

SPEAKING UP

Accents and social mobility

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About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.

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Contents

Foreword.....	3
Key findings.....	4
Recommendations.....	6
Introduction.....	8
Background.....	8
Recent evidence of bias in the UK.....	10
Methodology.....	14
Experiences of accent bias of the lifespan.....	15
Life stage 1: Secondary school and sixth form.....	19
Life stage 2: University.....	23
Life Stage 3: Work.....	29
Later Career.....	31
Discussion.....	37
Evidence for practical solutions.....	38

Foreword

For 25 years, the Sutton Trust has engaged in understanding the barriers to social mobility, from early years through to the workplace. But beyond the grades you achieve and the educational institutions you attend, there are barriers to mobility that aren't discussed - accents.

How people speak is an extremely important part of how they are perceived. Accent is key to how someone is viewed. Our ears are finely tuned to the wide variety of accents heard across Britain. This leads us to make all sorts of value judgments about where someone is from, their education and their class. It is inevitable that some of these judgments, often made unconsciously, are likely to be wrong. Just because someone has a working-class accent from, say, Leeds or Liverpool, doesn't mean they're less capable.

Yet as today's research shows, there is a hierarchy of accent prestige entrenched in British society, with 'BBC English' being the dominant accent of those in positions of authority. This is despite the fact that less than 10% of the population have this accent. Many young people who don't feel like they have the 'right' accent are worried about the impact on their careers, and many have been mocked, criticised or singled out during their education, work and social lives.

I faced this myself when I was 11 years old. When I moved from Wakefield to Surrey, my broad Yorkshire accent stood out at my new school and resulted in me being mercilessly picked upon and ridiculed, and I learned to develop a Surrey accent in order to fit in. This is a common experience for those who are geographically or socially mobile. But this need not be the case.

Talent in Britain is spread evenly, but opportunities are not. That means there are talented young people with every kind of accent, but for many, they need to work harder to prove their worth, just because of how they speak.

This country has learned to be more diverse in many respects, but there remain taboos about accents. We must embrace the diversity of accents to enable those from all backgrounds and parts of the country to have the chance to succeed.

Sir Peter Lampl

Founder and Executive Chairman of the Sutton Trust, Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

“Talent in Britain is spread evenly, but opportunities are not. That means there are talented young people with every kind of accent, but for many, they need to work harder to prove their worth, just because of how they speak.”

Key findings

- Accent is arguably the primary signal of socio-economic status. It is also a major indicator of many other aspects of a person's social background, some of them protected characteristics, including gender, race, age, sexuality, and many others.
- A hierarchy of accent prestige has been entrenched in the United Kingdom for centuries, with Received Pronunciation (sometimes known as 'Queen's English' or 'BBC English') the dominant accent in positions of authority across the media, politics, the civil service, courtrooms, and the corporate sector. This is despite less than 10% of the population estimated to have this accent, almost exclusively from higher socio-economic backgrounds.
- Public attitudes to different accents have remained largely unchanged over time, with the standard Received Pronunciation accent, French-accented English, and 'national' standard varieties (Scottish, American, Southern Irish) all ranked highly, while accents associated with industrial cities of England, like Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham (commonly stereotyped as 'working class accents') and ethnic minority accents (Afro-Caribbean, Indian) are the lowest ranked.

Accent bias and anxiety across the life course

- Self-consciousness and anxiety about accent bias are highest during university, particularly when approaching the end of a degree and facing entry into a chosen career. 35% of university students reported being self-conscious about their accent, a higher proportion than among university applicants (largely 17-18 year-olds) (24%) and professionals in the workplace (23%).
- Across life stages, there is concern about how someone's accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future, a worry that was again highest for university students, at 33%, compared to 19% of employees and 18% of university applicants.
- Many students reported having been mocked, criticised or singled out in educational settings due to their accents (30% of university students and 29% of university applicants). This was also experienced by professionals in work situations (25%).
- Employees report higher levels of being mocked or singled out for their accent in a social setting (46%), with a similar proportion of university applicants reporting the same (40%) and just under half of all university students (47%).

Differences by region, socio-economic background and age

- In earlier life stages, region of origin (particularly the North of England and the Midlands) plays an important part in accent anxiety. Later, in the mid-life stage of professional employment, social class differences are more prominent. At all life stages, respondents from lower social grades report significantly more mocking or singling out of accent in workplace and social settings.
- For example, for both university applicants and university students, those originally from the North of England were the most likely to be concerned their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (29% of university applicants and 41% at university from the North, vs 10% and 19% respectively for those in the South, excluding London).

- For those in senior managerial roles from lower socio-economic backgrounds, 21% were worried their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future, compared to 12% from better-off families. Similarly, 29% of senior managers from working class families said they had been mocked in the workplace for their accent, vs 22% from a better off background.

Recommendations

For employers

It is normal for humans to have stereotypical associations with accents. However, if left unchecked, these biases and stereotypes can be used to judge independent skills and abilities, leading to discriminatory behaviour. If gate-keepers favour candidates for reasons of prestige rather than merit, this can lead to a vicious circle, whereby non-traditional candidates are discriminated against, reducing their visibility in elite contexts and further marginalising their accent. The following recommendations are for any employer, but particularly for elite professions, HR teams, the civil service, schools, and universities.

- **Action to tackle accent bias should be seen as an important diversity issue in the workplace,** alongside efforts to tackle other types of discrimination such as sexism, racism or ableism. Efforts to tackle accent bias should be part of a wider strategy within organisations to improve socio-economic diversity of the workforce, and instances of accent discrimination should be taken seriously by employers.
- **Recruiters should undergo training to help to reduce any accent biases.** For a simple approach which is easily implementable, recruiters can read the following text before a recruitment task, to reduce their reliance on accents to infer skills. There is evidence that doing so can significantly reduce accent-based differences in ratings of the same response:

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.

For more in-depth training, we recommend the following 15-minute interactive training activity, available publicly: <https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-for-recruiters/>

- **Employers should aim to have a range of accents within their organisation,** and not require or encourage their employees to adopt Received Pronunciation (also known as 'Queen's English' or 'BBC English') in the workplace. Unconscious bias training only raises awareness of implicit biases, it does not eliminate them. As long as we hear the same accents in certain workplaces, we will not be used to hearing others in those contexts, and our unconscious biases will remain in place. Encouraging employees to change their accents will maintain an over-representation of RP in contexts of authority, and such an expectation also places an unequal cognitive burden on certain applicants and employees. It can also lead to alienation from one's own social group. Permitting a greater diversity of accent types in schools, universities, and professions will eventually break the association of particular, middle-class voices with professional authority. This type of 'de-linking' has happened to a great extent for gender in the workplace over the past century.
- **There should be no implicit expectation within the workplace that professionalism is signalled by sounding like a person from a certain region, socio-economic background, or who has had a public school education.** This middle-class norm is not equally accessible to all and creates serious inequality throughout the lifespan. A more appropriate professional trait for

contemporary times is an ability to expect and work with diverse cultures and social backgrounds in the workplace.

- **Action to tackle accent biases and prejudice should take into account work-associated social settings.** Accent-related commentary and mockery are highest in social settings, and this can compromise a person's sense of belonging in a given professional or educational community. There should be awareness among employees of the implications of such practices among colleagues beyond the workplace.

Advice for students, applicants and employees

Recent research has shown evidence of bias against some accents but also, crucially, that accent is by no means the only factor in professional interactions. Our research shows that most professionals can easily set aside such bias with simple awareness-raising. It also shows that people who speak with under-represented accents face significantly less accent-based bias when they show expertise in what they say and when they speak confidently. The following recommendations are particularly for students, job applicants, and employees who may have concerns about how their accent will be perceived, but also for their colleagues who may use a standard accent and be less directly affected.

- **It's best to avoid focusing excessively on accent modification, and instead focus on subject knowledge and confident public speaking.** Suppressing an accent out of self-consciousness can come across as a lack of confidence, which has the opposite of the intended effect. Our research shows that conveying confidence in *any* accent is highly valued.
- **Remember that managing accent differences and accent bias is not solely the responsibility of the speaker. 'Allies' should point out accent bias within the workplace wherever they see it.** If you notice accent bias occurring around you, we recommend that you draw attention to the issue even if it does not involve you. If 'allies' do not play this role, the burden of pushing back against accent-based bias is placed entirely on speakers of non-standard accents, who typically already face other disadvantages and then additionally risk being seen as trouble-makers if they complain. Action should be taken both in professional and in social settings.

Introduction

Accent is one of the most recognisable signals of social background in the UK today. It can cue a listener to a speaker's ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, region, culture, or social class. For traits that are not visible, such as socio-economic status, accent is often the primary signal.

Research in the United States has shown that bias against certain accents can lead to unequal access to employment, housing, and education. Despite the long history of accent-based social judgement in British society, equivalent research on its impact on life outcomes for different social groups in the UK is very limited. What impact does a person's accent have on their social mobility? What role do institutions at different life junctures—including schools, universities and employers—play in such barriers to mobility?

In this report, we review the problem of accent and social mobility, including recent work that has examined attitudes to accents among employers, recruiters, and the general public. We then extend the focus to personal experiences of accent anxiety, sense of belonging, and implications for social mobility at different life stages. We examine effects of social class, region, and ethnicity, but also how intersections among these amplify barriers to mobility.

Our specific focus is the effects of accent bias on anxiety, sense of belonging, and experiences of bias for different social groups at four key life junctures: university applicants (largely age 17-18), university students (largely age 18-21), young professionals (largely age 21-24), and senior managers (largely age 35+). At each juncture we present two types of data: a quantitative UK-wide picture and qualitative commentary on these experiences gathered from each life stage through more detailed questionnaires. We show that accent anxiety and bias affects every life stage, but that university is a time of particularly heightened accent anxiety, as young adults approach the moment of entering a chosen career.

Background

The UK has some of the highest levels of accent diversity in the English-speaking world. Spanning a wide range—from “traditional” accents like Brummie, Cockney, Geordie, or Scouse, to the standard accent (Received Pronunciation or RP, also known as ‘Queen’s English’ or ‘BBC English’), and to newer accents like Estuary English, Multicultural London English, and General Northern English—British accents reflect a range of social backgrounds. It is common to hear people say that they do not have an accent, but every person has an accent that signals some aspect of their social background.

It is also a human universal for individuals to have biases towards or against certain accents. This is an inevitable consequence of human cognition, which relies on fast processing of complex information, based on past experience. Because accents are often linked to specific regions, cultures, ages, genders, and social classes, they tend to trigger social stereotypes. Although a natural part of human cognition, these “shortcuts” based on stereotypes can lead to active discrimination if left unchecked, particularly when they are used to judge unrelated skills, such as competence, intelligence, or knowledge.

These issues are particularly relevant in professional contexts where accent bias may impact perceptions of the suitability or competence of an employee. An early study found that even when all other aspects of communication are kept “standard” (i.e., grammar, lexis, speaking style), a speaker with a Birmingham accent was judged to be less intelligent and less appropriate for a job as a university lecturer

than a Received Pronunciation speaker.¹ Other early studies found that English English was preferred in employment interviews over (standard) West Indian English² and that the lowest status jobs were seen as most suitable for speakers with non-standard accents.³

The effect of accent on social mobility has been investigated more fully in the United States, and bias against certain ethnic and regional accents has been shown to lead to unequal access to employment, housing, and education,⁴ and in professional service or business encounters.⁵ Similarly, speaking with a regional accent in Germany has been shown to incur a wage penalty of approximately 20% when compared to speaking with a standard German accent.⁶

In the UK, a long history of class-based social hierarchy has established a deeply rooted prestige-based hierarchy of accents. This is evident in the dramatic asymmetries between the proportion of people in the United Kingdom who speak RP (the national standard) as their native accent (estimated at less than 10% and almost exclusively people from higher socio-economic backgrounds) and the overwhelming presence of RP in positions of authority. It is by far the majority accent used by newsreaders on major TV networks, and the same dominance of RP can be observed in most other contexts of authority, for example, in Parliament, in politics more widely, in the civil service, in courtrooms, and in the corporate sector.

Given this dominance of RP as an accent of power and authority, we can expect not speaking RP to incur similar costs for social mobility as observed in places like Germany or the US. The stagnation of social mobility in the UK since 1970 makes this even more likely.⁷ Research across the UK over the past 50 years has consistently found strong correlations between the use of a non-standard accent and lower socio-economic status,⁸ making accent one of the primary signals of an individual's social background. Yet despite the long history of accent-based social judgement and limited social mobility in Britain, research on a direct link between the two has been limited. Recent studies have begun to address this gap.

¹ H. Giles et al. 1975. Communication length as a behavioural index of accent prejudice. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 6: 73-81.

² R. Kalin et al. 1980. The perception and evaluation of job candidates with four different ethnic accents. In H. Giles et al. (eds.) *Language: Social Psychology Perspectives*. (pp. 197-202). Oxford: Pergamon.

³ H. Giles et al. 1981. Accent and lexical diversity as determinants of impression formation and perceived employment suitability. *Language Sciences* 3 (1): 91-103.

⁴ Massey, D. S., & Lundy, G. (2001). Use of Black English and Racial Discrimination in Urban Housing Markets: *New Methods and Findings*. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36(4), 452-469.

⁵ Z. Wang et al. 2009. The Impact of Accent Stereotypes on Service Outcomes and Its Boundary Conditions. *Advances in Consumer Research* 36: 940-941.

⁶ J. Grogger et al. 2020. The wage penalty of regional accents. NBER: National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁷ J. Blanden et al. 2005. Educational inequality and intergenerational mobility. In S. Machin (ed.) *What's the Good of Education: The Economics of Education in the UK*. (pp., 99-114). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁸ A. Williams 2007. Non-standard English and education. In D. Britain (ed.) *Language in the British Isles* (pp., 401-416). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Recent evidence of bias in the UK

A 2007 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that only 3% of employers mentioned accent or dialect as an Equality and Diversity issue (compared to, for example, 60% referencing disability and 58% referencing ethnicity/race),⁹ even though a contemporaneous survey found that as many as 76% of employers admitted to discriminating against applicants on the basis of their accents.¹⁰ A 2015 Social Mobility Commission report also found that working-class candidates are often unable to gain access to elite professions, despite having the relevant qualifications and skills, because of informal ‘poshness tests’, such as a candidate’s style of speaking.¹¹ It should be noted that accent, alongside social class, is not protected by the Equality Act 2010.

To examine the role of accent more comprehensively, a team of researchers has recently developed an updated picture of attitudes to accent and implications for recruiting, both among the general public and in the sector of law as a sample elite profession (Accent Bias Britain, ESRC 2017-2021, www.accentbiasbritain.org). We describe two key findings from this series of studies as background for the present report. The findings show evidence of the deep entrenchment of an accent hierarchy in the UK along with indications that this directly affects fair access to elite professions and other routes for social mobility.

Judgements of accent prestige were first examined simply through reactions to accent labels gathered from a nationally representative sample of the UK population (N=821).¹² The study replicated surveys of attitudes to accent labels conducted 15 years ago¹³ and 50 years ago.¹⁴ Figure 1 lists the 14 accents that appear in all three studies (the later studies examine more accents). The data shows that, despite a slight levelling out, public attitudes to different accents and their related stereotypes have remained largely unchanged over time. Public ratings show an extraordinary level of continuity in evaluation, with the standard Received Pronunciation accent, French-accented English, and ‘national’ standard varieties (Scottish, American, Southern Irish) all ranked highly, while accents associated with industrial cities of England, like Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham (commonly stereotyped as ‘working class accents’) and minority ethnic accents (Afro-Caribbean, Indian) are the lowest ranked.

⁹ A. Tatli et al. 2007. Diversity in business: A focus for progress. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Survey Report, March 2007.

¹⁰ HR News. 2017. Shock as 8 out of 10 employers admit ‘regional accents influence recruitment decisions’. Available at: <https://hrnews.co.uk/shock-8-10-employers-admit-regional-accent-influence-recruitment-decisions/>

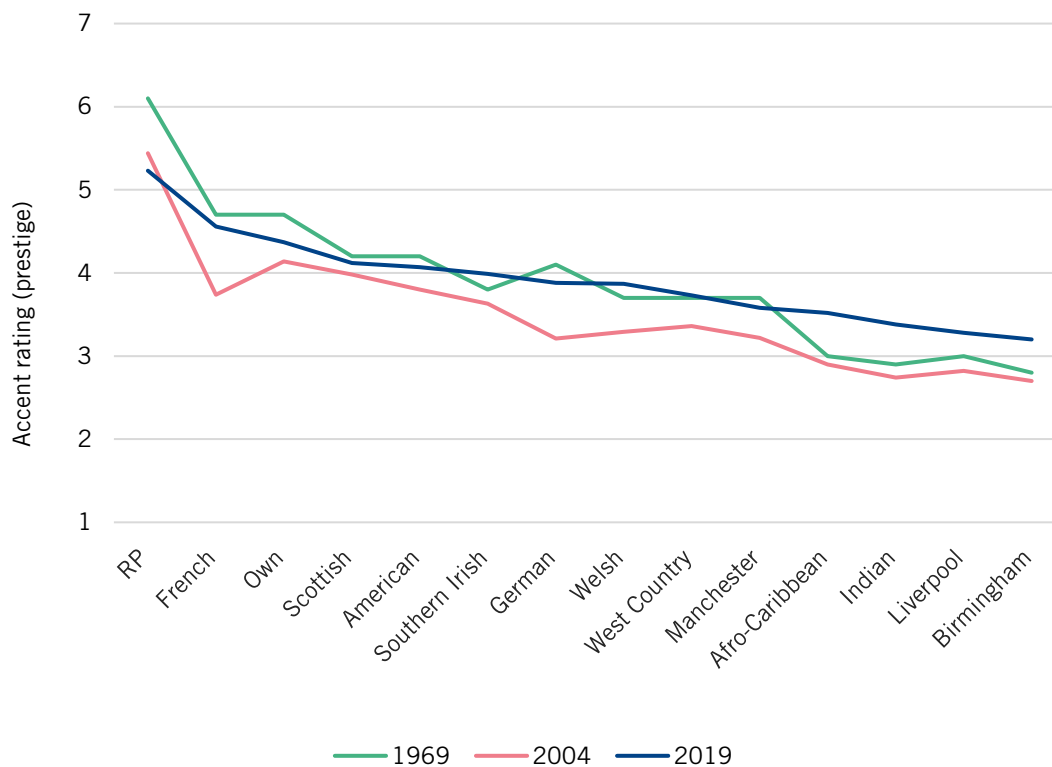
¹¹ L. Ashley et al. 2015. A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. London: Social Mobility Commission.

¹² D. Sharma et al. 2019. Methods for the study of accent bias and access to elite professions. *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 3(2): 150–172.

¹³ N. Coupland & H. Bishop. 2007. Ideologised values for British accents. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11: 74-93.

¹⁴ H. Giles. 1970. Evaluative reactions to accents. *Educational Review* 22:211-27.

Figure 1. Prestige ratings of accents by British listeners over 50 years



Source: Sharma et al. 2022¹⁵

The hierarchy above can function as a proxy for other forms of discrimination, for example against ethnic, class, or regional groups. Accent may thus be one of the primary cultural routes for obstructing mobility and socio-economic success.

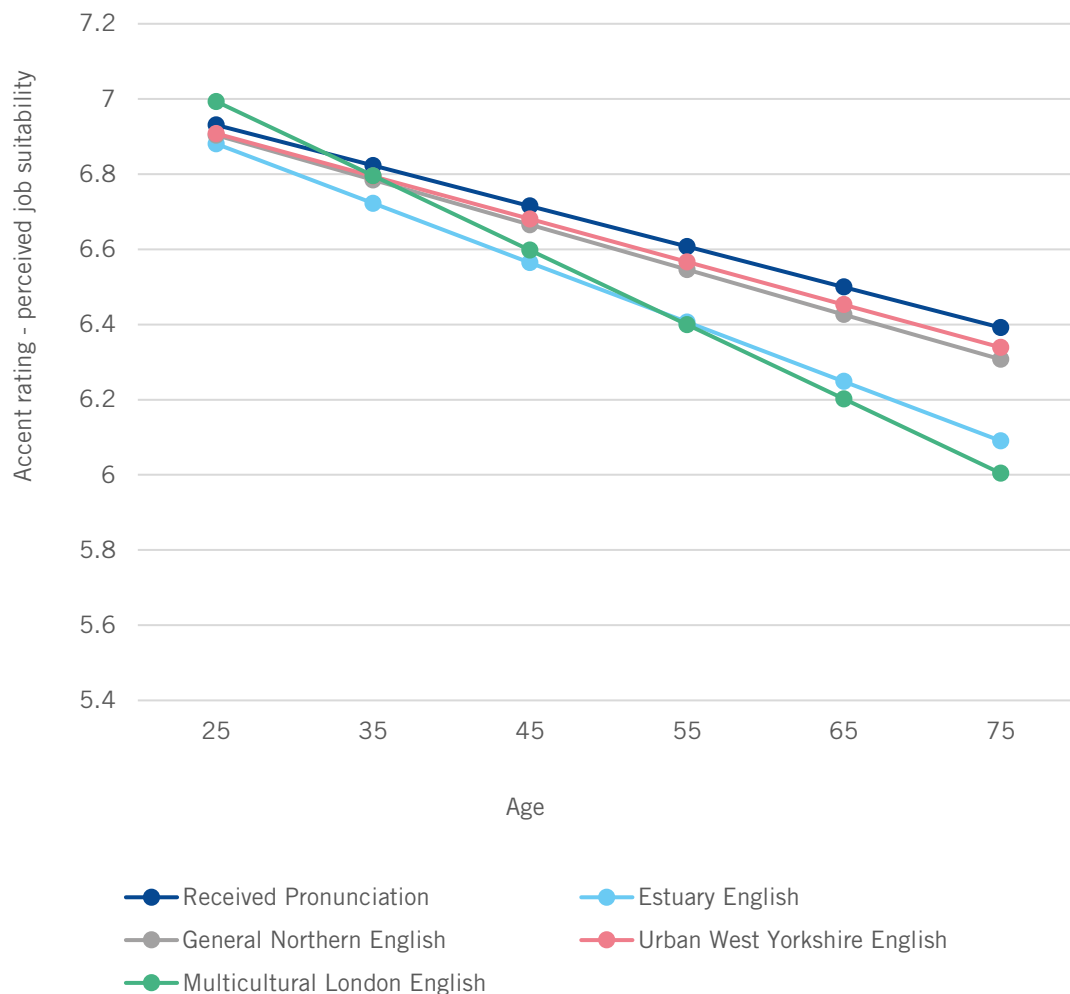
However, this must be tested rather than assumed. It is possible that people recognise this hierarchy but do not let it influence their judgements of professional competence, for example, when they hear the real voice of a person in a job interview, with career progression at stake.

We therefore tested the judgement of accents in such contexts, with a new nationally representative sample (N=848).¹⁶ The study examined the effect of social class, region, and ethnicity—as signalled through accent—in a situation of recruiting for an elite profession, i.e., a key juncture for social mobility. We examined five accents in detail: Received Pronunciation (RP), Estuary English (EE), Multicultural London English (MLE), General Northern English (GNE), and Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE). RP and GNE represent middle class varieties, UWYE a Northern working-class variety, and EE and MLE working-class London varieties associated with speakers of white and Black and/or Asian ethnicity respectively. Listeners heard 10 different interview responses for a job as a trainee in a law firm and were asked to judge their competence and expertise for the job. The analysis presented here compares judgements of identical responses in different accents.

¹⁵ Sharma D, Levon E, Ye Y 2022. 50 years of British accent bias. *English World-Wide A Journal of Varieties of English* vol. 43 , (2) 135 - 166.

¹⁶ E. Levon et al. 2021. Accent Bias and Perceptions of Professional Competence in England. *Journal of English Linguistics* 49(4): 355-388.

Figure 2. Older listeners (over 45 years of age) rate job candidates speaking with working class London accents significantly lower than other accents tested



Source: Levon et al. 2021.¹⁷ Note: Age was modelled as a continuous variable, the figure above shows averages

Figure 2 shows that listener bias emerged with age. In the full statistical model, listeners over the age of 45 dispreferred working-class London accents (Estuary English and Multicultural London English), rating them significantly lower for competence and expertise than the other accents, even though the mock interview responses contained identical content. Younger listeners made no such distinction and rate all 5 accents approximately equally. Based on past studies that have shown the same age effect, we interpret this as primarily an effect of life stage rather than social change in real time, whereby as people grow older and become more socialised into workplace norms, they become more conservative in their accent attitudes.

The study also showed that listeners who live in Southern England and those from higher social classes showed the most bias against these voices (more specifically, these two groups did not suppress their bias when they had an otherwise high motivation not to appear prejudiced). The study also found that a job interview response in a strong Multicultural London English accent was the lowest rated across all

¹⁷ Lev-On E, Sharma D, Watt D, Cardoso A, Ye Y 2021. Accent Bias and Perceptions of Professional Competence in England. *Journal of English Linguistics*

recordings whereas a milder MLE accent was rated well. This sensitivity to accent strength was not as strong for Northern accents, suggesting a penalty for not modifying *certain* accents.¹⁸

Other studies conducted as part of this project pointed to a number of factors that can mitigate these effects: (i) trained legal professionals in law firms were able to set aside bias when judging fine distinctions of quality of job interview responses, (ii) reading a short awareness-raising text before performing a recruiting task significantly reduced accent-based differences in ratings of the same response; (iii) the presence of expert content improved ratings of all accents, and (iv) how confidently a response was given was a stronger factor than the accent it was given in.¹⁹ We return to these positive findings in our recommendations at the end of the report.

Despite these positive indications of how to address the problem, the overwhelming evidence of the Accent Bias Britain studies and earlier research is that bias against certain accents is pervasive. Although more muted in contexts with implications for professional social mobility, such as recruiting, we see a reliance on accent stereotypes to judge independent traits of competence and expertise. This finding parallels recent studies in schools, which have shown that both teachers²⁰ and inspectors²¹ draw on stereotypical assumptions about accents when evaluating pupils' performance. Accent stereotypes thus place those from working-class, regional, and ethnic minority backgrounds at a disadvantage.^{22,23,24}

This evidence of societal bias against certain accents forms the backdrop for the remainder of the report. The research reviewed so far has focused on attitudes held by listeners, recruiters, or employers. This report moves beyond this focus to consider the lived experience of speakers of these accents, with new data on accent anxiety, experiences of bias, and a compromised sense of belonging in institutional contexts.

¹⁸ A. Cardoso et al. 2019. Inter-speaker Variation and the Evaluation of British English Accents in Employment Contexts. In S. Calhoun, P. Escudero, M. Tabain, and P. Warren (eds.), *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences* (pp. 1615–1619). Melbourne. Speakers with varying accent strengths were used in the experiments reported here, but differences in accent strength were controlled for in the results presented in Figure 2.

¹⁹ E. Levon et al. 2020. Accent bias in Britain: Attitudes to accents in Britain and implications for fair access report. Available at: <https://accentbiasbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Accent-Bias-Britain-Report-2020.pdf>

²⁰ J. Snell & I. Cushing (2022). "A lot of them write how they speak": Policy, pedagogy and the policing of 'nonstandard' English. *Literacy* 56(3):199-211.

²¹ I. Cushing & J. Snell (2022). The (white) ears of Ofsted: A raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate. *Language in Society* (online first)

²² D. Sharma et al. 2019. Methods for the study of accent bias and access to elite professions. *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 3(2): 150–172.

²³ E. Levon et al. 2021. Accent bias and perceptions of professional competence in England. *Journal of English Linguistics* 49(4): 355-388.

²⁴ E. Levon et al. 2022. Dynamic sociolinguistic processing: Real-time change in judgments of speaker competence. *Language*. In press.

Methodology

The results presented in this report are based on surveys about accent and experiences of bias that we conducted with people from across the UK at different stages of their lives. We conducted four parallel surveys with university applicants (largely students in sixth forms or colleges, N=511), university students (N=1029), early-career professionals (N=1014), and later-career/senior professionals (N=1002). The first three datasets were gathered through the research company Savanta (previously known as YouthSight) and the fourth via YouGov. The focus was on accents of the United Kingdom, so although interesting experiences were reported by speakers of foreign accents, these are excluded from the present report.

Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed (5-point scale) with three key statements:

1. ***Sense of belonging:*** “I feel self-conscious of my accent at school/university/work.”
2. ***Accent-based career anxiety:*** “I am concerned that my accent could affect my ability to succeed in the future (e.g. getting into university/getting a job/getting a promotion).”
3. ***Experience of bias:***
 - a. *In institutions:* “My accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in school/university/the workplace.”
 - b. *In social settings:* “My accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in a social setting.”

The respondents for each survey comprised a nationally representative sample in terms of age, region, and gender. We also worked to ensure that respondents represent a diversity of social backgrounds. The discussion in the report is drawn from detailed multivariate regression modelling of participant responses. All results presented include a significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level.

To code region of respondents, we use a standardised 14-region list, recoded to six broad regions: Wales, Scotland, South, Midlands, North, Northern Ireland. Respondents who did not grow up in the UK and who have foreign accents were included in the wider data sets but omitted from the present report.

For socio-economic classification, we use the six-level socio-economic grade (SEG) model produced by the ONS (UK Office for National Statistics). Social grades A and B include higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations (22% of the UK population in Census 2011), C1 includes supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations (31%), C2 covers skilled manual occupations (21%), and D and E cover semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed, and lowest grade occupations (26%). These are recoded into lower SEG (C2DE) and upper SEG (ABC1) in our report. We record parental SEG, rather than current SEG, as a measure of socio-economic family background.

We complement these larger quantitative surveys with qualitative analysis of testimonials that we collected from university applicants (N=27), university students (N=178), schoolteachers (N=81), and lawyers and civil servants (N=38) from across the UK. Surveys were distributed to university applicants and schoolteachers in 342 schools, and for the other surveys, responses were received from university students in 62 universities and lawyers in 10 major corporate law firms, along with a few from legally trained professionals. These are not necessarily as representative as the larger quantitative results presented. Nevertheless, we collected both quantitative and qualitative responses from diverse groups located in different UK regions, from different social backgrounds, and with different career goals,

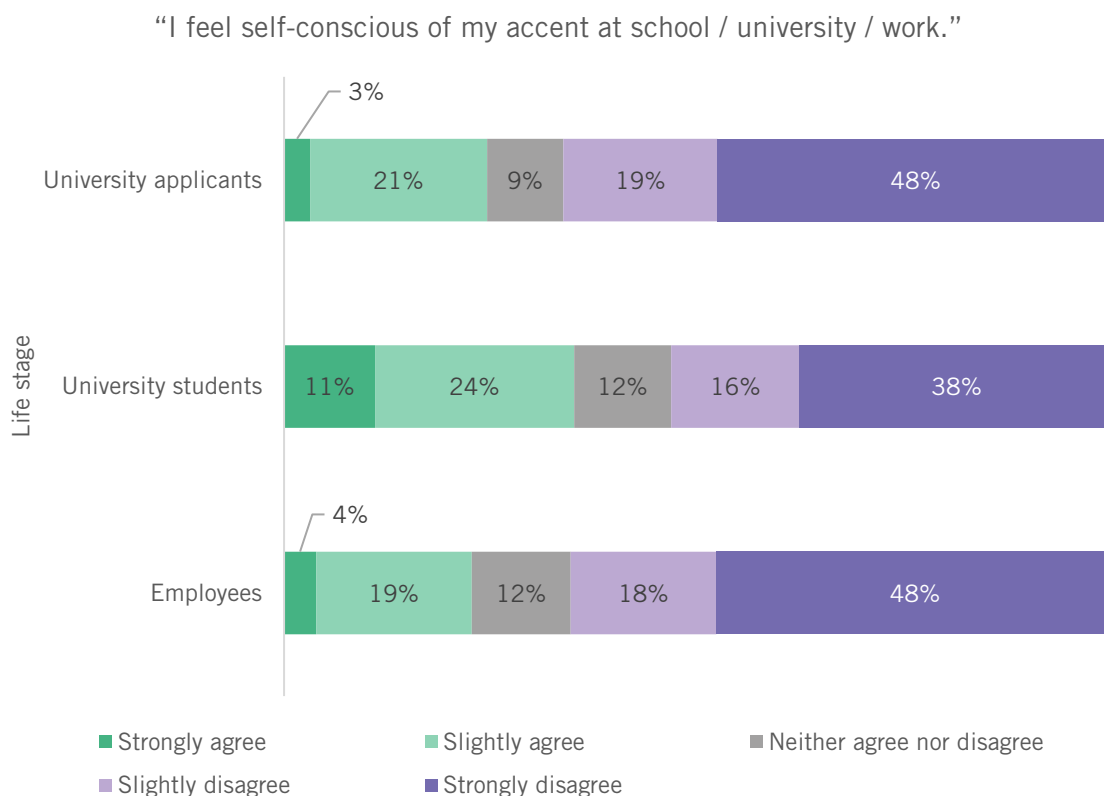
experiences and aspirations. In the present report we focus on the qualitative material, with testimonials offering more in-depth insights into how different segments of the UK population negotiate accent and accent bias in their daily lives.

Experiences of accent bias of the lifespan

In this section we first compare the three main life stages examined in this report (schools and colleges, university and the workplace). We find that accent-based effects on sense of belonging, career anxiety, and experience of bias are felt across the lifespan, but most keenly by university students. This is perhaps unsurprising, given this is a time period when young people have left school and joined a more heterogeneous social environment, while also facing the hurdle of access to their desired profession.

35% of university students reported being self-conscious about their accent, ahead of university applicants (24%) and professionals (23%) (see Figure 3). The pattern of higher levels of accent-related anxiety and bias among university students recurs across all four survey questions.

Figure 3. Proportion of individuals at different life stages saying they are self-conscious of their accent - university applicants, university students and employees.



Many survey respondents were also concerned that their accent may impede on their future career success, a form of anxiety that can be closely related to barriers to social mobility. It is not just the experience of discrimination, but the expectation of discrimination that can hold individuals back. The average proportion overall of responses that confirm some degree of anxiety over accent as a barrier stands at 24%, but is much higher, at 33%, for young people at university, compared to 19% of employees surveyed, and 18% of university applicants.

Although below 50%, this is still a notable proportion for a concern that ideally should not arise at all. If a third of those about to start their career are concerned that their accent may impede their success, this is evidence that accent — almost never mentioned in discussions of equality and protected characteristics — is in fact a central concern in equal access.

Figure 4. Proportion of individuals at different life stages saying they are concerned their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future.

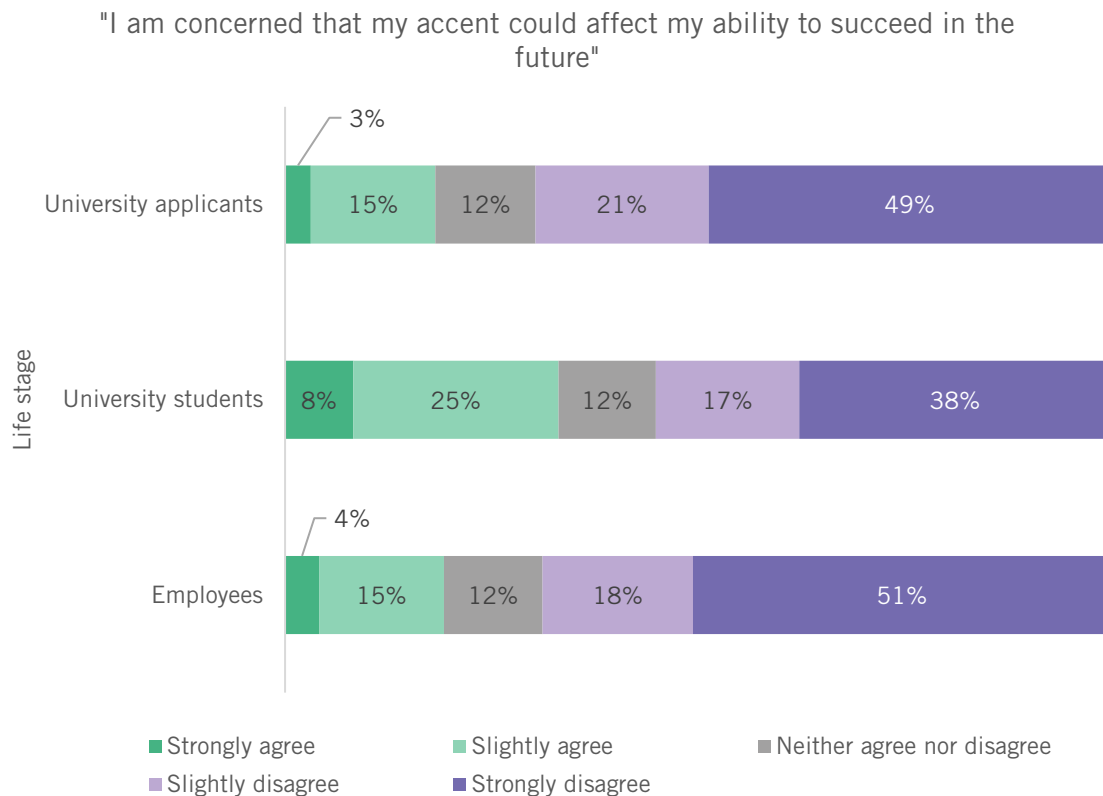
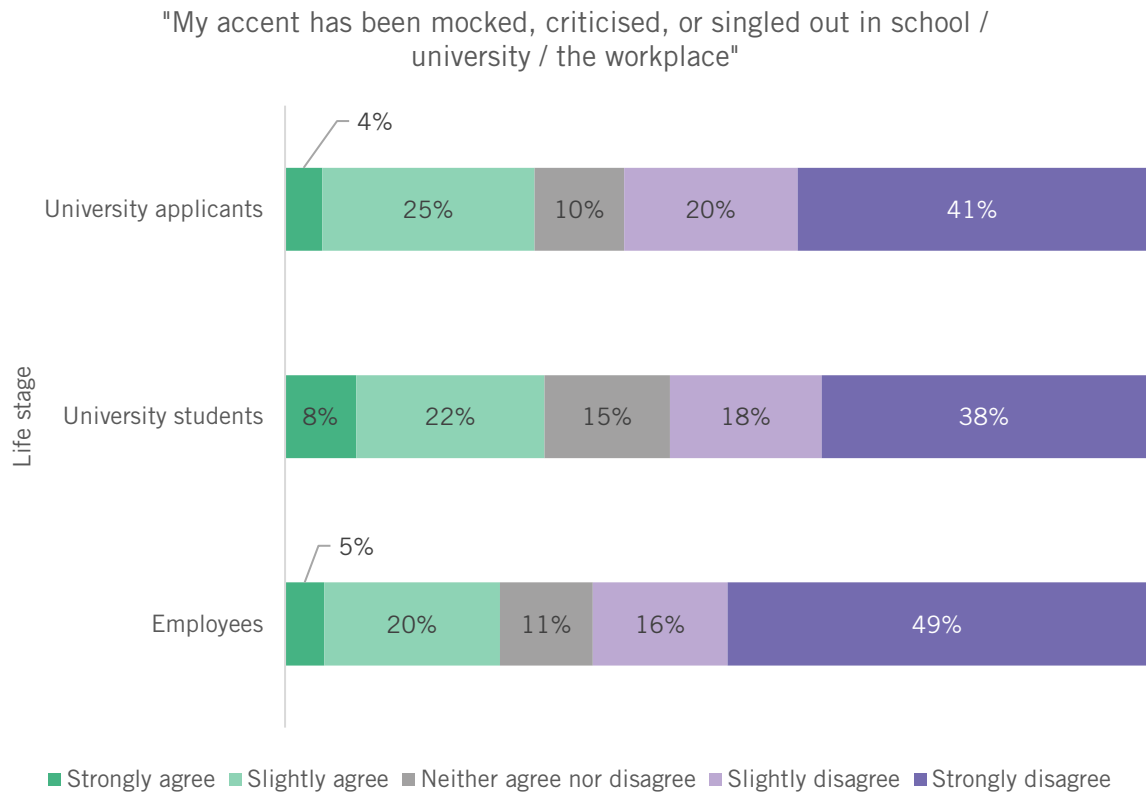


Figure 5 turns from perceptions or expectations of accent bias to experience. It shows the extent to which individuals have experienced singling out or criticism of their accent in an educational or work setting. Almost a third of respondents overall reported some such experience in an institutional context, once again peaking in university at 30%, when individuals often interact with a substantially wider social range for the first time. Similar rates were observed at other life stages, 29% among university applicants, and 25% among professionals. This suggests that fears of accent impeding career success may be well-founded, and could derive from experience of such effects.

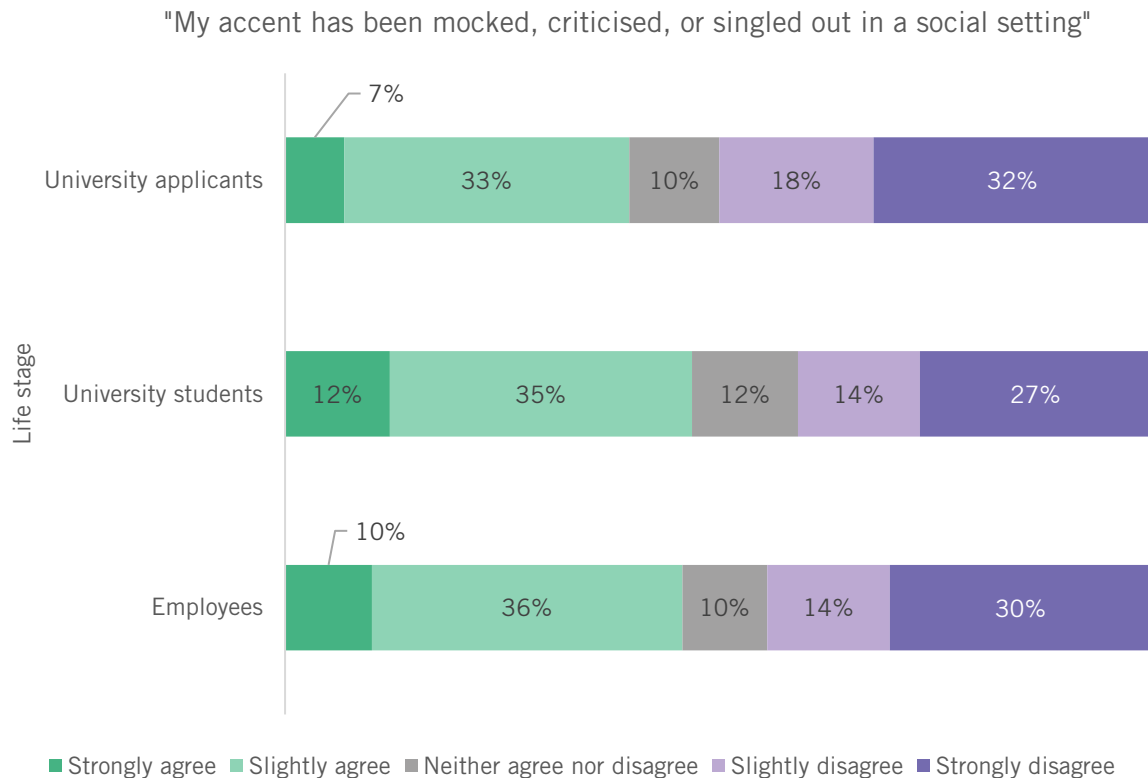
Rates were marginally lower when participants were asked more narrowly about experiences of bias in 'high stakes' contexts such as in the classroom or in recruiting (31% among university students, 26% among school students, and 8% among professionals). This suggests some effort in workplaces, though less in education, to attend to the risk of accent-based bias.

Figure 5. Proportion of respondents reporting their accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in school, university, or the workplace.



The final question, experience of bias in social situations (Figure 6), shows the highest levels of experiences of bias, and these are sustained across social situations over the entire lifespan. Figure 6 shows that by the time people reach their working life, nearly half (46%) have experienced some negative focus on their accent in a social setting.

Figure 6. Proportion of respondents reporting their accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in a social setting.



In the sections that follow, we delve deeper into these issues at each of three main life stages: university applicants, students currently in university, and people working at different stages of their career.

We focus specifically on accent-based career anxiety (Q2) and personal experience (Q3), and then return to a reflection on the wider implications for sense of belonging (Q1) in the discussion.

In each section, we examine how further factors come into play in these patterns of anxiety and personal experience, particularly the region and socio-economic background of respondents. We do not present results for gender, as gender differences were minimal in all the datasets, an interesting finding in itself. We return to the question of gender in our discussion, as gendered patterns of accent bias can in fact be observed in public discourse. Finally, for each life stage we present sample testimonials to add depth and detail to the experience of accent bias.

Life stage 1: Secondary school and university applicants

The next section of the report looks in detail at each life stage. Results reported are limited to those found to be significant in multivariate analyses that took account of region, age, socio-economic background, and stage-specific factors such as year of university. The Methodology section earlier outlined full details of each dataset. We start with the life stage of secondary education.

Children acquire accents from their community, initially from parents and siblings, but after the age of 4 or 5, also from their peers at school.²⁵ During this time, children also start to form social associations with particular accents. Research has shown that children as young as four years of age are able to discriminate between different groups of speakers based on their pronunciation of features associated with northern and southern varieties of British English.²⁶

As children mature, language becomes a key marker of social identity. To establish in-group identities and to distinguish themselves from older generations, teenagers tend to use more non-standard accent features.²⁷ At the same time, young people must operate within school language policies, which often favour RP as part of a wider ‘standard language ideology’ – the perception of certain ways of communicating as superior.²⁸

Research has shown that standard language ideology is enforced both implicitly – through instruction and the requirement of the student to use ‘fluent’ styles of speaking (often equated with elimination of regional traits) – and explicitly – through educational policies.²⁹ In these ways, speakers of non-standard accents, who represent the large majority of British people, often encounter the message that their accents are not associated with authority early in life. At a young age, they may start to lack self-confidence in formal settings, contribute less to classroom discussion, and be unfairly reprimanded for using certain types of language.³⁰ This can affect overall academic performance at school.³¹

Though students may encounter accent bias throughout their school education, these issues are potentially heightened when they transition to higher education providers. For instance, if students change schools at sixth form, this can trigger more awareness of their accent and of wider attitudes, as often students will encounter classmates from a wider range of social backgrounds. This entry into heterogeneous, often hierarchical, social structure is intensified when students complete this stage and enter university.

In our survey of university applicants, we anticipated somewhat lower levels of anxiety and experience of bias, and indeed, Figures 3-6 above showed this to be lower than among university students. However, as early as sixth form, there is already evidence of significant regional and social class differences in

²⁵ W. Labov. 1964. Stages in the acquisition of Standard English. In R. Shuy (ed.) *Social Dialects and Language Learning*. (pp. 77–103). Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of Education.

²⁶ E. Jeffries. 2019. Preschool children's categorization of speakers by regional accent. *Language Variation and Change* 31(3): 329 – 352.

²⁷ S. Tagliamonte & A. D'Arcy. 2009. Peaks beyond phonology: Adolescence, incrementation, and language change. *Language* 85(1): 58-108.

²⁸ P. Trudgill. 1999. Standard English: What it isn't. In T. Bex & R. J. Watts (eds.) *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. (pp. 117-128). London: Routledge.

²⁹ I. Cushing & J. Snell (2022). The (white) ears of Ofsted: A raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate. *Language in Society* (online first)

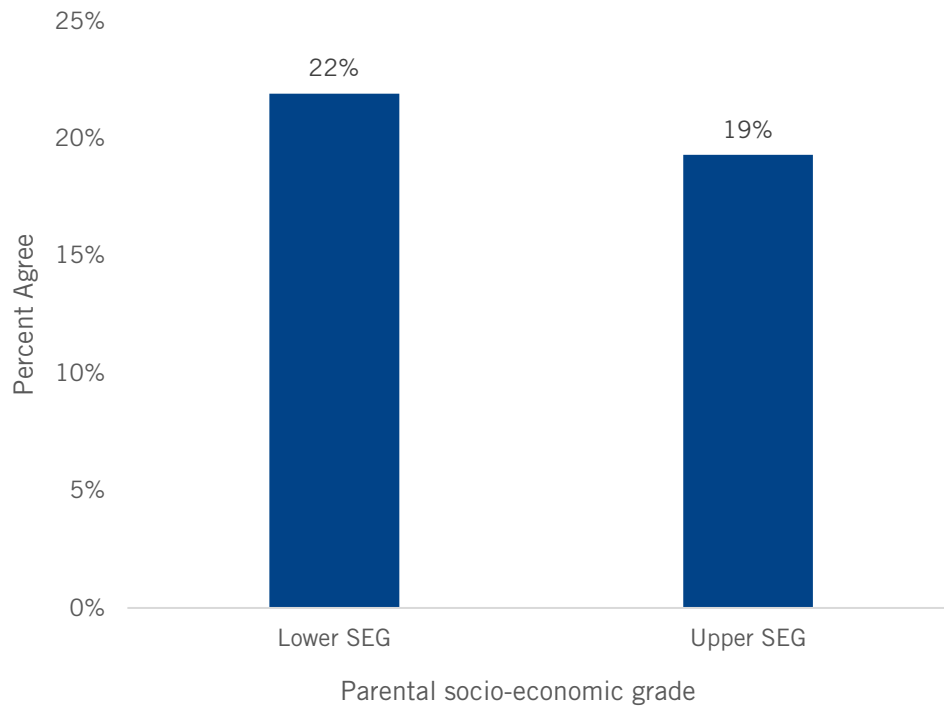
³⁰ S.M Gates & C. Ilbury. 2019. Standard language ideology and the non-standard adolescent speaker. In C. Wright, L. Harvey & J. Simpson (eds.) *Voices and Practices in Applied Linguistics: Diversifying a Discipline*. (pp. 109-125). York: White Rose University Press.

³¹ J. Snell & A. Lefstein. 2018. “Low Ability,” Participation, and Identity in Dialogic Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal* 55(1): 40-78.

both accent anxiety and the degree to which young people have already experienced accent bias directed at them.

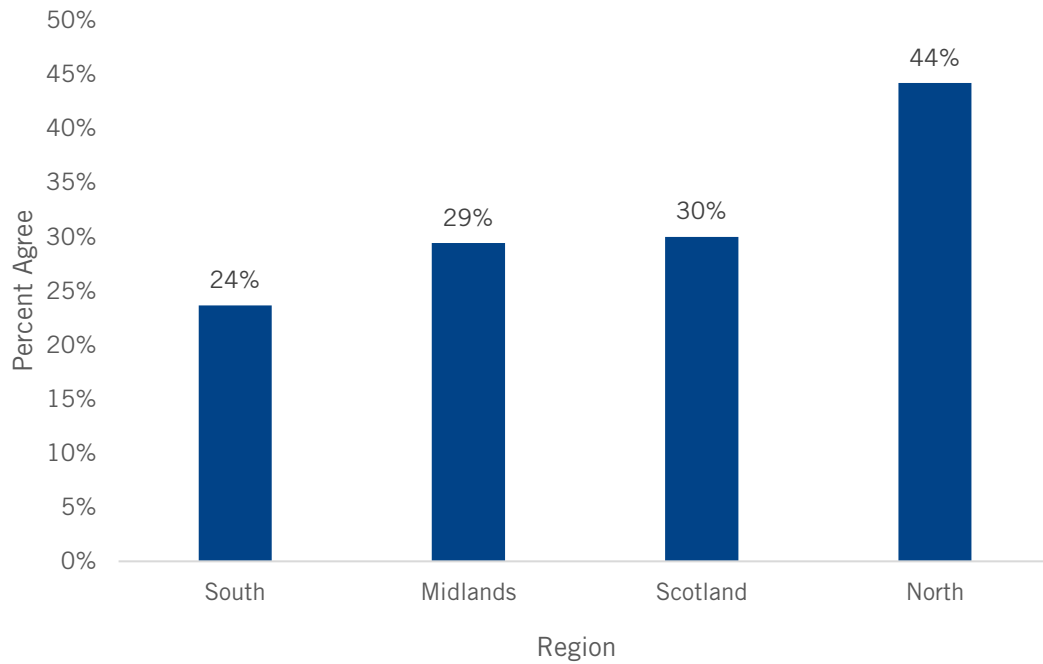
In Figure 7, we see slightly higher anxiety among respondents whose parental social grade is from the lower three socio-economic grades, but the greater differences at this life stage are regionally based (Figure 8). Differences based on SEG become stronger in the later life stage of professional work.

Figure 7. University applicants – concern their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by parental socio-economic grade)



Accent anxiety was found to be higher for young people from the North (29%) but lower among those from the South (13%; 10% when London is excluded). The same stark regional difference is found for actual experiences of accent bias in a school context among students from the North in contrast to those from the South (Figure 8). Although not shown in Figure 8, it is worth noting that for all region-based results in this report, the levels of bias and anxiety experienced by individuals from the South are even lower if London is excluded, as much of the bias against Southern accents is directed at working class accents of London.

Figure 8. University applicants – experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised, or singled out in school (by home region)



Note: Figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are not shown due to small sample sizes.

As noted, each section in this report only present graphs of results found to be statistically significant in a multivariate model. At this life stage, the above figures show that region plays an important part in accent anxiety and experiences of bias; socio-economic background is also implicated, but only in the former, and at this life stage is not found to be implicated in experiences of bias. As we will see in later sections, region persists as a factor, and socio-economic background re-emerges as a strong factor during adulthood and in work life.

Testimonials from our in-depth consultations with 27 sixth form students as well as with older respondents recalling school experiences confirm the quantitative picture above and illustrate the nature of bias feared and experienced by specific social groups. (In all testimonials in this report we include the self-identified accent of the respondent.)

Testimonials – Secondary school student experiences

(Black Country, age 18) – *“Genuinely, I don’t want to change my accent, but I am absolutely convinced I need to before I can go to uni or be employed. I am never made to feel this way locally, but on field trips, general holidays etc, I am constantly EXPECTED to be ashamed/mockered for my accent.”*

(Black Country, age 19) – *“For a couple of weeks, I did have a group of other students mimic an extreme version of a black country accent every time I spoke (about anything).”*

(Cockney, age 18) – *“It is not something I feel insecure about however I know that others with similar accents to myself do. I also believe that it is a disgrace that people should be ashamed to speak in the native accent.”*

(East London, recollection by a 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 I realised this is what I was doing and my accent settled into something closer to ‘normal’.”*

(Recollection by a teacher) – *“When I first taught in England, back in the early 2000s, I encountered a lovely Year 7 boy whose family had just moved from Manchester to the Southampton area. I put a stop to accent bullying immediately in my class, but other teachers didn’t bother. The poor child moved schools because the management was ineffective regarding bullies winding him up because of his accent.”*

Here we see one student observing that they primarily encounter negative expectations when away from their home region, which can place limits on their sense of belonging and willingness to move for reasons of social mobility later in life, such as when attending university. In our in-depth surveys with 178 university students, large numbers of respondents also reported changing their accent when they moved to secondary school or sixth form, or when they entered the independent school system, e.g., “went to private secondary school and was teased for my Yorkshire accent”, “affected RP when teased about my accent at boarding school”, “some of my pronunciation is influenced by my mothers’ families accents (from Lancashire). I never realised this until I started attending this school, and it was pointed out by my peers”.

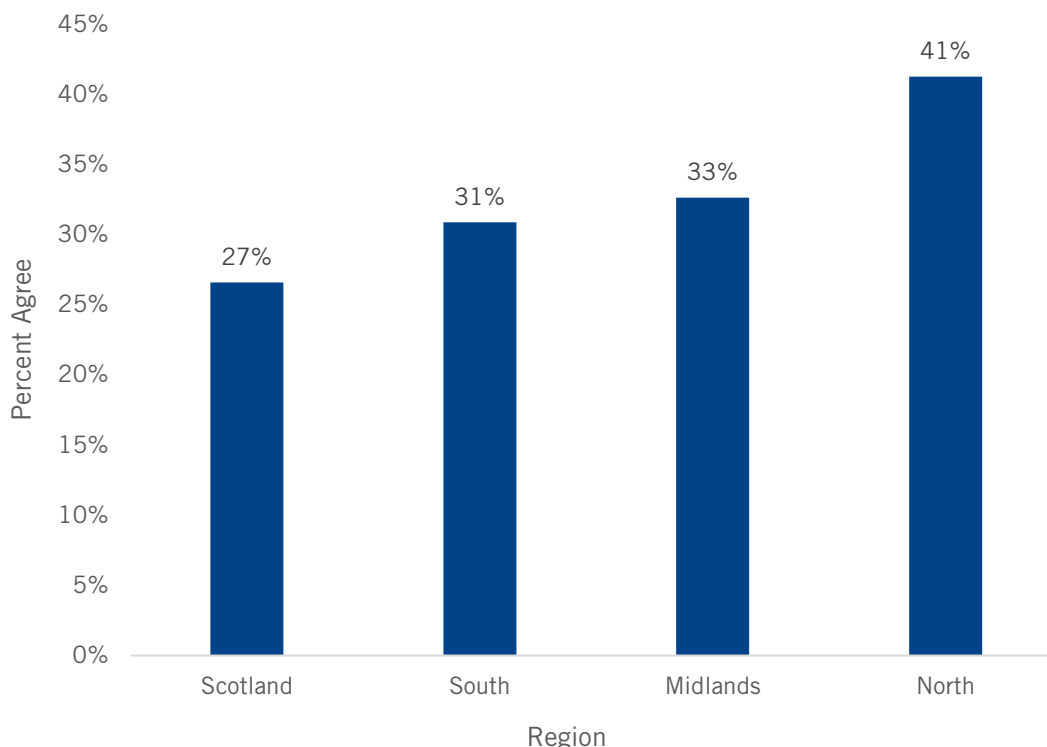
Another former student above describes their life trajectory of shifting away from both ethnic minority and working class speech, only later to return to what she describes as a more ‘normal’ way of speaking. It is worth noting that pursuing wholesale shifts of this kind due to external social pressure creates more cognitive pressure and mental stress for those people, a burden that users of middle-class accents do not face. The final testimonial above describes experiences not just at the individual level, but failures of institutions to create spaces that support a range of voices.

Life stage 2: University

The transition to university represents a unique moment for young adults, when many move away from their home region or from their most familiar social circles and enter a microcosm of wider society. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds move less,³² but even a move to a local university typically transforms social networks substantially at this age. These changes include informal social interaction with a much more diverse sample of peers, more formal interactions in class and public speaking, and greater exposure to professions and institutions, along with the language and prototypical social profile of employees across these social contexts. This exposure, and the need to fit in, can trigger a much starker awareness of one's place in that hierarchy, and the limits or prospects that derive from that positioning. We anticipated that university, and particularly the final stages of university, would be a major time of more acute accent awareness and anxiety about its role in one's own career prospects. This prediction was confirmed.

Findings in this section show consistent effects of a respondent's home region and their stage of university on the extent to which they report experiences of accent anxiety regarding their professional future, and experiences of bias directed at them. As shown in Figure 9, concern that their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future follows a similar regional effect as observed earlier, with more anxiety among Northern respondents (41%) as compared to 31% among those from the South, which falls to 19% if London is excluded.

Figure 9. University students – concern their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by home region)



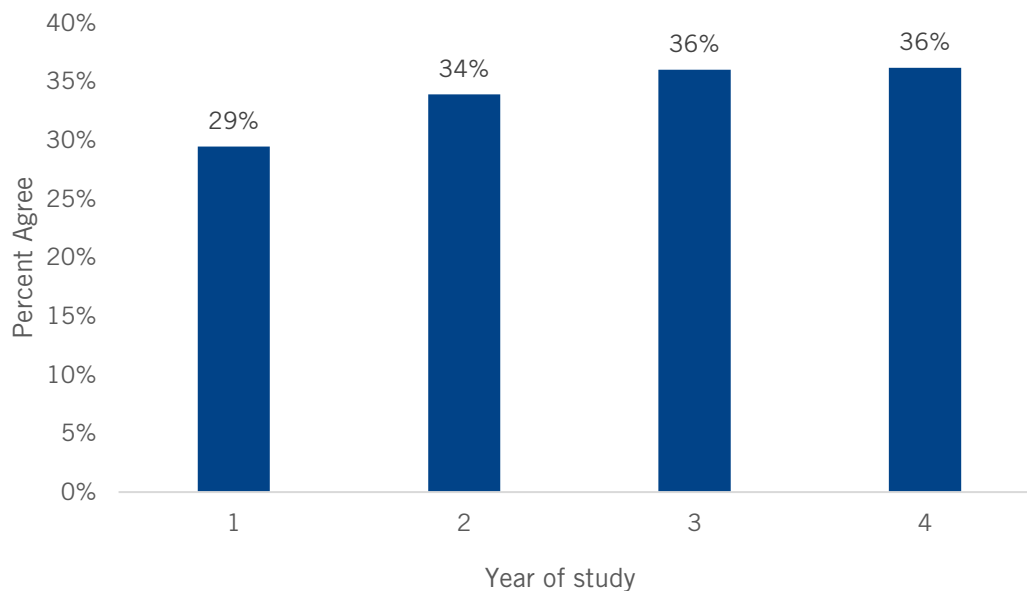
Note: Figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are not shown due to small sample sizes.

³² Donnelly, Michael and Gamsu, Sol (2018) Home and away: social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility', Project Report. The Sutton Trust, London.

Differences based on socio-economic background are still less marked than regional differences at this life stage than they become in professional life. It is notable that accent-related career anxiety is fairly prevalent in higher SEGs too, not just lower SEGs, and at university as well as school, as we saw earlier. In fact, we observed that among individuals based in the North, those from higher SEGs reported slightly greater accent-related anxiety about their prospects for career success. It is likely that specifically these individuals aspire to enter elite professions, where attitudes to their regional accent might be an impediment.

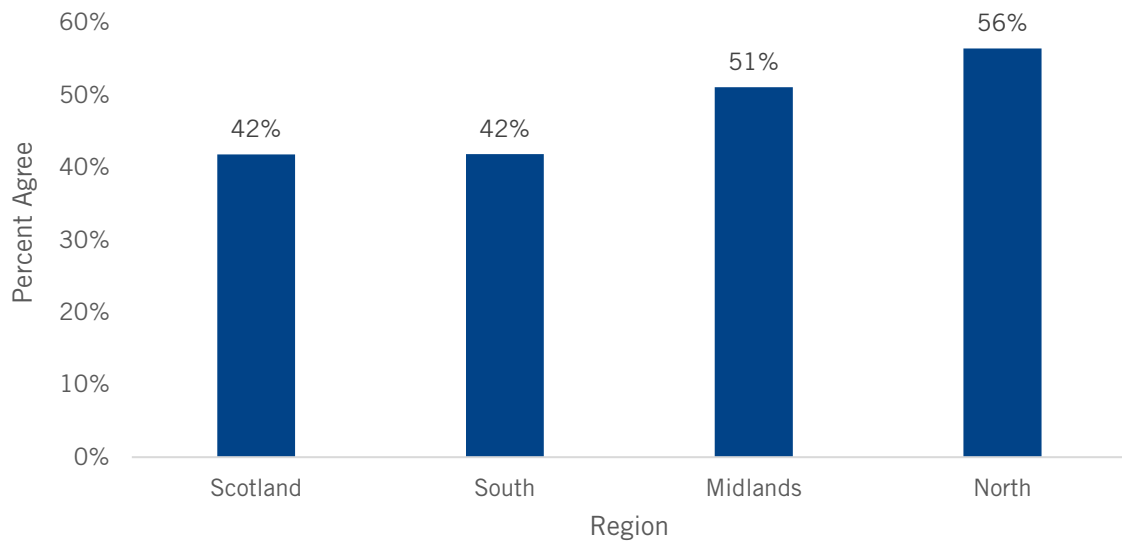
Respondents' concern about whether their accent might affect their ability to succeed in the future was also influenced by their stage of university, with an incremental increase with every year of their university degree, as students progress towards entry into a chosen career (Figure 10).

Figure 10. University students – concern their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by year at university)



In terms of actual experiences of bias during their university years, university students' responses again showed a regional bias such that students from the North reported more such experiences (Figure 11).

Figure 11. University students – experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised or singled out in a social setting (by home region)



Note: Figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are not shown due to small sample sizes.

Not surprisingly, given the greater length spent at university, reported experiences of accent-based mockery or criticism also showed a statistically significant, incremental increase with every year of university. This was true for experiences within the university setting as well as within social settings. As before, the above results are limited to factors that are statistically significant in a multivariate analysis. Socio-economic background did not emerge as a significant main effect when these other factors were taken into account, but it showed the interaction with region described above.

We gathered testimonials from 178 respondents across UK universities to explore individual experiences more closely. A small sample is provided here. Although we do not report quantitative patterns from this smaller survey, the quantitative patterns confirmed those observed in the larger datasets.

As the sample testimonials show, intersectional effects of social class, region, and ethnicity arose. Many express a compromised sense of belonging developing while at elite universities or in certain programmes, e.g., “it makes me feel more like a novelty than a valued friend”, “I needed to change the way I speak to fit in”. A student from Birmingham reports encountering more bias from Southerners, a pattern that was confirmed statistically in the research presented in Figure 2.³³

Many report a pressure to change their accent against their wishes. Aside from the problem of a subsection of society bearing this added social burden of distancing themselves from their community, this is also not an easy task in terms of cognitive plasticity, as accent involves articulatory settings established over a lifetime. This places added cognitive pressure on a subset of social groups who tend to already be facing disadvantage of other kinds.

Finally, some students report hesitancy to speak in class, speak up in tutorials, or ask questions, which can impede learning and the acquisition of public speaking and communication skills crucial for social mobility and career advancement.

³³ E. Levon et al. 2021. Accent Bias and Perceptions of Professional Competence in England. *Journal of English Linguistics* 49(4): 355-388.

Testimonials - University student experiences (Page 1)

(Lancashire) – *“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.”*

(Leeds) – *“I am a law student and I was doing a moot (mock trial) and the judge (who was an older student) asked me to repeat myself multiple times and also repeated me saying ‘no’ back to me. I know that I was speaking clearly and the issue was that my accent is perceived as chavvy or not posh/Queen’s English enough.”*

(Lancashire) – *“I was mostly ostracised by my university classmates. 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 to find friends elsewhere. The few friends I had during undergrad were from working class backgrounds whom I met in my accommodation (by chance). I did not join any societies or clubs at uni due to my insecurity about my accent. I felt that I didn’t belong.*

“I regularly felt disadvantaged. I was once asked (out of context) if my parents worked in the coal mines. I was also asked if I grew up in a council house. In my experience, accent and class are often conflated in these situations. As an undergrad at Edinburgh uni, I was discriminated against regularly because of my Lancashire accent. In the first year of undergrad, I consciously spoke with a stronger Lancashire accent as a form of protest against the difficulties I faced simply due to my accent.

“After being discriminated against by other students and staff for a sustained period (3/4 years), I consciously minimised my Lancashire accent into a more standard English accent, hoping to be perceived as more intelligent. I wish I didn’t have to do this, but I was persistently overlooked and underestimated due to my accent.”

(Newcastle) – *“A lot of times people mock my accent, but that doesn’t particularly bother me. At interviews, I remember one boy from London asking a large group of people if they could “actually understand [my] accent”, which was pretty awful and not a nice first impression of university.”*

(East Midlands) – *“I don’t think I have been disadvantaged but I have worried about it. I remember meeting a tutor for the first time and the first thing she said to me was “you don’t sound like you’re from Oxford”. My tutorial partner also wasn’t from Oxford; she was from Birmingham but spoke in an RP accent, so her accent wasn’t commented on but mine was.”*

(Birmingham) – *“I always get asked to repeat myself so that some Southerner can repeat it back again in a drawl (interesting that I don’t recall or have the feel of being disadvantaged by northerners. It’s always unpleasant people from the south). I fear that people think I am stupid, sad, or emotionally withdrawn because of the ‘Brummie monotone’ (which I don’t think exists and is horrible). One niche example: I always get excluded from discussions about the exciting or interesting parts of the UK, because we revert to ‘what’s good in the north’ or ‘what’s good in the south’ and my heritage and my pride in my city get excluded.”*

(Multicultural London English) – *“Sometimes I feel as though when I speak in my natural accent my ideas don’t come across as valuable. I have felt that I needed to change the way I speak to fit in with other people- not so much anymore but definitely in first year.”*

Testimonials - University student experiences (Page 2)

(Estuary English) – *“Whilst my accent is Estuary English, it’s also extremely common sounding and this has led me to be hesitant during presentations and such as I sound more “stupid” compared to other accents.”*

(Manchester) – *“I have sometimes felt as though I don’t fit in some social situations, as there are often not many people from the North, let alone Manchester, at university. This makes me feel worried that I am disadvantaged because I don’t come from as privileged a background as others, and so haven’t had the same opportunities as them and can’t relate to them.”*

(North West) – *“During my undergraduate studies, my accent was commented upon in class and outside of class regularly. At this university, there were not many other students from the North of England and those who were generally from higher socio-economic backgrounds. My accent is perceived as reasonably middle-class where I grew up (and I am reasonably middle-class), but at university I think some people perceived me as working class. This made me slightly hesitant in some circumstances to speak a lot in lessons.”*

(East Midlands) – *“Yes, I think I have been disadvantaged in social settings. In Oxford, it feels like those with posh London accents (which represents a lot of people at Oxford) gravitate towards each other, starting even in Freshers’ week. In contrast, I feel like my accent gives away that I am working class.”*

(Scottish) – *“I feel that my accent has allowed people to more quickly judge me to be of lower class or wealth or not having attended a private school which for some people means they are no longer interested in speaking with you. I am a very sociable and friendly person but have had numerous people clearly of higher class/wealth turn their back to me in a group setting where they have clearly judged me to have been ‘not their sort of person’. My accent is an inescapable indicator that I am ‘not their sort of person’.”*

In addition, some students based at elite universities commented on how they picked up a voice for success through that elite exposure: “There’s a certain ‘Cambridge drawl’ you can often detect among second- and third-years. I’ve found myself slipping into this a little.” RP has been observed to be part of a specific cluster of classed signals in recent work.³⁴ While students widely reported this advantage of RP, a few students commented on being teased for sounding too posh; we return to this type of bias when discussing the life stage of professional work.

When asked (in our smaller, detailed survey) whether they believed that a standard accent was required for their chosen career, students from minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those who were the first in their family to attend university and those who were later along in their degrees, agreed more strongly with the claim than others, indicating greater anxiety and compromised ability to belong. The majority of respondents agreed that people in the UK are expected to develop a standard accent for the workplace regardless of their personal preference, yet almost none of the 178 respondents believed that this should be the case, nor that it is easy to change one’s accent. Respondents from the South of England were most likely to agree with the idea that it’s reasonable to expect people to change their accents.

³⁴ S. Friedman. 2022 (Not) bringing your whole self to work: the gendered experience of upward mobility in the UK Civil Service. *Gender, Work and Organization* 29 (2): 502 – 519.

Next, we turn more specifically to the question of equal opportunities and fair access to elite professions. The sample quotes below indicate that people who use non-standard accents have a fine-tuned awareness of the biases documented by Accent Bias Britain and are aware that these may impede their access to elite professions.

Testimonials - Fear of exclusion from elite professions among university students

(Received Pronunciation) – *“I’m a dentist and most dentists have an RP accent or a regionally accepted one (some variation of Scottish).”*

(Northern Irish) – *“I want to go into academic research and I am scared even with a more “posh” regional accent I would be hindered.”*

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

(Manchester) – *“I don’t think it *requires* it (civil service) in the sense that it is not possible to advance with a regional accent, but I think it will make progress harder due to unconscious bias in interviewers and senior civil servants”*

(Newcastle) – *“I think most jobs in the legal sector require a certain profile, an RP English accent being part of this profile.”*

(Scottish) – *“Medicine feels very elitist, and my working class Scottish accent will not fit that narrative.”*

(Leeds) – *“I do law and whenever lawyers come to speak to us, they all sound the same doing formal talks. I’ve noticed that when I talk to them after, more informally, there is a range of dialects but there is a conscious focus on the Queen’s English during Court/formal appointments.”*

(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 & 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.”*

(Leeds) – *“There seems to be a set accent within professional workspaces that mine does not conform to.”*

(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.”*

(Liverpool) – *“I don’t hear my accent when I watch videos of scientists giving talks and I don’t hear my accent from lecturers in the field. I feel as though my work won’t be taken seriously if I don’t change my accent.”*

Life Stage 3: Work

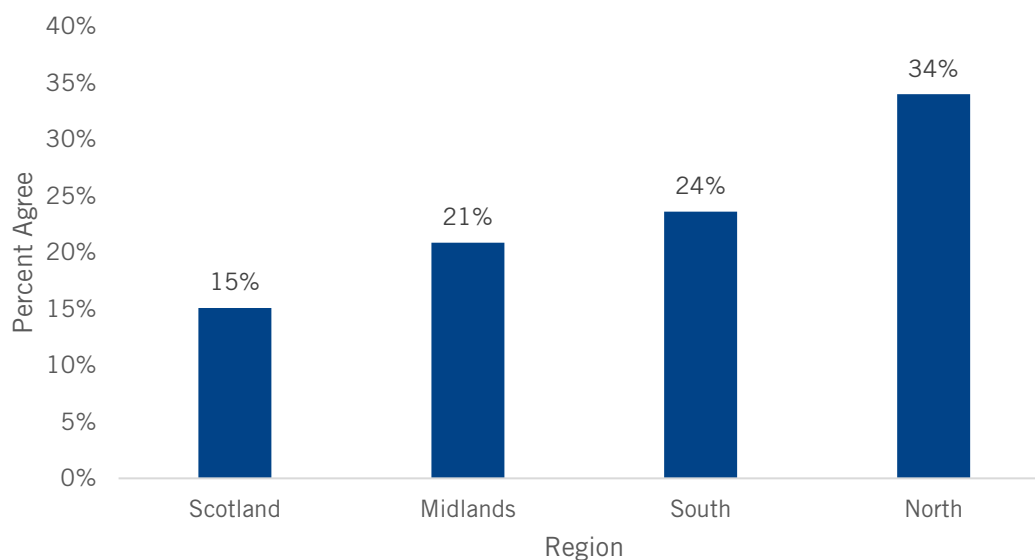
Early Career

What happens when these young people start to enter their chosen careers? The students quoted above show acute awareness of the long-standing association in the UK between certain professions and a specific social profile. The 2015 Social Mobility Commission report cited earlier observes that “current definitions of talent can arguably be closely mapped on to socio-economic status, including middle-class norms and behaviours... the current definition of talent may disadvantage talented students who have not benefited from similar educational advantages or been socialised in a middle-class context, no matter how great their aptitude for a professional career in all other respects”.³⁵ A major signal of this desirable middle-class social capital is command of a Received Pronunciation accent.

Given this wider context, and the clear evidence of differential assessment of job interview candidates based on accent provided in Figure 2, accent bias could materially affect participation, performance, and success at various junctures: the job market, job interviews, recruiting, and the workplace. Young adults notice this risk and may face both exclusion by others and self-exclusion during their career.³⁶

Among respondents who are starting out in their careers, we again see higher anxiety about accent impeding one’s career and a higher proportion of direct experience of accent bias in the workplace among Northerners (Figs. 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Early career employees – concern that accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by home region)

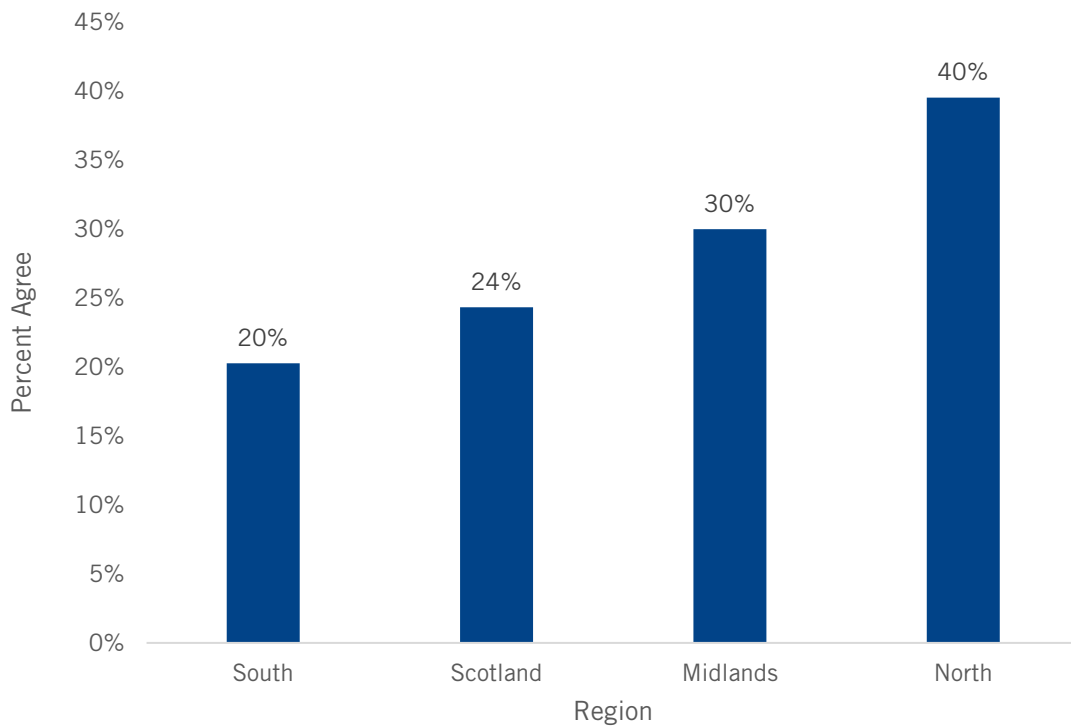


Note: Figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are not shown due to small sample sizes.

³⁵ L. Ashley et al. 2015. *A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions*. London: Social Mobility Commission.

³⁶ L. Ashley & L. Empson. 2017. Understanding social exclusion in elite professional service firms: Field level dynamics and the ‘professional project’. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(2): 211-229.

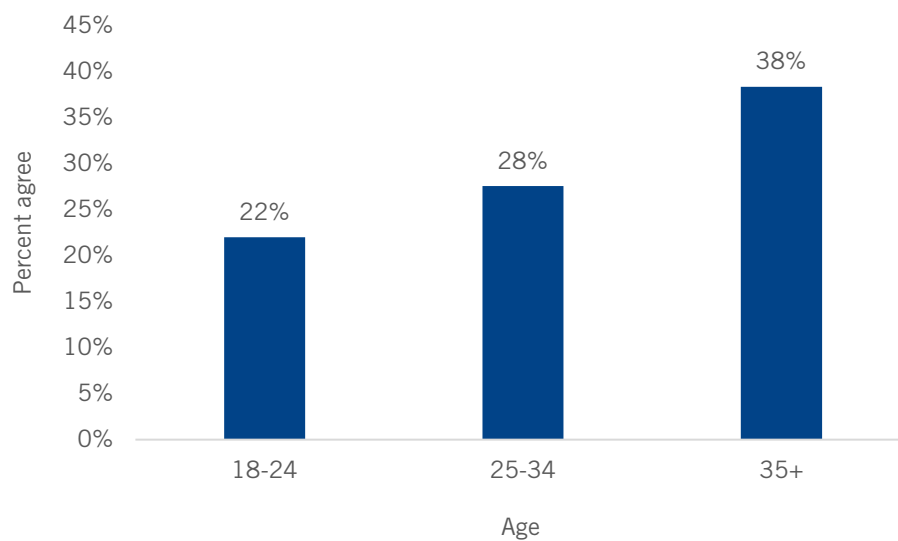
Figure 13: Early career employees – experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised or singled out in the workplace (by home region)



Note: Figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are not shown due to small sample sizes.

Figure 14 also shows that the older an individual is when starting their career, the higher their level of anxiety around accent, possibly due to growing up with even narrower criteria for access to career advancement.

Figure 14. Early career employees – concern that accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by age)

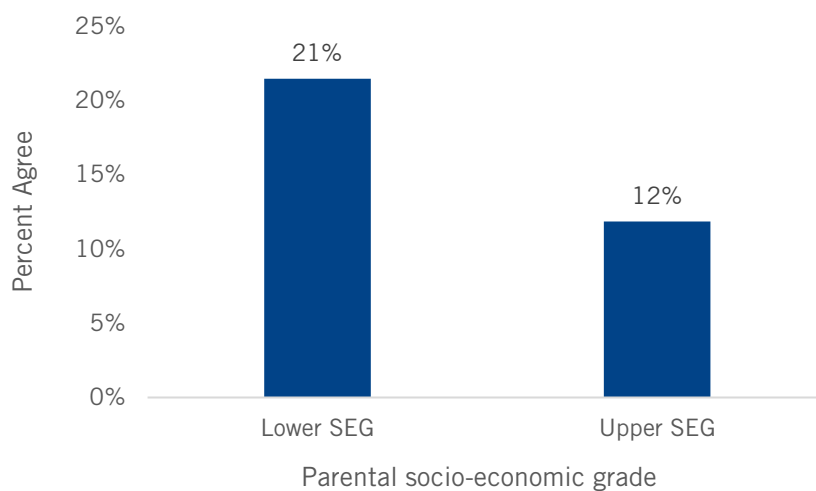


Later Career

Our final dataset on accent-related anxiety and experiences is concerned with professionals in decision-making roles, in other words more senior managers.

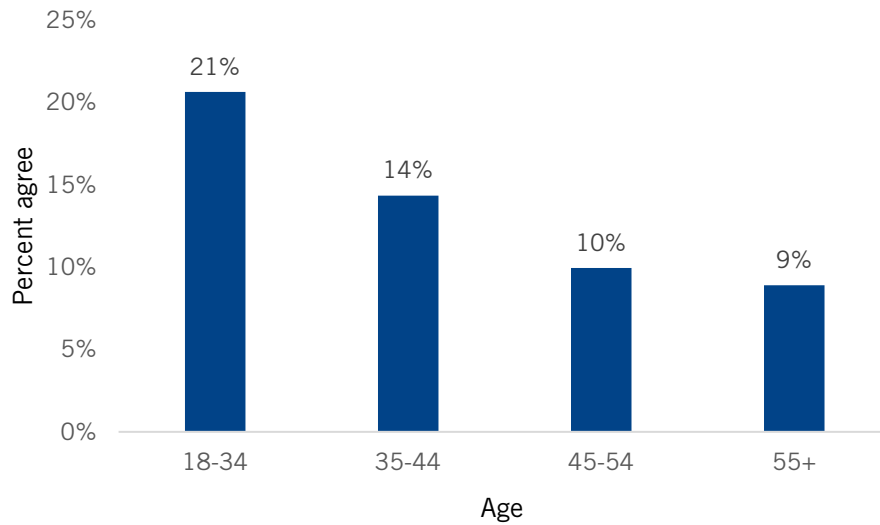
In terms of anxiety that their accent may compromise their ability to succeed at work, Figure 15 shows the same effect of parental social class, namely that those from lower social grades in senior management roles experience more anxiety in this regard (21% vs 12% for those from better off families).

Figure 15. Senior managers – concern that accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by parental socio-economic grade)



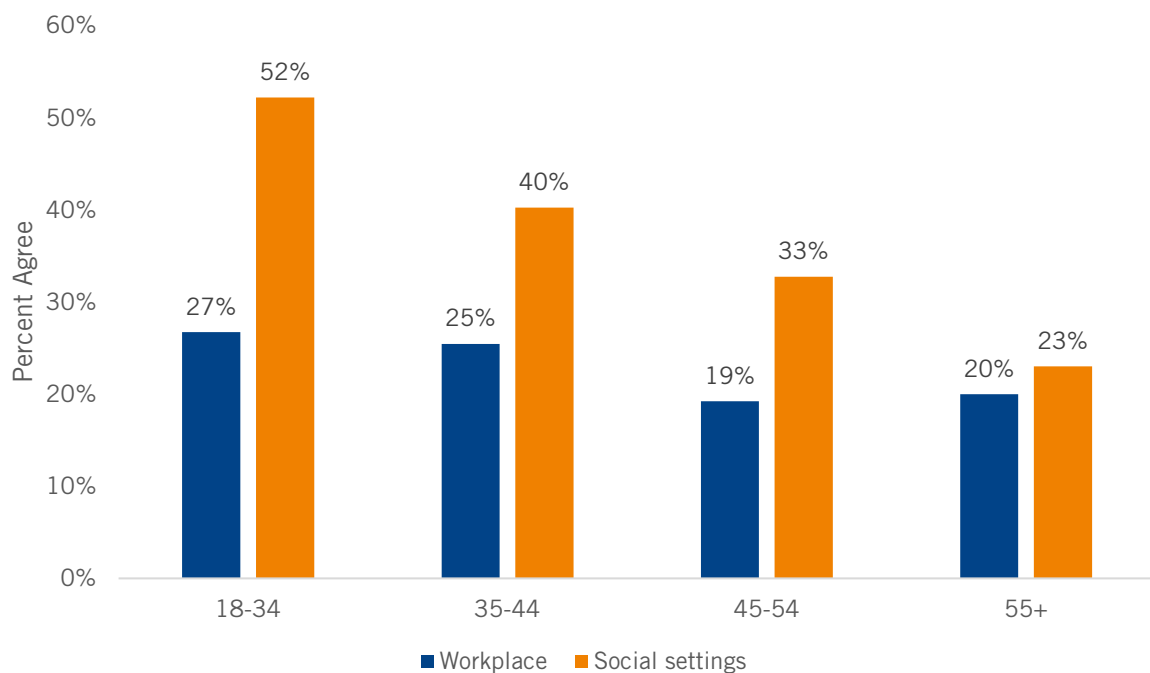
Interestingly, the age pattern for accent anxiety in this group (Figure 16) is the *reverse* of that observed for early career respondents in Figure 15. Here, senior managers who are older have less anxiety. This may be two sides of the same coin: older respondents who have gained access to senior roles may have the confidence of having already crossed a difficult hurdle—the same hurdle causing older early career respondents' anxiety.

Figure 16. Senior managers –concern that accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by age)



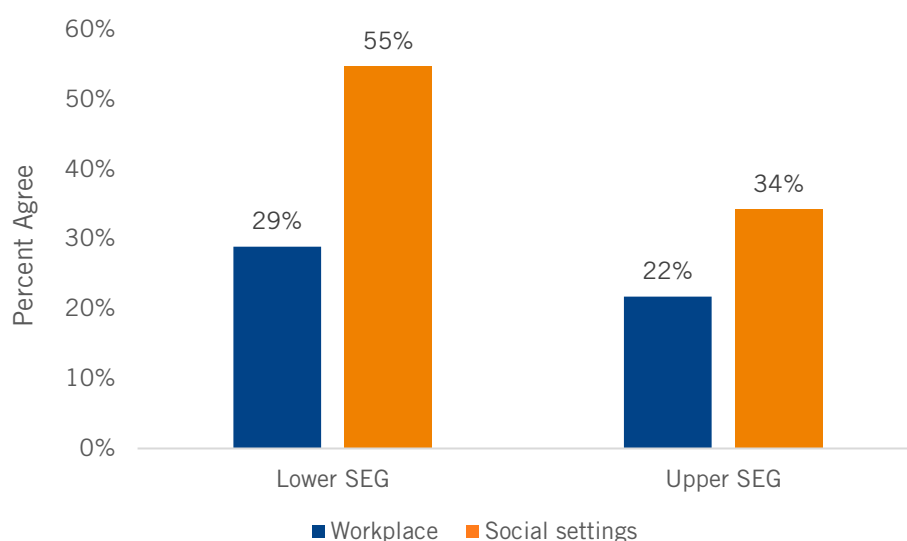
This age profile also holds for experiences of bias, both in the workplace and in social settings (Figure 17). This could mean that younger people are encountering more bias or that younger people are more likely to perceive negative comments as bias; however, our surveys suggest that the pattern may be due to older professionals having suppressed their non-RP accents to a greater extent in earlier decades, assimilating to the standard in order to avoid discrimination.

Figure 17. Senior managers – experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised or singled out in the workplace and in a social setting (by age)



Socio-economic status affects accent-related anxiety among senior managers (Figure 15), and it shows the same significant effect on whether a respondent has experienced bias against their accent, either in the workplace or socially (Figure 18). 29% of respondents from lower socio-economic grades reported such experiences in the workplace, as against 22% from higher socio-economic grades. And 55% of senior professionals from lower socio-economic backgrounds report such experiences in social settings, as compared to 34% from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 18. Senior managers – experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised or singled out in the workplace and in a social setting (by parental socio-economic grade)



It is notable that region disappears as a main effect at this life stage. This mirrors the findings for listener bias found in earlier work (Figure 2): As we enter the more institutionalised power dynamics of professional work, the focus turns to social class, rather than the North-South divide that schoolchildren and university students orient to.

The significant effects outlined above have shown that socio-economic background is one of the strongest factors in accent-based anxiety and experiences of bias during adulthood and in professional environments. Looking over the main life stages presented, we see that region comes to be replaced by socio-economic status as the leading factor affecting experiences of accent bias and anxiety.

The qualitative observations that follow are based on life experiences gathered through our more in-depth surveys. In these surveys, we focused on accessing individuals in occupations that have been particularly associated with standard language ideologies: law³⁷, the civil service³⁸, and secondary school and sixth form teaching.³⁹

Friedman has observed, for example, that Received Pronunciation is one of the three key dimensions of the “studied neutrality” expected in the civil service. In his data, a participant from a higher socio-economic background observes that “[t]here is a definite style of speaking... that kind of neutral-ish RP

³⁷ L. Ashley et al. 2015. *A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions*. London: Social Mobility Commission Report.

³⁸ S. Friedman. 2022. (Not) bringing your whole self to work: the gendered experience of upward mobility in the UK Civil Service. *Gender, Work and Organization* 29 (2): 502 – 519.

³⁹ I. Cushing & J. Snell. 2022. The (white) ears of Ofsted: a raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate. *Language in Society* (online first).

accent, like trying to place yourself as from nowhere... so I think most people in the [senior civil service] end up having an accent that is quite similar... And it is very like: 'I'm objective, my analysis is objective.'" Friedman contrasts this with stereotypes of regional accents being framed as "impinging on this embodiment of neutrality, with those from working class backgrounds frequently reporting feeling misread as aggressive, loud or too passionate".⁴⁰ The earlier Lancashire student's testimonial of being described as aggressive in tutorials echoes this deeply ideologised opposition.

The testimonials below, all from senior professionals, reflect these barriers to merit-based assessments at more senior levels of elite professions.

Testimonials - Law and civil service experiences

(Estuary English) – *"I applied for a promotion three years running. My [Law School] Head told me to apply and said I easily met the criteria. I was not given the promotion to the third time. I recall her [feedback] words to me, the VC had said "great candidate, shame about the voice". I don't know if this attitude affected my previous attempts, but I was very upset and went to elocution lessons after – to be told by the tutor that I was a "hopeless cause". ... After completing the Bar course to become a barrister, at an official dinner, I felt picked on by a judge, who singled me out and bombarded me with questions. The other people in attendance all had BBC accents."*

(Liverpool) – *"In a work context I was told 'Ha, you're not a typical civil servant, are you?'"*

(Nigerian) – *"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."*

(Received Pronunciation) – *"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."*

Conservatism with respect to accent is also a major focus in the teaching profession. School policies supporting a standard accent were noted earlier in relation to the student experience. This ideology is so pervasive in educational contexts that teachers too are often required by schools to 'tone down' regional accents in their teaching practice, with mentors instructing trainee teachers to adopt a 'professional', standardised accent.⁴¹ These discourses are generally justified on the grounds that standardised accents aid student comprehension of speech (doubtful in regions with few RP speakers), but the practice is key to maintaining the special status of RP accents and erasing accent diversity from a young age.

Our in-depth surveys confirmed a number of these earlier observations. A third of the 81 teachers in our smaller in-depth survey believed students exercised accent bias towards them, with teachers located in the South observing this more, and teachers in Scotland not at all. These impressions were affected by their age and level of experience. As in the quantitative findings above, those earlier in their career felt more pressure to adapt their accents. And finally, more teachers from independent schools reported such effects than those teaching in state schools.

⁴⁰ S. Friedman. 2022. (Not) bringing your whole self to work: the gendered experience of upward mobility in the UK Civil Service. *Gender, Work and Organization* 29 (2): 502 – 519.

⁴¹ A. Baratta. 2021. Varieties of 'standard accents' among teachers in contemporary Britain. *World Englishes* (online first).

In the sample comments below, we see informal enforcement of accent norms at work via managers, colleagues, and students. Working class and ethnic minority accents are singled out, speakers of these accents distance themselves from their community accents, leading to continued absence of these voices from professional life, and we see indications of greater bias in Southern England, as found in relation to the study reported on earlier in Figure 2.

We also see some indication that standard or 'posh' accents escape bias, though they can also be the target of commentary for teachers, as noted by a few university students too. Individuals who speak in an RP accent only occasionally reported mild forms of bias—a sample testimonial is provided below—but in all of our surveys we had no reports of this leading to obstructed career advancement and social mobility. Relatedly, standard accent speakers feel much less pressure to modify their accents. So, although bias may be encountered, it is of a very different kind, with limited negative implications.

Testimonials — Teacher experiences (Page 1)

(Edinburgh) – *“The accent I most see criticised by students is South Asian, and I see students in London giving those teachers a hard time. I have seen students make fun of teachers with West African accents, and bully teachers with Eastern European accents. And I have seen my colleagues be incredibly disparaging towards women with working class Essex accents.”*

(South London) – *“I worked in a school in Kent which was predominantly white. I am a white person myself but because of my strong South London accent I was referred to as ‘the black teacher in M7’ because I ‘spoke like I was black’. Other White members of staff laughed this off. However, there was a common attitude that specific skin colours spoke a specific way.”*

(South London) – *“I felt as though in school people would be able to tell I was poor from the way I spoke so I changed the way that I spoke to try and sound less common.”*

(West Midlands) – *“My accent became a lot milder once I left home and the area I grew up in. It is not considered a socially acceptable accent. As a result my accent has been neutralised.”*

(Stoke-on-Trent) – *“My accent and its depiction in national media is very heavily related to social class and social deprivation. It is an accent that makes people sound ‘thick’ and ‘poor’ and these are enormous barriers, reinforced by the mainstream media and its depiction of places like Stoke-on-Trent and the people who live here.”*

(Southern Irish, on whether she has encountered discrimination) – *“In a meeting with management or other teachers. Never in the classroom with the students. The multicultural students I teach understand my accent perfectly and never mock me.”*

(Estuary English) – *“My accent comes from my family and my community. To ask me to modify it is to ask me to deny my heritage. I have learnt in this accent and have taught with this accent. I can demonstrate other accents – and have taught in standard English for the sake of pronunciation in ESOL classes, but I will not code switch for some classist outdated concept of elitism. It’s my least favourite thing about living in England.”*

Testimonials — Teacher experiences (Page 2)

(Southern Irish) – *“I was recruited from university in Ireland – my first teaching job was in London. I was told many years later by the head who recruited me, a very English lady, that the reason she recruited heavily from Ireland was because “Irish teachers will teach all pupils the same – regardless of where they are from or what their social status is. English teachers don’t generally do that.” The school I worked in was in East London with a high proportion of West African and Caribbean girls. I think there is subconsciously or not, a real bias to accent here.”*

(Scottish) – *“My accent is not a typically strong Glaswegian one, but it is Scottish and I am proud of it. The only issues I’ve EVER had with my accent have only come from English people. And that’s with travelling to many countries and working abroad for many years in different countries.”*

(Queen’s English) – *“Some students think of me as posh due to my accent. I think generally the students and staff wouldn’t care about anyone’s accent and wouldn’t think anything of it, but amongst leadership possibly a slight bias towards ‘proper’ness.”*

(Estuary English) – *“I am conscious of having one of the very few southern voices in the room in meetings – especially when with those who don’t know me. I sometimes feel that I might be perceived as posh or stuck up or just different, as I am aware of attitudes towards accents like mine here [in the North].”*

Discussion

The new data presented here on accent anxiety and experiences of accent bias over the lifespan of accent users complements the recent findings of *Accent Bias Britain* presented earlier, as it adds the perspectives of those with accents to what we know about listeners' judgements.

The *Accent Bias Britain* studies found that British people rate the accents of working class speakers, Northern industrial towns, and minority ethnicity groups lower for prestige. Working class and minority ethnic accents were associated with lower professional expertise and competence even when interview responses were identical. Listeners based in the South of England, from higher classes, and above the age of 45 exercised these forms of bias more.

The data presented here have shown that the same categories—social class, region, and ethnicity—affect whether a person feels anxious that their accent may impede their professional progress, feels a compromised sense of belonging, and has experienced mocking or singling out of their accent in workplace and social settings. The data further reveal that self-consciousness and anxiety peak towards the end of university, as individuals face entry into a chosen career.

The new data have also shown that, in earlier life stages, region of origin (particularly the North and the Midlands) plays an important part in accent anxiety, while later in life, particularly in work contexts, social class differences come to dominate as the most important factor in accent-related career anxiety and experiences of accent bias.

Feelings of insecurity and lack of belonging may stem from direct experience of having one's accent commented on, but they can also arise due to the long-standing asymmetries in which accents are heard in positions of authority. As noted at the outset of this report, even today the voices of authority in the UK—newsreaders, MPs, judges, barristers, civil service employees, schoolteachers, professionals—are overwhelmingly associated with RP.

We have not addressed gender in this report, as gender played a minimal role in differential accent experiences and self-perception. The *Accent Bias Britain* studies similarly did not find any major gender effects. This is at odds with clear signs of gendered accent bias in public discourse. For example, female MPs (e.g. from Manchester and Birmingham) have reported receiving extensive abuse for their accents via social media and from the public more generally, in stark contrast to male MPs.⁴² The same asymmetry was observed recently within broadcasting, when a female sports presenter who speaks with a London accent was reprimanded for her accent on social media by a male MP; almost no comment is made of the extensive prevalence of vernacular accents among male sports presenters.⁴³ Thus, although accent anxiety was not found to be higher among female respondents here—indeed men reported marginally more experience of bias and accent anxiety—there is a clear intersectional effect observed in public and professional contexts, whereby women with nonstandard accents can face greater criticism.

⁴² K. Edwards. 2022. People are 'accent policing' Angela Rayner – why does this only ever seem to happen to women? *Independent*, 13 January.

⁴³ M. Bryant. 2021. BBC's Alex Scott 'proud' of working class accent after peer's elocution jibe. *Guardian*, 31 July.

Evidence for practical solutions

A number of positive findings in the research of Accent Bias Britain and in the data presented here form the evidence-based foundation for the recommendations at the start of this report.

On the part of the applicant or employee, we found that two important factors mitigated or even eliminated the degree to which they were negatively judged for their accent: (i) mock interview candidates who demonstrated technical expert knowledge in their response were subject to less accent-based differential rating, and (ii) mock interview candidates who spoke confidently, without false starts and hesitation, were also subject to much less accent-based differential rating. Ironically, self-consciousness about accent can lead a person to suppress their voice and be harder to hear or understand. The two factors noted here—expert knowledge and confidence—suggests the opposite strategy, of speaking confidently and knowledgeably regardless of accent, is more effective.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, this still means that speakers of under-represented accents bear a greater burden in the context of elite professions and social mobility. But it does form a basis for concrete evidence-based recommendations.

On the part of employers, we found that trained legal professionals in law firms were consistently able to set aside bias when judging fine distinctions of quality of job interview response.

In a separate study, we specifically tested whether workplace unconscious bias training is effective. In recent years, a variety of strategies have been proposed for enhancing ‘cognitive control’ (the ability to ignore stereotypes and process information more consciously) to reduce discrimination. We tested the efficacy of five such strategies and only one was shown to have an effect. Simply having potential recruiters read a short awareness-raising text before the recruiting task significantly reduced accent-based differences in ratings of the same response.⁴⁵

This was particularly interesting because some recent work has shown that sort of awareness-raising for gender or racial bias no longer has a clear effect, possibly because people have heard the message so often. We interpret our finding as an indication that people are genuinely unaware of how much they rely on accent as a shortcut for making assumptions about competence or expertise, so many can make real adjustments once alerted to this risk.

This set of positive findings confirms a general observation in psychology: All humans can be ‘lazy’ listeners, liable to fall back on stereotypes, but if we hear some other basis for evaluating the speaker – expertise, confidence, or training to focus on specific recruiting criteria – we can gain the motivation (enhanced cognitive control) to pay attention to relevant cues and set aside our reliance on social stereotypes as mental shortcuts.

Finally, the research presented in this report attests to a willingness among younger people to shift expectations. As noted, the majority of respondents in our smaller survey of 178 university students agreed that people are currently expected to develop a standard accent for the workplace regardless of their personal preference, yet almost no one believed that this should be expected, nor that it is easy to change one’s accent.

⁴⁴ E. Levon et al. 2021. Accent Bias and Perceptions of Professional Competence in England. *Journal of English Linguistics* 49(4): 355-388.

⁴⁵ Y. Ye et al. 2020. “Mind the accent”: Effects of bias reduction interventions on the evaluation of job candidates with accents in the UK. Presentation at Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) Conference, New Orleans.

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