- Subtly impede career progression via other- or even self-exclusion

Do speaker's actual experiences reflect this?

4000 surveys and testimonials — 4 life stages

- Secondary school
- University
- Young professionals
- Senior professionals

→ *Experiences of bias and resulting career-related anxiety*

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/speaking-up-accent-social-mobility/>

SPEAKING UP

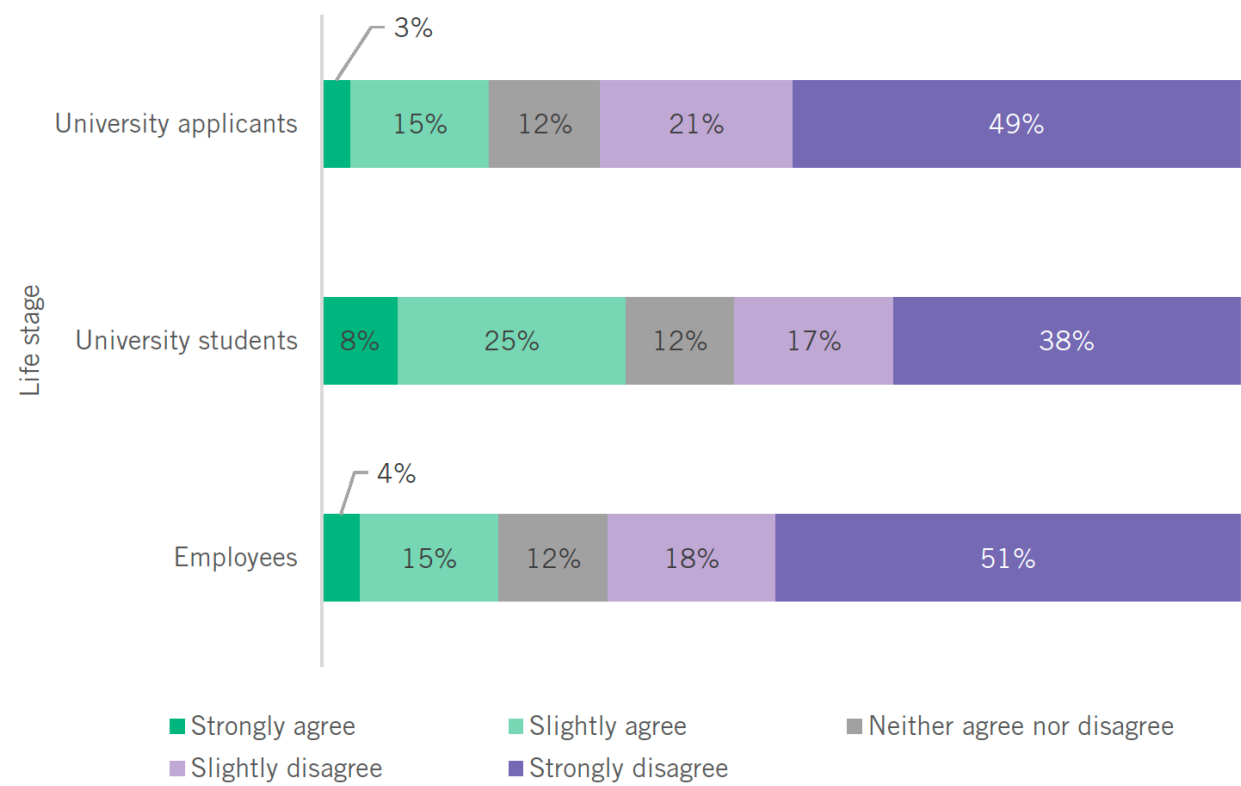
Accents and social mobility

Professor Erez Levon, Professor Devyani Sharma and
Dr Christian Ilbury

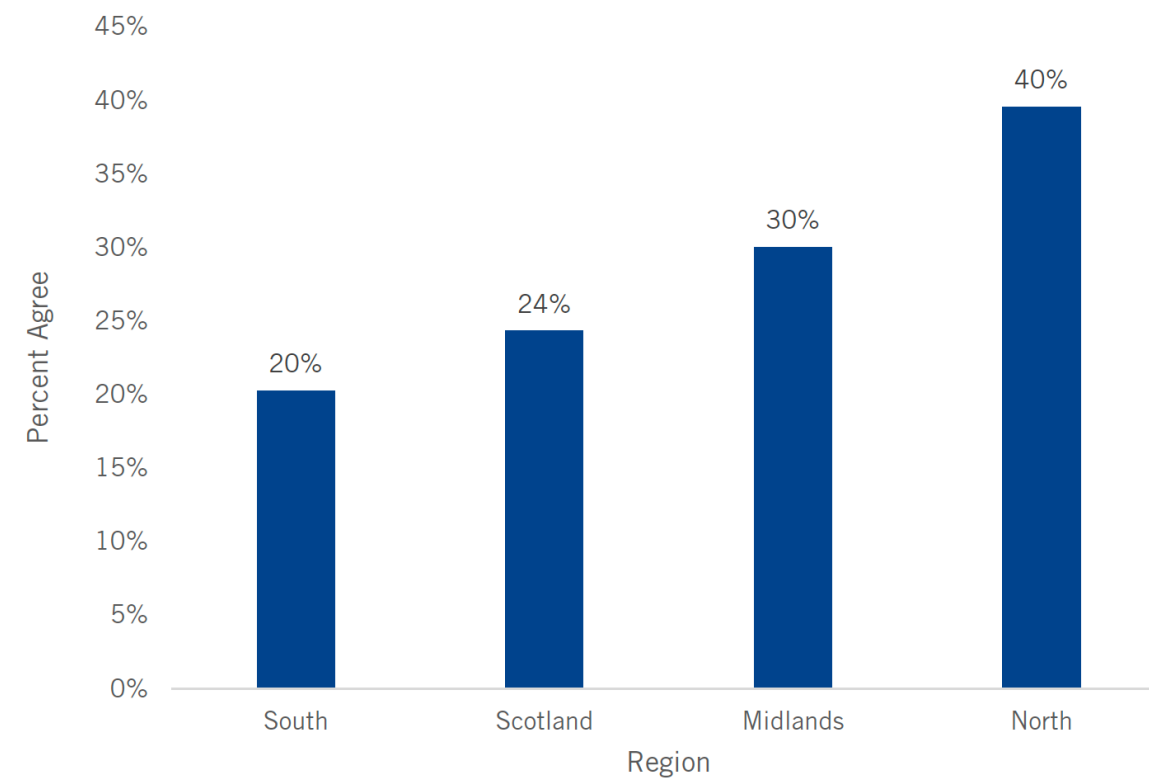
November 2022



Across life stages —
“I am concerned that my accent could affect my ability to succeed in the future.”

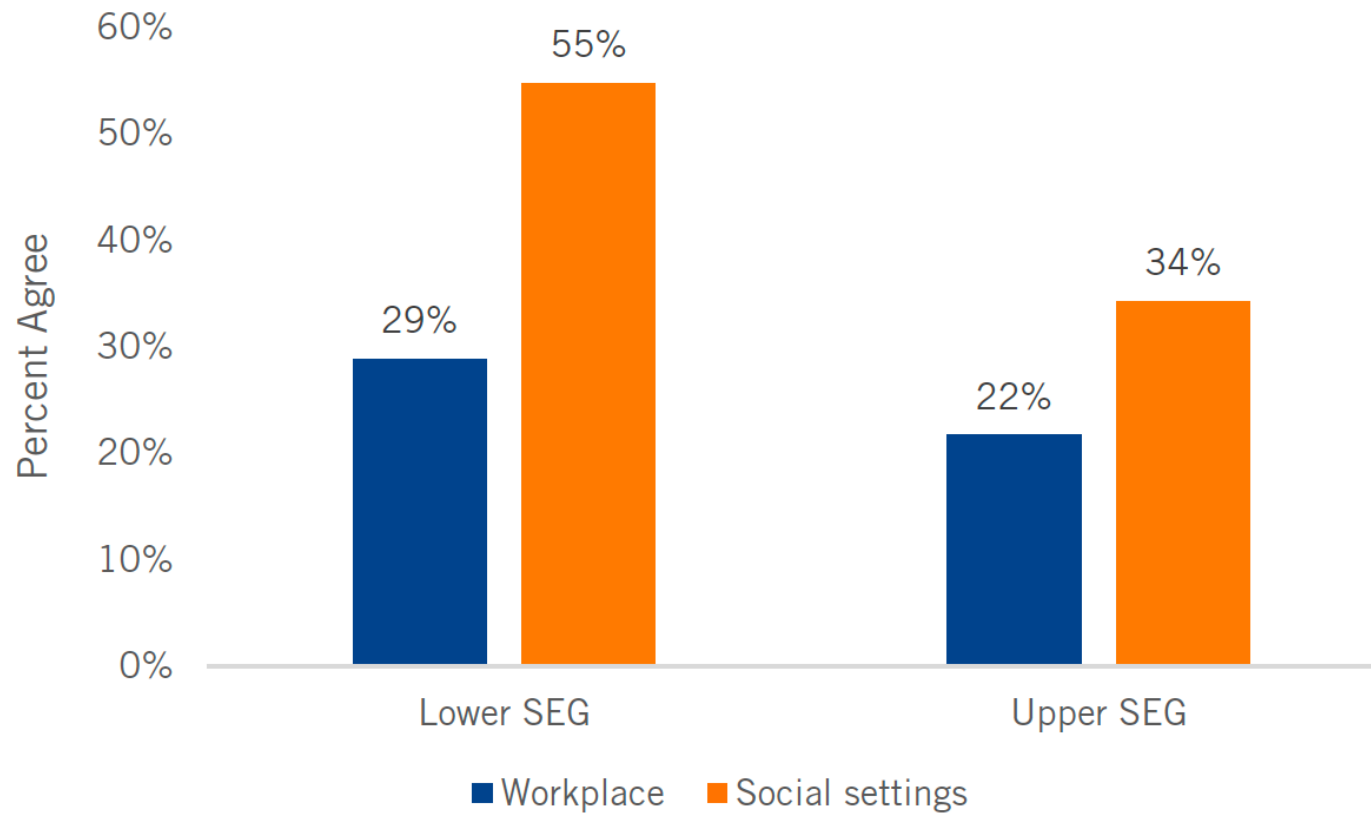


Early career employees —
“My accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in the workplace.”



Senior managers —

"My accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in the workplace / in a social setting."



Testimonials

Lancashire student

The overwhelming majority of students came from private and public schools. I was one of very few state school students. Most students would excuse themselves immediately after hearing my accent ... I did not join any societies or clubs at uni due to my insecurity about my accent. **I felt that I didn't belong.**

Lancashire student

My accent was described as '**uneducated**' and '**aggressive**' in tutorials. When I assert myself my accent was mocked as I **struggle to suppress it** when I am emotional.

East London teacher

I did realise at a really young age (subconsciously) that I had **to 'act white' if I wanted to succeed, so my accent was a lot 'posher' than my peers** at school for no clear reason. It was only when I grew up and learned about internalised racism that... my accent settled into something closer to 'normal'.

Estuary English lawyer

I was not given the promotion. I recall her [feedback] words to me, the VC had said **"great candidate, shame about the voice"...**

Nigerian NHS worker

I am glad you are raising awareness of this issue. Because a major problem we have is that, if we experience accent bias and raise the concern with our managers, **we are seen as trouble-makers.**

Fear of exclusion from elite professions among university students

Lancashire **Civil service** values communication skills – eloquence/being perceived as intelligent are not associated with my accent compared to RP.

Scottish **Medicine** feels very elitist, and my working class Scottish accent will not fit that narrative.

Glasgow I want to become a **solicitor**, but the legal sector is still very elitist so there tends to be a trend in lawyers sounding “more middle class”. However, I’ve met several solicitors who sound just like me, so maybe it is changing. I think if I wanted to become a judge however it would be a lot different.

Yorkshire I’m training to be a **speech and language therapist**, which is predominantly middle class white women with middle class accents. I know three lecturers all from places up North that have changed their accents to sound less “common”. This hasn’t been said but heavily implied, even demonstrated by one in a lecture who switched between accents.


Derbyshire I am at medical school and very few **doctors** I have met have regional accents.

Multicultural London English Within **finance**, especially banking, it seems like the vast majority of workers are from upper class backgrounds and as such have the same way of speaking.

What is the solution?

→ 15-minute interactive tutorials for HR teams, recruiters, and students

<https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-for-employers/>

 [Home](#) [About](#) [The project](#) [Results](#) [Training and tools](#) [Resources](#)

Training for employers

This page offers a 15-minute interactive tutorial to raise awareness of accent bias and help reduce its effects in hiring.

The tutorial will cover: why accent differences exist, what accent bias is, what accent discrimination is, and provide evidence-based advice on how to minimise it. You will also be informed about current attitudes to accent in Britain and whether or not such bias necessarily leads to discrimination when job candidates are evaluated.

🕒 Step 1

🕒 Step 2

🕒 Step 3

🕒 Step 4

🕒 Step 5

🕒 Step 6

→ Accent added to Social Mobility Commission's Professional Services Toolkit

<https://socialmobilityworks.org/organisation-directory/>

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Accent Bias in Britain
Accent Bias in Britain shares expert research



Aspiring Solicitors Foundation



Bridge Group
The Bridge Group is a non-profit consultancy



Raising awareness



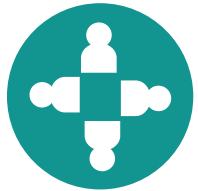
Identifying irrelevant information



Committing to fairness and objectivity



Increasing accountability



Appealing to multiculturalism and diversity



Raising awareness

Recruiters who read the following statement before judging job interview candidates had **significantly smaller differences** in how they rated identical interview responses in different accents:

Recent research has shown that, when evaluating candidates' performance, interviewers in the UK can be influenced by the candidates' accents of English. In particular, they tend to rate candidates who speak with a "standard" accent more favourably than candidates who speak with "non-standard" accents. This is an example of so-called "accent bias". The focus should be on the knowledge and skills of the candidate, not their accent. Please keep this in mind when assessing the suitability of candidates.



Raising awareness

How effective is such training?

- Not always, e.g. unconscious gender or racial bias training
- Our positive result suggests people are less aware of the problem of accent bias
- So accent bias training is useful

However...

- Unconscious bias training only raises *awareness* of bias
- It does not eliminate it
- Biases and stereotypes are reduced through lifelong diverse exposure
→ in school, university, workplace

Why not just code-switch to a standard accent?

Many people do!

Erasure

- Southern, white, middle-class norm
- Absence of voices and whole self from professions

Pressure

- Adds cognitive pressure for those already more anxious
- Isolation from own community

Unequal

- Only for certain groups
- Accent = hardest aspect of language to change, often least necessary to change

Levelling the field — advice

For speakers — Confidence and competence reduce biased listening

For listeners — Listen to what is said, not how it is said

→ *In a mobile world, expect difference, not a single standard.*

Accent bias **exists**.

It leads to **unequal outcomes** in many sectors of life.

It places a significant added **burden** on already disadvantaged applicants.

It can be **addressed** through awareness raising.

www.accentbiasbritain.org

@accentbias

#AccentBiasUK

Thank You



If you would like to take these tools or ideas further, please get in touch!

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