Diversity and inclusion in the think tank sector

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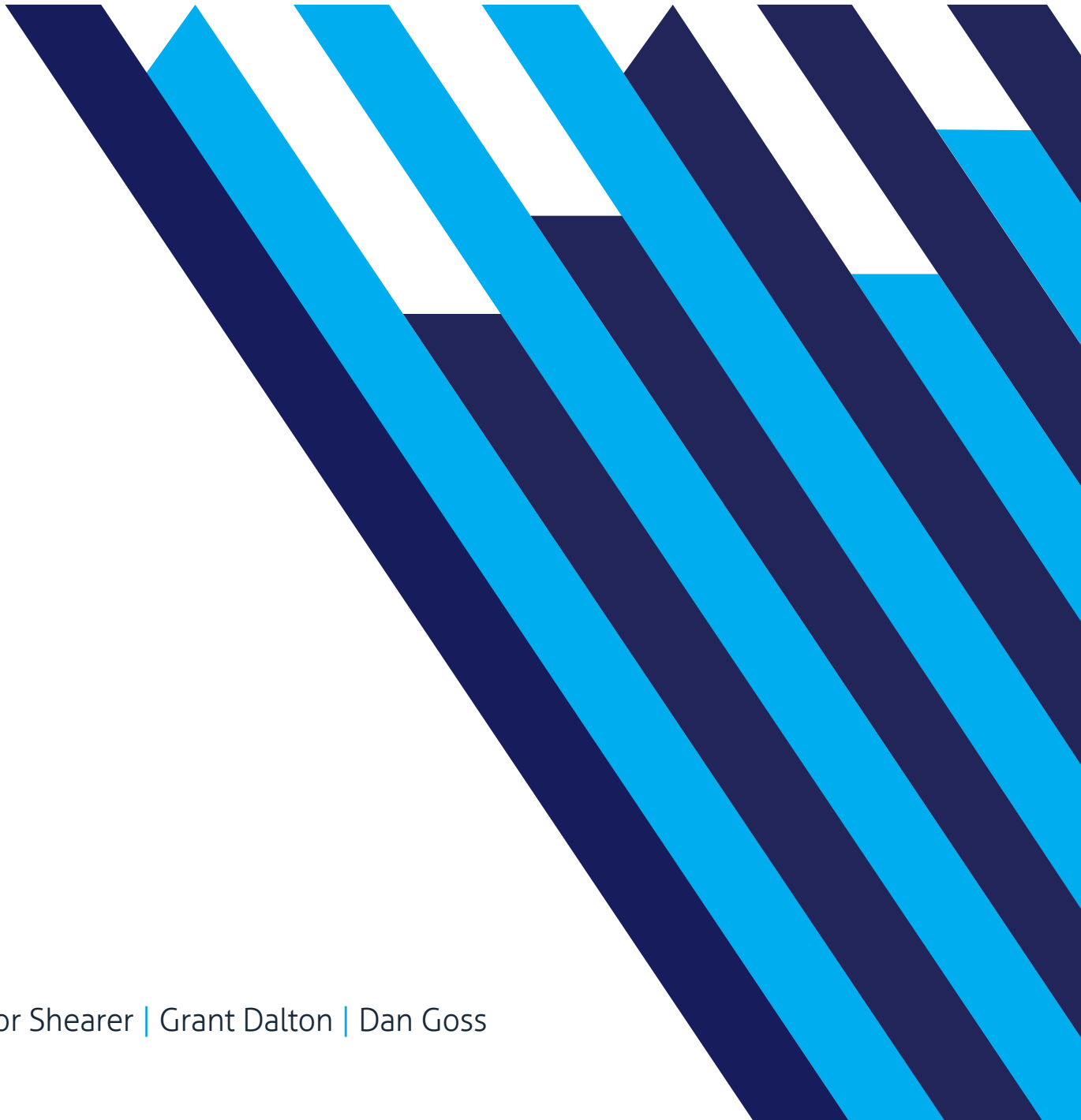
About this report

Diversity is vital for research organisations. It is important that think tanks reflect the wider population and that their work can represent a broad range of experiences. Efforts have already been made to improve diversity in the sector, but it is clear that much more is needed. This report considers how to make recruitment in the think tank sector more inclusive.

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Introduction

Diversity is vital for research organisations – for its own sake, because it is wrong to discriminate in recruitment practices or maintain an inaccessible work environment, but also because a diverse staff will be better able to draw on a wider range of experience to inform research.[1]

Work has already been done to improve diversity in the sector, but it is clear that much more is needed. With the influence that think tanks aim to have over government and policy, it is important that they reflect the wider population and that their research can represent a broad range of experiences.

Scope

This report considers how to make recruitment in the think tank sector more inclusive. We focus specifically on junior research roles as an important pipeline into the sector, though some of our conclusions will also apply to non-research roles. We investigate why think tanks might not attract a very diverse pool of applicants for their junior research roles, and how this could be improved.

We look at barriers faced by people from minority ethnic groups and those from a lower socio-economic background. We did not consider other forms of disadvantage, such as disability, but the sector could do more in these areas too and they intersect with the characteristics that we do consider. Improving diversity along other lines – for non-research staff and for other protected characteristics – is also important and worthy of future research.

We also did not set out to consider issues of working environment, progression and retention in detail in this research, nor did we consider in detail how different recruitment processes advantage or disadvantage certain applicants. We do make some observations and recommendations in these areas, but these are not comprehensive, and would be worthy of further consideration in future.

Methodology

The evidence for this report consists of a literature review of research on diversity in think tanks and related fields, interviews with people working on diversity and inclusion across the policy sector, a survey and focus groups.

We sent a survey out to students and people starting their careers in the policy sector, asking them about their perceptions of think tanks. We used the survey to recruit participants for three focus groups – comprising 19 participants from under-represented groups, ethnic and socio-economic – to hear in more detail their views of the sector and what should change. We disseminated the survey through university societies with a focus on class or ethnicity, such as 93% clubs, or African and Caribbean societies, through the newsletter for the Local Government Association's National Graduate Development Programme and through the Sutton Trust alumni

network (people from a disadvantaged class background who have participated in their summer schools). The survey received 114 responses, of which 71 were from those with an ethnic minority and/or intermediate or working-class background.

The small sample size of our survey and our focus groups should be taken into account when interpreting our findings and recommendations. A further limitation of our survey and focus groups was that the sample was not representative. As well as skewing towards people already interested in or working in public policy, the National Graduate Development Programme was strongly over-represented in our sample. This will have an effect on our findings around people's career goals and priorities.

Given these limitations, we see this research more as a starting point for further conversations and future research, rather than as offering definitive answers on diversity and inclusion in think tanks.

Our findings

The first section of this report is an overview of available data on think tank diversity, and also presents some benchmarks that organisations can use to compare with their own applicant pools and current staff. The second section explains the main barriers to entry in the think tank sector that may explain why it struggles to attract applicants from under-represented backgrounds. These barriers are:

- Low levels of awareness of think tanks and what they do

- Negative perceptions of the sector

- Problems with the way think tanks recruit, which may be off-putting.

The third section outlines our proposed solutions, including:

- Increased, co-ordinated outreach, focused on providing resources for teaching and for careers services

- Changing perceptions of think tanks, including by publishing content on career progression and impact

- Changing some recruitment practices, including with policies specifically targeted at improving geographical representation

- Initiating discussions about think tanks' own work culture.

In the conclusion, we summarise our recommendations, how quickly they could be done and whether they require cross-sector co-ordination. In the context of limited resources to expend on diversity efforts, there will be a trade-off between quicker and easier wins that may have less of an impact and more resource-intensive actions that may be more effective.

How diverse are think tanks?

In a report on diversity in think tanks, published in 2020, Smart Thinking highlighted that a lack of data is a major barrier to understanding diversity in the think tank sector.[2] There is very little publicly available data on the sector as a whole, and though individual organisations may monitor the diversity of their staff or their applicants this is not usually published. This section summarises the data that is available on think tanks and presents some relevant benchmarks so that individual organisations can consider how their staff and applicants compare.

Ethnicity

In its 2020 report, Smart Thinking estimated that 84% of think tank staff were white. This is about the level of the UK as a whole, which was 86% white according to the 2011 census. But it is far above the level of London, where most think tanks are based, which is 60% white. Smart Thinking also estimated that racial diversity is worse at the top of think tanks, with 94% of senior staff being white.

These figures are a useful starting point, but aggregating data on minority ethnic staff can disguise significant differences between different groups. For example, an organisation might have 35% of its staff from an minority ethnic background, comparing favourably with the London benchmark, but only 2% Black – compared to 13% of the population of London. In Table 1, we present some possible benchmarks, disaggregated by ethnicity, that think tanks might be able to use to compare their own staff or the applications they receive for junior positions.

Table 1 **Ethnicity benchmarks**

Benchmark	White	Asian	Black	Mixed	Other
Population	86%	8%	3%	2%	1%
London	60%	19%	13%	5%	3%
Universities	74%	11%	7%	4%	2%
High tariff universities	77%	12%	4%	5%	2%
Civil service (policy profession)	82%	8%	5%	4%	1%
Fast Stream applicants	71%	15%	8%	6%	2%

Source: 2011 Census; HESA Student Data, 2019-20; Summary of civil servants in the policy profession, 2021; and Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data 2021.

We offer benchmarks for the population as a whole and for London. We also show the breakdown of university students – both in general and at what UCAS classifies as 'high tariff' universities, those that require higher numbers of points to attend. Think tanks may find that if they predominantly advertise in and recruit from more elite institutions, their diversity will suffer as a result, particularly in terms of attracting Black applicants.

Finally, we also offer data on the Civil Service Fast Stream and civil service staff. The civil service is able to recruit on a scale that is far beyond think tanks due to its much larger size, but in the absence of other data on the sector, it is a useful comparison point because it attracts people with an interest in public policy, and staff salaries are often comparable to those in the think tank sector (as opposed to in, say, law or banking where they would be higher).

Although the civil service and the Fast Stream also have work to do to improve their diversity, think tanks might usefully compare data on the applicants they attract with the Fast Stream, and data on their research staff with civil servants working in policy roles to see where any issues of under-representation might be particularly acute.

Class

Because it falls outside the official 'protected characteristics' as outlined in the Equality Act 2010, such as gender and ethnicity,[3] efforts to measure socio-economic diversity tend to be less developed than ethnicity. The 2020 Smart Thinking report did not contain any estimates of the class backgrounds of think tank staff, but did note that many people it spoke to felt the sector did have a class problem. It also uses the university background of directors as a proxy, given that Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities are less diverse in terms of class, and finds that three quarters of directors went to these institutions. Collecting and publishing more data about class diversity should be a priority for the sector, and the Sutton Trust has guidance on the best questions to ask to measure socio-economic background, which is complex and has multiple dimensions.[4]

Based on the data available, we offer some benchmarks for parental occupation, parental education and eligibility for free school meals. As above, these are provided for UK adults as a whole, for university students from different types of institutions, and for the civil service and the Fast Stream.

Table 2 **Parental occupation benchmarks (based on the occupation of main household earner when respondent was about 14)**

Benchmark	Professional or managerial background	Intermediate background	Working class/lower socio-economic background
UK adults	37%	24%	39%
Civil service	54%	12%	34%
Fast Stream applicants	68%	14%	18%

Sources: The Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Toolkit, 2021; Social Mobility Commission, *Navigating the Labyrinth*, 2021; and Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data 2021.

Table 3 **Parental education benchmarks**

Benchmark	At least one parent with a university degree	No parent with a university degree
UK graduates	33%	67%
Russell Group	50%	50%
Fast Stream applicants	50%	50%

Sources: The Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Toolkit, 2021; and Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data 2021.

Table 4 **Free school meal (FSM) eligibility benchmarks**

Benchmark	Not eligible for FSM	Eligible for FSM
Population	86%	14%
UK graduates	91%	9%
Fast Stream applicants	79%	21%

Sources: The Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Toolkit, 2021; and Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data 2021.

Barriers to applying for a think tank role

Drawing on our focus groups and interviews, we have identified the main barriers that those from an minority ethnic or working-class background face when applying for think tank jobs. Barriers exist at every stage: finding out about an organisation or role, learning more about that role, seeing a job advertised, and being interested and confident enough to apply. This section considers those that are most relevant when explaining why the sector might not attract a diverse pool of applicants for its junior research roles.

Some barriers are due to poor knowledge, or even negative perceptions, of think tanks, often rooted in poor communication by the sector about what think tanks really do. Though some of these negative perceptions are rooted in what think tanks are actually like, there are some that are based on misunderstandings, and the solutions will involve better communication and outreach. For instance, some may think that think tanks have little or no impact, or are simply lobbying organisations by another name; better communication around impact and funding can help with this. Other barriers are more structural, and overcoming them will require longer-term organisational reform.

Lack of knowledge and understanding
Think tanks are not a well-known career path, disproportionately affecting under-represented groups
There is likely to be a significant pool of people from under-represented backgrounds who are interested in the work think tanks do. But think tanks are not well known or understood by the wider public, including by some people interested in, or even working in, adjacent sectors.

In a nationally representative survey asking people to name think tanks, less than 4% could name a single think tank.[5] This low level of awareness means that opportunities for potential applicants to learn about think tanks – including about job vacancies – are less accessible. This favours those with exposure to the sector, which tends to be those with specific educational backgrounds or personal connections.

Think tanks have a limited presence at careers services and events – a key place under-represented groups learn about careers
Students with less access to networks of knowledge – family or family friends in the think tank or similar sectors – are more reliant on public resources when making decisions about their careers. Seven of our 19 focus group participants talked about their university careers service, and six about university careers events, as ways they had received information about jobs and sectors they were interested in; none mentioned their family and just one mentioned other 'networks'.

Careers services and events are useful for under-represented groups not only to be exposed to certain sectors and organisations, but to understand what day-to-day work looks like, what sort of roles exist, how funding works, and what the routes into the sector are. Building this knowledge helps encourage those from under-represented groups to apply.

While there have been positive efforts at outreach in recent years, including the Working in the Think Tank Sector event,[6] think tanks still generally have a limited presence at careers services and events (in part due to their small size and limited resources). Very few of those we spoke to said they had learned about think tanks at careers events.

Negative perceptions of think tanks
Think tanks are not seen as accessible to those without post-graduate education

There is a perception that even entry-level positions in the think tank sector require a postgraduate qualification or significant experience. This discourages potential candidates from considering the sector as a possible career choice. Four of our focus group participants said this had put them off applying.

There are some think tank roles where postgraduate degrees are required, or may be heavily favoured in the application process, meaning this perception is founded. This is likely to have an exclusionary effect because, for example, working-class people are only a quarter as likely to obtain a postgraduate degree as those from more privileged backgrounds.[7] But even where this is a misconception, it is more likely to affect those who are least familiar with the sector, creating another deterrent disproportionately affecting under-represented groups.[8]

Think tanks are not seen as welcoming to or a cultural fit for those from under-represented backgrounds

The fact that the think tank sector is not visibly diverse can be off-putting to people from under-represented backgrounds. In our survey, we asked which of a list of factors might most discourage someone from applying for a think tank role. The most common response across all groups was that it was difficult or competitive to get into the sector, but "Lack of role models/people like me in senior positions" was the second most common response for minority ethnic respondents, and only the sixth most common for white respondents (out of 10 possible responses).

These findings were echoed in our focus groups. Five participants expressed concern that think tanks would be 'elite' – for example, "only for like people who are overly educated and middle class" – and another participant expressed the view that think tanks would be "really white and middle class… [and] not even trying to improve that". One noted that "when I'm watching the news and think tanks come up, it's normally a white, very well-educated person, and for me that does stick out a lot". This is echoed by survey evidence, which suggested in 2018 that among those who work in politics or policy, 68% believed that think tanks represent the interests of the elite.[9]

This perceived lack of diversity can be off-putting for people from under-represented backgrounds. Focus group participants spoke of the discomfort caused in general by a lack of diversity in workplaces through:

- Feeling like they do not fit in with the culture of a workplace

- The need to 'code switch' (behave in accordance with the social norms of dominant cultural groups)[10]

- A lack of recognition of inequalities and privileges among staff

- Having to listen to sensitive conversations about race spoken about in a flippant way

- Having their success in getting the job dismissed as just resulting from affirmative action.

> "Every time I go into a big company or talk to someone who's middle class – like professional – I feel like I'm putting on a facade and it's the weirdest thing ever... you're expected to change the way you speak and how you think and how you behave." – *Focus group 3 participant*

There may be think tanks where the workplace culture is as alienating as people from under-represented groups fear. Even with the best of intentions, an organisation that is not diverse can inadvertently create an environment that is unwelcoming. But it is also likely that some think tanks are not doing enough to dispel myths that they are elite or inaccessible, and that better communication could make clear that they are putting in the work to make sure they are a good fit for people from all backgrounds.

Some of our focus group participants also raised worries that think tanks were not clear on their values, political affiliation and funding, and so working for a think tank might not align with their values.

People are not clear on the impact that think tanks have

In the focus groups, participants were clear about how much they valued having a career that makes a difference. Eleven told us they wanted to have a 'social impact' with their career. In our survey – which covered people of all ethnicities and class backgrounds – 75% said they wanted to work in a sector with 'positive social impact', and 64% listed the 'opportunity to influence government policy' as a key attraction of working in the think tank sector.

But think tanks are not always perceived as organisations that can make a difference, especially when they are associated with academic concerns rather than driving concrete change. Four focus group participants specifically mentioned that a lack of observable impact would put them off from working for a think tank. Three also felt that the work of think tanks is not accessible to the wider population – beyond researchers and academics – noting this makes it hard for most people to grasp their impact.

In part, this may be a result of think tank impact generally being indirect – influencing the views of people in power and the wider debate rather than instituting change directly – and therefore less immediately obvious. But think tanks might also not be doing enough to communicate the social impact they do have.

There are concerns among under-represented groups about upward career progression

In part because think tanks are not well understood, some focus group participants expressed concerns that think tanks will not offer upward progression, training or a range of professional experiences. Two of our 19 participants felt that in think tanks their career progression would be more limited than on graduate schemes like the National Graduate Development Programme and the Fast Stream. And progression concerns for under-represented groups may not be wholly unfounded: the 2020 Smart Thinking survey found that 94% of senior staff in think tanks were white, compared to 84% of staff in the sector as a whole.[11]

This is partly because career progression in the sector is less linear than in the civil service or local government. The small size of think tanks means staff frequently move upwards into adjacent sectors, which is itself a valuable progression opportunity. These aspects of career development in think tanks may not be well communicated to potential applicants at present.

Concerns about jobs in the sector
The lack of graduate schemes makes entry-level opportunities less attractive to under-represented groups

Taking a chance on a short-term, entry-level position is harder for those without the financial resources or family support to fall back on if this doesn't turn into a stable job, or doesn't lead to an increase in skills and earning potential. This makes graduate schemes an attractive option for many people.

> "I'm financially independent and always have been, so doing something like an internship or applying for a role that wasn't permanent would leave me in a difficult position. Already that removes a lot of opportunities from people."
> – *Focus group 3 participant*

In our focus groups, people said they were attracted to graduate schemes because they:

- Are clear and easy to understand

- Provide training and development

- Offer a range of experiences and are flexible as to work paths

- Had predictable and regular entry points

- Allow new entrants to join as part of a wider cohort

- Offer high likelihood of further employment, creating a sense of stability.

This is a problem inherent to the sector. Think tanks are generally too small to offer graduate schemes. Politics and associated sectors seem to have a particularly high prevalence of unpaid internships, although the majority of think tanks now pay their interns at least the national living wage.[12]

Some think tanks do offer an annual internship, but these may be only a few months long. The Institute for Government offers a year-long internship, but even this does not involve cross-team rotations as standard or guaranteed future employment in the sector on the scale of other public or private sector graduate schemes. And currently no think tanks collaborate with one another on a joint entry-level programme to realise these economies of scale in recruitment.

Think tanks jobs are too often based in London

Think tanks are concentrated in London. But many potential candidates either do not want to live in London or would face difficulties and costs in relocating. Jobs that require physical presence in London therefore present an additional barrier to people based outside of the capital, and particularly those with lower incomes.

This also applies to interviews, as in-person interviews in London mean some applicants may have to incur the financial cost and inconvenience of a long journey.

Problems with recruitment practices

Our research did not consider in detail how different recruitment processes might present a barrier to applicants from certain backgrounds. However, this was something that came up in interviews and the literature review, and is worth further study.

Most organisations recruit using different stages, usually some combination of:

- CVs and cover letters

- Short-answer written questions

- A longer written task

- Online tests, including verbal and numerical reasoning tests and situational judgment tests

- Assessment centres

- Interviews

Many organisations find that the diversity of their applicant pool decreases through each stage of their recruitment process. This means that attracting a more diverse pool of applicants is only part of the problem – a think tank's recruitment process might still mean that people from under-represented backgrounds are less likely to get hired.

We can see evidence of this in the Fast Stream. Figure 1 shows how, on various measures of ethnicity and class, more advantaged applicants are more likely to get through the recruitment stages and receive an offer.

Figure 1 **Success rate of applicants to Civil Service Fast Stream by ethnicity, socio-economic background, parental education and free school meal (FSM) eligibility**
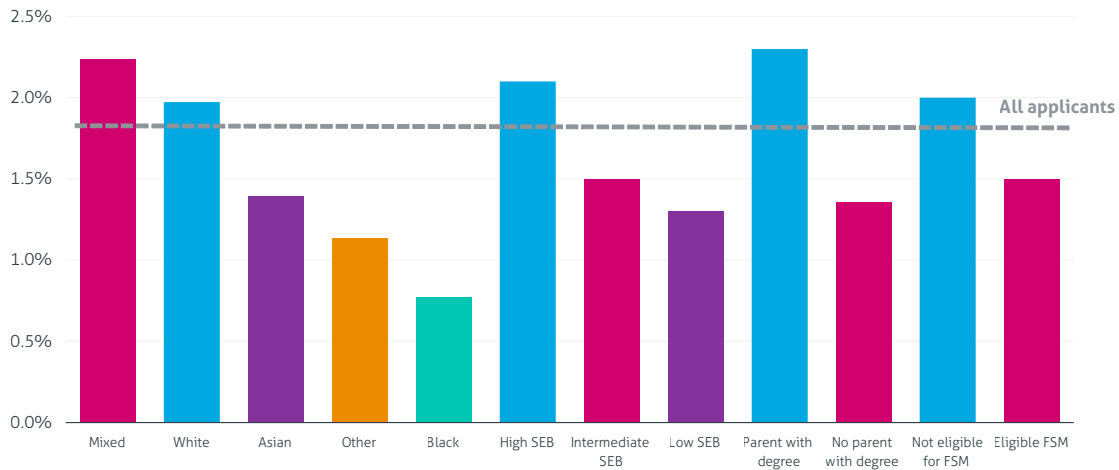
Source: Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data, 2021

The civil service has previously published research on making its application process fairer to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.[13] The Local Government Association's National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) has also recently reviewed the fairness of its application process.[14] Both note the impact that online verbal and numerical tests can have in disadvantaging candidates based on their background – something that has been echoed in research by Rare Recruitment.[15]

Solutions

Better outreach

Better outreach in schools and (in particular) universities can improve awareness of think tanks and how they work. This is especially important in lower-tariff universities, which are more likely to have a more diverse student body. It could also include routes into the sector that do not require a university degree at all.

But individual think tanks cannot do a comprehensive outreach programme alone. Cross-sector co-ordination is needed to promote opportunities and then to provide access. The testimonies from focus groups suggested two particular ways of doing this.

A focus on careers services

As discussed above, university career services are a good way of reaching out to students who may not have other means of finding out about the sector. Think tanks should do more to provide information about the sector as a whole to careers advisers. This would be fairly low cost, as careers advisers will be able to do actual outreach if furnished with information about the sector. But careers advisers are often required to cover a wide range of sectors and may have a limited understanding of think tanks.

To combat this, think tanks should co-ordinate to put together an information pack explaining how the sector works and possible routes into it to careers advisers and students. This could be emailed to the careers services of every university in the UK, and could include a list of think tanks and their entry-level positions.

Co-ordinated outreach across the sector

In-person outreach is also a crucial part of the picture, to encourage as wide a group as possible to apply to think tank jobs. Three members of our focus groups suggested that more outreach events would be helpful in widening the pool of applicants to think tank roles. But individually few, if any, think tanks have enough staff to do significant outreach to all 165 universities in the UK, let alone the thousands of UK schools.

The sector therefore requires a co-ordinated outreach programme, bringing together staff from a group of think tanks to reach out consistently to a larger group of universities and schools. A group of volunteers from across the sector could come together to divide up access work and cover a wider range of universities and geographies, using standardised cross-sector resources about how think tanks work and how to get into the sector.

This could specifically target careers fairs, for the reasons discussed above. It could also target social mobility organisations and initiatives like the Sutton Trust's Summer Schools Programme, which three focus group participants said had been an important part of how they learned about career options.

Focus group participants also gave some pointers on what successful outreach events look like. Participants felt that having time to ask questions of staff one-on-one was useful – though some felt that networking events can be intimidating, so this should always be supported by written resources for those who are less confident asking questions in person. Participants also said that careers events worked well when there was a clear instruction of how to move on after the event, such as who to contact, what opportunities are offered or how to apply.

Integrating content into curriculums

An alternative way for individual think tanks to help potential applicants learn about the sector is through curriculum-based content. Three focus group participants said they had learned about think tanks through politics courses. School and university curriculums are a good way of making students aware of think tanks without having to do direct outreach.

We interviewed one think tank that had seen success through reaching out to teachers, and another was considering this approach. Because politics and economics are both elective subjects at A level, many schools don't have a dedicated politics or economics department or teachers with a background in those subjects. This means curriculum resources can be particularly useful for teachers, and are a good way of raising awareness of think tanks earlier on.

Think tanks could consider organising some of their pre-existing work into a specialist resource for students to use, such as a list of work on subjects covered in the A level syllabus for relevant subjects (politics, economics, geography etc). In creating this content, think tanks should evaluate the best way to appeal to a variety of learning styles, by mixing text-based, visual and video-based content. This would not only benefit recruitment but increase the reach of content.

> "I think there could be more that's done to make this content and these subjects a bit more engaging to people of diverse backgrounds. Sometimes it can seem a bit stuffy and not particularly relevant to normal people. I think even if it's just a slight change in focus or even just rewording things slightly, it can make it more engaging, more appealing to people from different backgrounds" – *Focus Group 2 participant*

It could also be useful to create a document introducing university lecturers in relevant subjects to a think tank's work, which could then be sent out to academic contacts – particularly those at non-Russell Group universities – to encourage them to use it.

Non-degree routes into the sector

Currently, junior roles at many think tanks require a university degree, but going to university is not an option for everyone. Think tanks should consider whether and how they could open up alternative routes to a career in the sector, for instance by accepting applications from those with a track record of applying the research skills needed in a work environment but without a degree. Longer term, think tanks could also consider getting involved in plans to develop a social research apprenticeship, led by the Government Social Research profession.

Improving perceptions of the sector

The think tank sector is not well understood by the public and is often seen as precarious, exclusive or lacking diversity. While some of this may be solved by improved outreach, there is more that can be done to tackle these perceptions.

Offer paid, long-term entry-level jobs

Participants in the focus groups placed great emphasis on career development opportunities, which were mentioned by eight people as a key factor which motivated them to apply for roles in their chosen field. In particular, many participants mentioned the idea of a graduate scheme, and the certainty of progression and rotation these schemes provide, as something that is attractive.

While this finding may partly be influenced by the high proportion of people already on a graduate scheme among those who participated in the focus groups, it also speaks to their backgrounds. Those from less economically secure backgrounds are more likely to be attracted to careers that offer long-term certainty, and allow them, for instance, to move to a new city without feeling they are taking a financial risk.

Think tanks should offer fair levels of pay for interns and other entry-level positions, as unpaid positions significantly favour those with financial means. These should also be advertised on a range of public jobs websites, and not just specialist sites or through mailing lists and word of mouth. Some of our focus group participants also highlighted the importance of transparent communication about pay and experience requirements, with entry-level jobs clearly flagged as such and pay information provided.

Most think tanks are too small to provide regular entry-level opportunities, let alone a graduate scheme with the offer of a permanent job at the end of it. But in combination, the sector is large and varied enough for this to be possible. To encourage more applicants who want variety and longer-term opportunities to apply, the sector should consider creating a cross-sector graduate scheme, which would offer applicants the chance to rotate between different organisations and areas of work and a guaranteed opportunity for a full-time job at the end of the process.

While this would be a big undertaking to organise, it has the potential to have a huge impact in offering an attractive alternative to the Fast Stream and other graduate schemes in the policy sector. Charityworks, the graduate trainee programme for the non-profit sector, could be a promising model for think tanks to follow.[16]

Advertise progression of junior staff

Some think tanks will struggle to offer long-term opportunities, due to uncertainties around funding and a desire not to take financial risks by advertising permanent entry-level roles. But even if think tanks are able to offer only temporary or low-level jobs, more can be done to help potential applicants understand career progression in the sector. For instance, think tanks could advertise what roles former interns or junior staff go on to – either through video testimonies, which could help think tanks seem more personable and approachable, or in the form of statistics on the proportion of former interns in work a few months after the scheme ends – to make it clearer that

internships are a good start to a career, rather than a risky short-term contract. These could include some detail on how the internship helped people go on to other roles, and what skills they learned.

Think tanks should also emphasise, in the materials provided to careers services for example, that careers often involve moving between think tanks and other sectors – for instance, government, politics, academia or public affairs. This would help attract applicants who want a varied career or are unsure about opportunities for progression in a specific think tank, but would be more confident if they knew about opportunities to move into other roles.

Showing impact

Think tanks can have a major impact, but their impact and the type of work they do is not always explained to the outside world. The sector should think about how to do this better, partly to attract candidates looking to make a difference. For instance, think tanks might consider publishing impact case studies to publicise times they have changed policies or outcomes for the better (perhaps a few years after they have happened, to avoid political sensitivities). These should particularly target the general public by being accessible – clearly written and ideally as HTML text or social media content rather than as a long PDF that needs to be downloaded. They should also highlight where think tanks work on topics that are interesting and important to the general public, to help combat the misconception that think tanks are removed from the concerns of ordinary people.

Alternatively, they could publish some text explaining in general terms how their work can make a difference. Even publishing more detail of what day-to-day life is like for junior staff, and what sort of work is involved, might help – for example, the Institute for Government recently recorded a podcast for internship applicants to help them understand what a 'day in the life' of an intern usually involves.[17]

Being transparent about funding and mission

Some potential applicants may be put off an organisation if they worry its values or funding sources do not align with theirs. Lack of transparency around funding may also contribute to the more general perception of think tanks as elitist or inaccessible. Think tanks should be transparent in public about their funding sources and what they seek to achieve, to ensure they attract applicants who understand and align with their values.

Improving representation in media and events

Those we spoke to in interviews and focus groups were aware that the think tank sector has a diversity problem – partly because think tank staff appearing in the media or think tank events are not likely to be fully representative, especially of Black or working-class people. Three focus group participants said that this had put them off the sector. This is unsurprising; candidates are encouraged to apply by visible role models from their background in positions of power, and can be discouraged if these role models do not exist.

> "I think for me representation does matter in terms of leadership at our leading think tanks. Recently I was watching the news and for the first time I saw a Black female who was chief exec of a think tank, the New Economics Foundation. That really caught my eye because normally when I'm watching the news and think tanks come up, it's normally a white, very well-educated person, and for me that does stick out a lot. I think you need to promote diverse leadership in all levels and people from diverse backgrounds will really resonate with that. People start looking at these things and being like no, actually there's someone here who looks like me, talks like me, this might be an interesting career for me" – *Focus group 2 participant*

Think tanks that run public events, podcasts or publish work from external politicians or political advisers should be particularly mindful of the diversity of those whose voices they promote, and ensure they invite a good range of people to speak.

Think tanks should consider collecting statistics on the racial and socio-economic diversity of those appearing at their events and in the media. They should use this aggregate data to highlight to staff where they might be failing on diversity and consciously target under-represented groups in those who they invite or suggest for media appearances.

Talk proactively and publicly about the problems

Focus group participants were also clear that the sector should be honest to potential applicants about the problems it has on diversity, and what it was doing to combat them. While there is a difficult trade-off on this – overemphasising the problems would have a detrimental effect – the preconceptions about think tanks as elitist and unrepresentative already exist and should be tackled head on.

This was discussed in some of the literature we reviewed and our interviews. Smart Thinking's 2020 report recommends that think tanks publish a diversity and inclusion strategy on their website, as this "helps to formalise their policies and is a clear signal that it is taken seriously by the organisation".[18] Some think tanks, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, have already done this.[19]

The Social Research Association's recent report on diversity in social research also suggested developing an action plan endorsed by senior leadership as a key way of delivering change.[20] We agree with this, and suggest think tanks should have a public statement on diversity on their website, linked to their career page, which recognises the problems in the sector and sets out what each organisation is doing to tackle them.

Improving recruitment practices

It is difficult to make a judgment on the impact of think tanks' recruitment practices on the diversity of those they recruit without internal data, which think tanks are not often willing to share. But some organisations may worry that their recruitment process results in a lower success rate for ethnic minority candidates or those from a lower socio-economic background.

Applications and interviews

The most rigorous way of countering problems with recruitment processes is to undertake a disparity audit of the application process. This would look in detail at whether and why certain stages of the application process discriminate against candidates from particular backgrounds. Other organisations have found this works well to counter bias: the NGDP hired an external auditor to conduct a review into its practices, and was able to identify changes as a result.[21]

Contextualised recruitment can also be an option to improve diversity, and may be preferable to blind recruitment. This is where recruiters consider applicants' achievements in the background; for example, by valuing three As at A level more highly if an applicant is from a state school than if they are from a private school. The Sutton Trust recommends the use of contextualised recruitment for employers to improve class diversity,[22] and Rare Recruitment (an organisation that works with minority ethnic graduates) recommends it for improving ethnic diversity.[23]

There are advantages to blind recruitment in terms of minimising unconscious bias, and it may be that think tanks should keep some elements of the process blind – such as scoring the answers applicants provide. But then being able to contextualise those scores according to applicants' experience and educational background might be valuable in improving the diversity of those who are interviewed. Under equalities law, there is scope for positive action where an employer has two candidates of similar ability, and can prioritise one on the grounds of their background to correct for systemic under-representation of certain groups, which might be used at certain recruitment stages if appropriate.

Other organisations have expressed concern about the effects of verbal and numerical reasoning tests on diversity. For example, the NGDP recently removed such tests because of concerns that they were putting applicants off, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Instead, the NGDP now relies more heavily on situational judgment tests.[24] Especially if a disparity audit shows that aptitude tests produce high levels of racial and class disparity, think tanks who use these tests should consider redesigning the tests or removing them entirely (if feasible given the skills they require).

The interview stage of recruitment processes is another source of potential bias. Interview guides should explicitly ask staff to challenge their unconscious biases. This should focus on encouraging interviewers to value a wide range of experiences, rather than being about which candidates they 'click' best with, which will often be related to a candidate's educational, social or ethnic background. For staff involved in the recruitment process, there could also be more resources made available on how to think about issues of diversity in our recruitment. Self-study unconscious bias training could also have broader value outside recruitment processes, by encouraging staff to reflect on the way they conduct research more broadly.

Improving geographical accessibility

Moving to a new city is costly for those without savings or family support, especially in London.

> "I've always had to go down to London and because I don't really have family in London, I'd have to leave Sheffield at like four or five in the morning to get there for 8 o'clock in the morning… Yeah, definitely, [it would be great] if they did interviews in other areas other than London" – *Focus group 3 participant*

Think tanks, particularly those based in London, should think about ways of lowering barriers to those who do not live nearby at the interview and other stages of their recruitment process. Think tanks should consider online interviews or, alternatively, ensure they offer to pay interviewees' travel costs up front – as some candidates may not be able to afford to wait before being reimbursed. Those with fixed requirements for new starters to be in the office should also offer some initial flexibility over working from home for new starters moving from somewhere else.

Think tanks could also look further into other ways to help ease the costs of moving to start a new job, including:

- A scheme to lend the cost of a rental deposit to staff moving from elsewhere

- A scheme to provide a first month's salary in advance to junior staff on request.

Removing a demand for unnecessary academic qualifications

Some jobs may require specific skills, including those obtained through postgraduate study. But access to postgraduate qualifications is deeply unequal as outlined above, so requiring certain qualifications (or rewarding them in the application process) does risk reducing the diversity of those who are recruited.

Think tanks should review whether entry-level roles really require postgraduate qualifications and, if not, remove them, or at least encourage applicants without them also to apply. More broadly, some participants in our focus groups complained that some think tank jobs were advertised as entry-level but in practice required lots of experience to apply. Think tanks should create genuine entry-level roles to help talented candidates without prior experience into the sector.

Improving work culture

Diversity and inclusion research can often focus on pipeline and recruitment issues and ignore retention and progression issues once staff from under-represented backgrounds are actually within an organisation. It was beyond the scope of this research to consider in detail whether and how the think tank sector could improve its work culture to provide the most inclusive and welcoming environment for staff from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds.

However, a recent survey of nearly 1,000 policy researchers from the Social Research Association suggested marginalised groups "tend to have negative experiences of working in the [research] profession", and may feel the sector fails to accommodate their circumstances or offer fair opportunities or rewards.[25] People with multiple forms of disadvantage reported feeling less valued, less supported and having less of a feeling of belonging in their organisations than less disadvantaged groups.[26]

This sort of information is hard to ignore. Think tanks should reflect further on whether they do create the right environment for staff of all backgrounds. Data on pay and progression of staff from under-represented backgrounds should inform this reflection.

Focus group participants also raised some common issues that can make people from under-represented backgrounds feel unwelcome:

• Discussions of poverty, benefits, or any other issues where some people may have direct lived experience can be alienating if these become too abstract and impersonal.

• If it feels awkward or uncomfortable to discuss race or class, this can lead to some people feeling unable to "bring their whole self to work".

The Social Mobility Commission's report on class in the civil service also found that an attitude of 'studied neutrality' – where it was better to be emotionally detached than passionate – led working-class people to feel that they had to hide parts of their identity to fit in.[27] As workplaces that can be fairly cerebral, think tanks should have wider discussions among all staff about how they discuss race, class and policies that affect marginalised groups, and consider issuing guidance or conducting training on the basis of whatever such discussions conclude.

There is also work being conducted by the RECLAIM project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, that will be considering class diversity in think tanks, including how work culture can help or hinder progress, and this research will be an important future resource for the sector.[28]

Conclusion

This report has detailed some of the ways the think tank sector is not as diverse as it should be. Solutions will involve a mix of correcting misconceptions and myths through better outreach and communication, and structural changes where the concerns of under-represented groups are founded in real problems in the sector. Some of the interventions will be organisation-specific, others will need to be co-ordinated across the sector.

Outreach efforts will raise awareness of the think tank sector, reaching people who might never currently think of applying. Providing more information to applicants will help those who do consider an application weigh up the decision. Improving recruitment processes will ensure they are as fair and inclusive as possible. And making changes to think tanks' work environments will mean that when people from under-represented backgrounds do work in the sector, they will find it a welcoming and supportive place.

The efficacy and resource-intensity of these solutions will depend on the size, focus and problems specific to each think tank. It is therefore difficult to suggest which is the highest priority, as this will vary case by case, and some recommendations will not apply to some organisations, as they have already been implemented.

Below we have organised our recommendations by how quickly they can be achieved, and how much co-ordination they need.

Quick wins

Some of these suggestions can be implemented relatively easily by organisations, to align with industry best practice. These include:

- Ensuring that all short-term roles and internships are paid and advertised on a range of public jobs websites

- Ensuring that entry-level positions do not require unnecessary experience or qualifications, such as postgraduate degrees

- Collecting statistics on the racial and socio-economic diversity of those appearing at their events and in the media, and using these to consciously target under-represented groups in those who they invite or suggest for media appearances

- Offering interviewees online interviews or paying candidates' travel expenses, to make sure those who do not live locally can apply (especially for London-based think tanks)

- Publishing a statement on diversity on their website that recognises the problems in the sector and sets out what they as an organisation are doing to tackle them

- Publishing examples of how former interns and junior staff have progressed in their careers

- Being as transparent as possible about their funding sources and mission, perhaps through a public statement on their website.

Longer-term work

There are also some recommendations that should be considered in the longer term by organisations once they have analysed their own diversity and recruitment processes, and worked out where potential problems lie. These include:

- Conducting a disparity audit of their recruitment process and potentially redesigning it based on the results; for instance, by changing the tests involved or using a contextualised recruitment tool

- Having wider discussions among all staff about how they discuss race, class and policies that affect marginalised groups. Based on the conclusions of those discussions, they could issue new guidance or conduct diversity and inclusion training

- Organising some of their pre-existing work into a specialist resource for school and university students, linked to the A-level or degree syllabuses for relevant subjects

- Considering whether and how they could open up alternative, non-graduate routes into the sector; for instance, by accepting applications for junior roles from people with a degree 'or equivalent experience'

- Considering whether their location is putting off candidates from other parts of the country, and potentially joining a scheme to lend the cost of a rental deposit to new starters from elsewhere in the country

- Publishing impact case studies to engage the general public in the work think tanks do.

Cross-sector projects

Finally, there are some projects that will require cross-sector co-ordination as no one organisation is likely to have the resources to successfully deliver them alone. While these may be more complex to deliver, they could have a greater impact by changing perceptions of the industry as a whole. These include:

- Creating a cross-sector graduate scheme that would offer applicants the chance to rotate between different organisations and areas of work and a guaranteed opportunity for a full-time job at the end of the process

- Co-ordinating an outreach programme, bringing together staff from a group of think tanks to reach out consistently to a larger group of universities and schools to teach them about the whole sector

- Creating an information pack explaining how the sector works and outlining possible routes into it, and circulating this to university careers services and social mobility charities.

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