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# Purpose and the profession:

## the global challenge of improving upward mobility

Think Ahead

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# About ACCA

**ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the global body for professional accountants, offering business-relevant, first-choice qualifications to people of application, ability and ambition around the world who seek a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management.**

ACCA supports its **200,000** members and **486,000** students in **180** countries, helping them to develop successful careers in accounting and business, with the skills required by employers. ACCA works through a network of **101** offices and centres and more than **7,200** Approved Employers worldwide, who provide high standards of employee learning and development. Through its public interest remit, ACCA promotes appropriate regulation of accounting and conducts relevant research to ensure accountancy continues to grow in reputation and influence.

ACCA is currently introducing major innovations to its flagship qualification to ensure its members and future members continue to be the most valued, up to date and sought-after accountancy professionals globally.

Founded in 1904, ACCA has consistently held unique core values: opportunity, diversity, innovation, integrity and accountability.

**More information is here: www.accaglobal.com**

## About this report

This report explores the global challenge of improving social mobility and the role of professional accountancy in making it happen.

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# Foreword

**Healthy and prosperous economies are ones that build equitable and thriving societies.**

They are places of equal opportunity, where people know that they are able to access opportunities regardless of their background. Over the last generation, the world has become a more prosperous place for many people. But today, with inequality rising and more and more people feeling left behind, it is becoming clear that our economies are not focused enough on striving to deliver for everyone. This is a problem that impacts us all and demands our attention. And it is why an unwavering focus on improving social mobility is more important than ever.

Improving the ability of people to access opportunities regardless of their background must be a core tenet of government action and a key business priority – and not just because it is the right thing to do. The business case for improving social mobility is clear. A more diverse workforce is better equipped to make decisions. It also better reflects the societies in which it operates and the customers and clients with whom it interacts. In today's interconnected and complex global economy these attributes matter more than ever. The accountancy profession has a key role to play in opening up access to opportunities and in so doing play its role in building healthy and prosperous economies where people of all backgrounds are able to flourish.

Progress is being made to make more people aware that professional accountancy is a career choice that is open to them and to remove artificial barriers to progression. These range from building more ways to support people throughout their studies and their careers, to changing how people are hired and promoted so that employers can access wider talent pools and to eliminate unconscious biases.

ACCA was founded in 1904 for the very reason of opening up access to professional accountancy. We remain committed to open access today and are determined to play our part in improving social mobility and contributing to building a more equitable future for all.

**Helen Brand OBE**
**Chief executive**
ACCA

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# Introduction

**Over the last generation, as the economies of countries around the world have grown, changed and become more interconnected, the opportunities they create for growing populations have also changed. The access an individual has to these opportunities determines their ability to live well, prosper and thrive in the modern world.**

Helping people, regardless of their background, to live well and to have the chance to improve their fortunes and live rewarding lives ought to be the responsibility of all actors in society that can influence it. This means not only governments but also extends to business. But why must making opportunities available to everyone, regardless of their background, be the driving force behind all those who could make this happen?

Firstly, because, despite impressive gains over the last generation, many countries have a long way to go to ensure that their least well-off citizens have the tools they need to live well. More must be done to address this across many spheres. Actively ensuring that people can access opportunities, regardless of their background, is critical to creating prosperity.

Secondly, it is because economic growth that is not inclusive restricts countries' ability to fulfil their true potential for generating enduring, broad-based prosperity for their citizens. For governments, creating the enabling conditions for accessible opportunities, free of artificial barriers, to proliferate will increase the number of people able to live well, prosper and thrive, thereby enriching society. This same logic applies equally to businesses. Financial success alone only narrowly defines corporate value creation. It fails to capture the multidimensional nature of activities through which a business contributes value to society and the wide range of stakeholders with which it interacts.

Thirdly, for business, it is not just that its purpose and its contract with customers, other stakeholders and society – its 'licence to operate' – go beyond making profits. A more socially diverse business is one that is equipped to make better decisions. Examples abound demonstrating that the complexity and volatility that characterise today's global economy can be best navigated by those that value diversity – this includes diversity of socioeconomic background. Greater diversity has been demonstrated to improve decision making (McKinsey, 2018). It has been shown to increase innovation (BCG, 2017). It also builds better organisational performance (Farrington, 2017). Hence it is imperative that the private sector actively generates meaningful employment opportunities and makes them accessible to people, regardless of their background, removes artificial barriers and publicly makes the case for more diversity and inclusion as an essential part of the DNA of business and related government policy.

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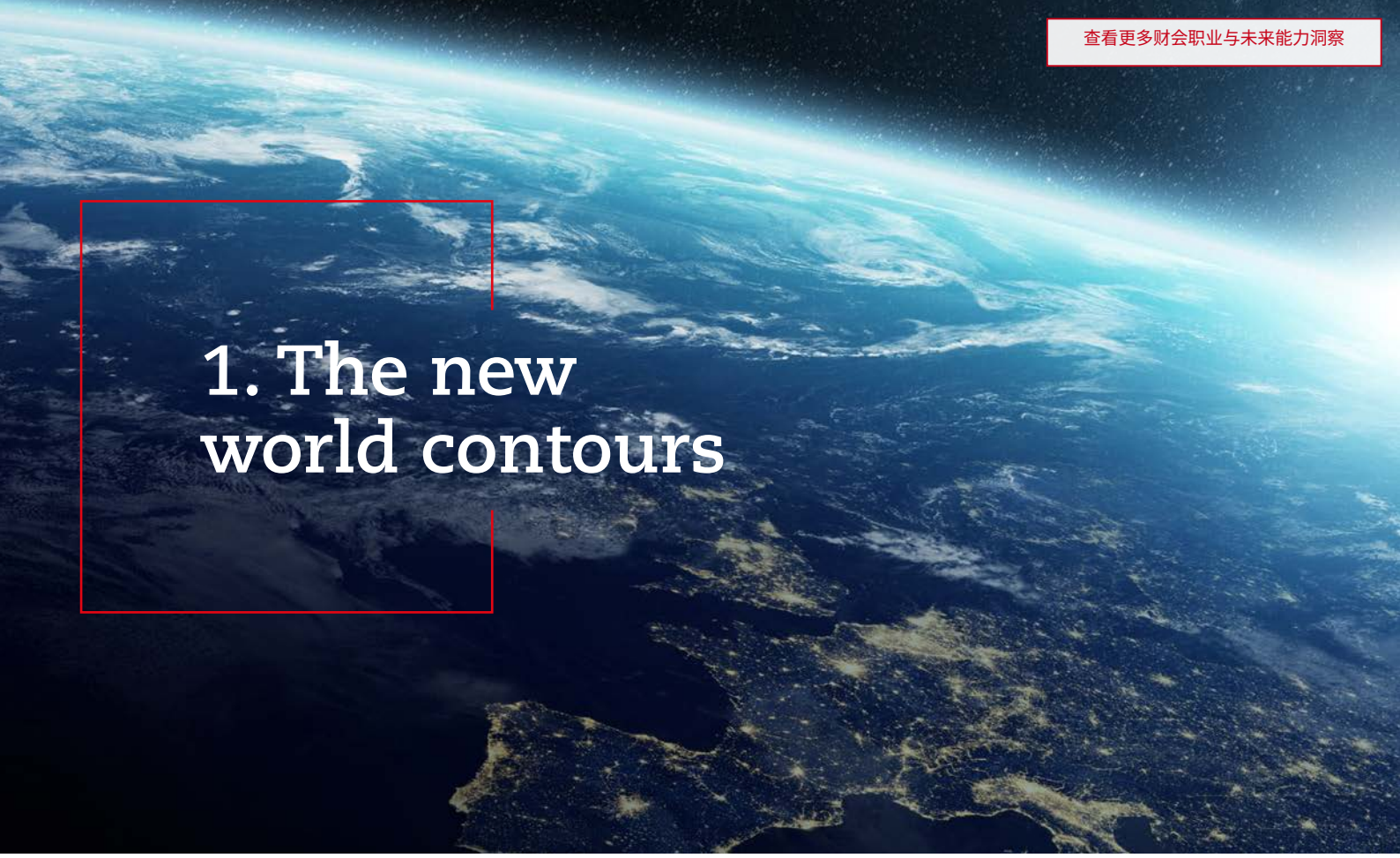


# 1. The new world contours

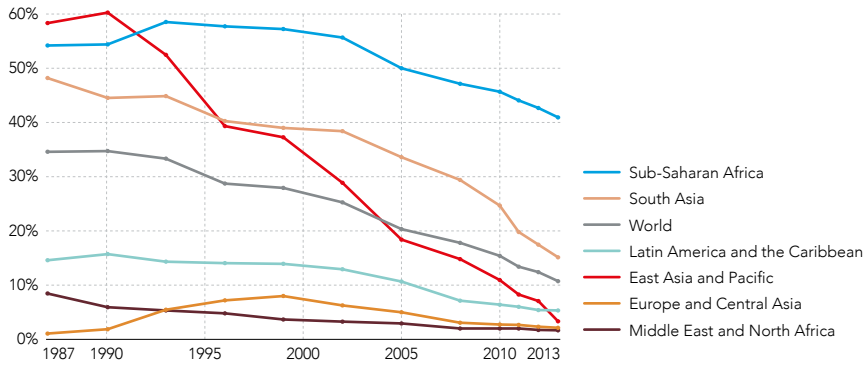
**Over the last generation, the global economy's growth has made many people better off than their parent's generation. This has happened across a number of critical areas.**

In recent decades the share of the world's population living in extreme poverty has fallen fast (see Fig. 1.1). Global literacy rates have increased (see Fig. 1.2). Other indicators that together make up quality of life, such as income, have risen in many countries around the world.

This progress can be seen in the global rise of the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (UNHDI) – a composite measure designed to reflect peoples capabilities, bringing together a summary of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living (see Fig 1.3).

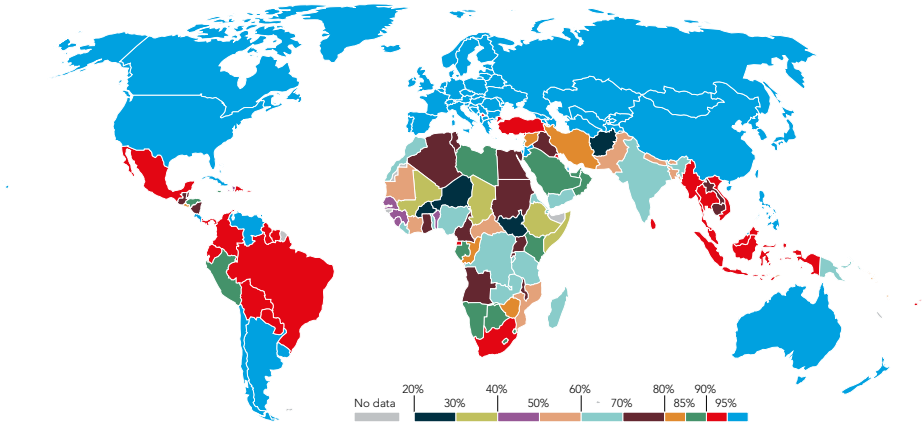
At a global level, more people than ever before have been able to gain skills and use these skills to access opportunities in modernising economies that are growing.

**FIGURE 1.1:** Share of population living in extreme poverty, by world region[1]




Source: *Share of population living in extreme poverty by world region* – PovcalNet World Bank; Our World In Data: https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/

**FIGURE 1.2:** Literacy rate by country




Source: Literacy rate for the entire population, CIA Factbook 2011.
Our World in Data Literacy rate by country, 2011 https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/literacy-rate-by-country

1 Extreme poverty is defined as living with per capita household consumption below 1.90 international dollars per day (in 2011 PPP prices). International dollars are adjusted for inflation and for price differences across countries.

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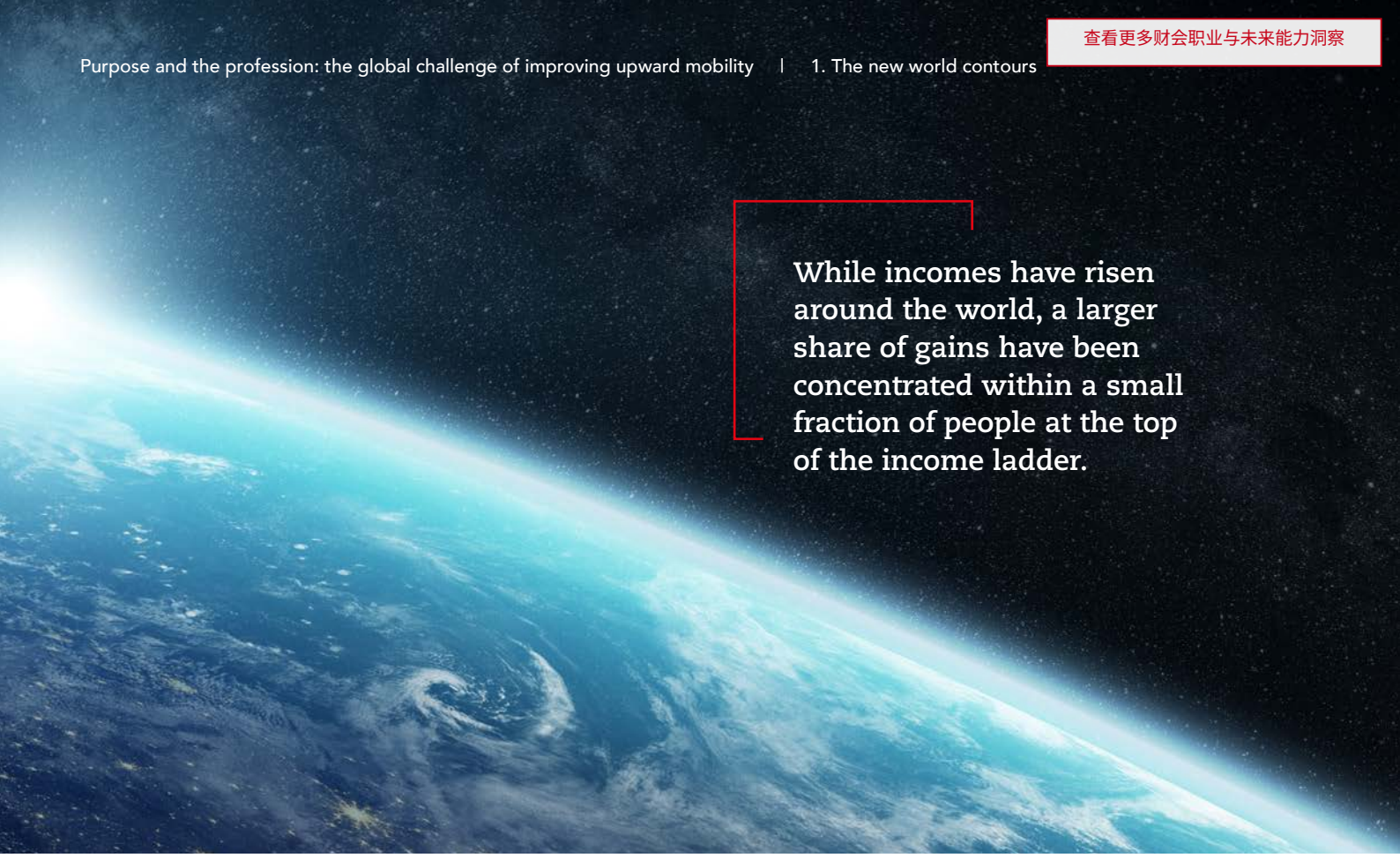
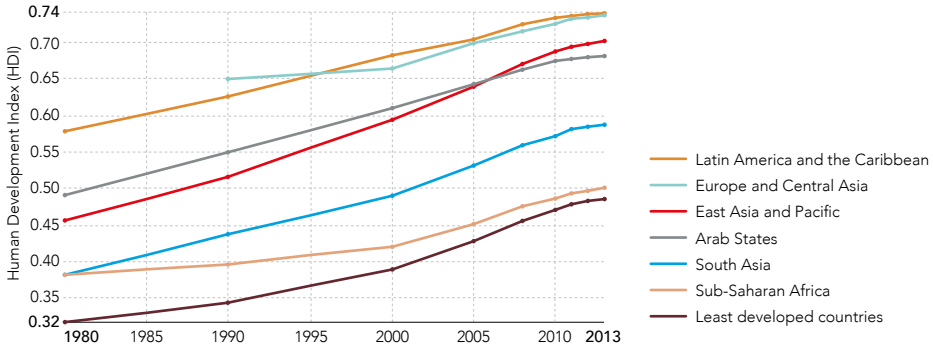


While incomes have risen around the world, a larger share of gains have been concentrated within a small fraction of people at the top of the income ladder.

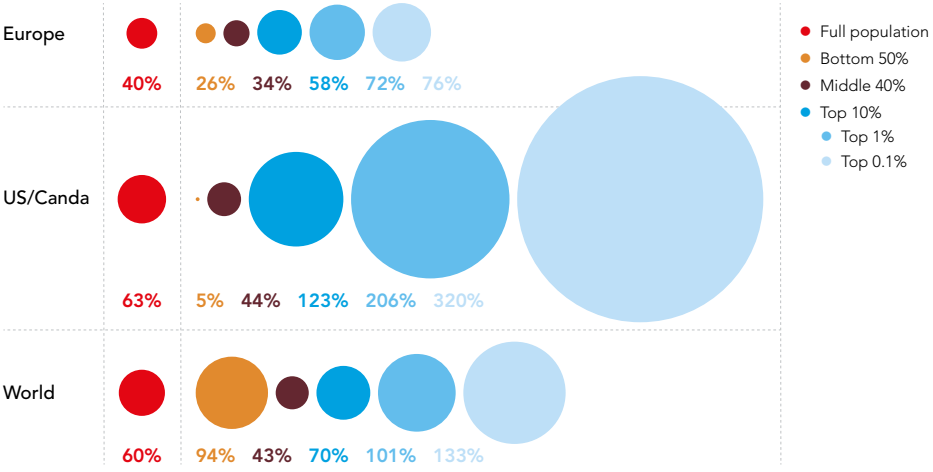
Although quality of life can be said to have increased for large parts of the world, many are still denied the opportunities for living well. And at a level down from a birds' eye, 'absolute' view of the world, where some countries are now richer and others remain poor, there are still entrenched inequalities within countries rich and poor, advanced and emerging, that stop people from living fulfilled lives. Some are still able to prosper more than others. Around the world, in some places faster than others, income growth of the now well known top 1% (and perhaps less well known top 0.1%) have outpaced income growth of the rest of a country's population. And so while incomes have risen around the world, a larger share of gains have been concentrated within a small fraction of people at the top of the income ladder (see Fig 1.4). In Asia, for example, the IMF found that income inequality, measured by the gini co-efficient, rose in 15 countries from 1990 to 2013 (IMF 2016). Furthermore, work is not working for everyone. Despite gains in employment and incomes, the security of work around the world is changing. For example the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that almost 900 million South Asians are in 'vulnerable' employment and that globally 730 million workers make just $3.10 per day (ILO, 2018).

**FIGURE 1.3:** Human Development Index by world region, 1980-2013




Source: United Nations Development Programme; Our World in Data Human Development Index, 1980-2013
https://www.maxroser.com/roser/graphs/HDI_byWorldRegion_Since1980_UNDP/HDI_byWorldRegion_Since1980_UNDP.html

**FIGURE 1.4:** Global income growth and inequality, 1980–2016




Source: World Inequality Report, 2018; Data in chart from Table 2.1.1 Global Income Growth and Inequality, 1980–2016
http://wir2018.wid.world/part-2.html

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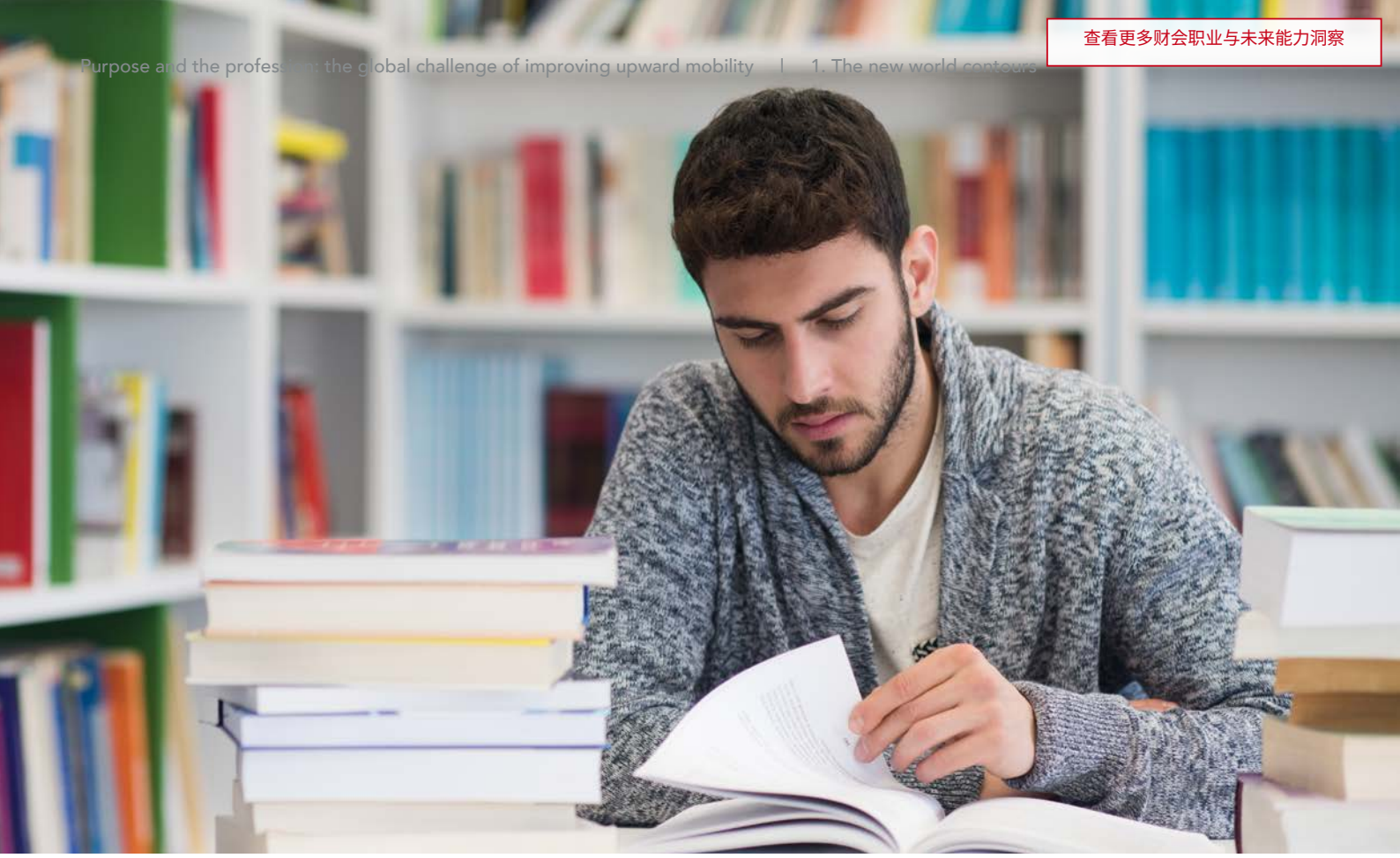


## UNEQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Inequalities exist across many spheres and while income differences provide a useful way of determining who can access what, there are other inequalities that combine to produce this broader imbalance. An unequal availability of access to opportunities is one of them. This can be based on a combination of interrelated factors, including how wealthy a person is and how much income they earn relative to others. But it can also be down to what gender they are, where they live and whether their personal connections can help them to secure a particular career opportunity.

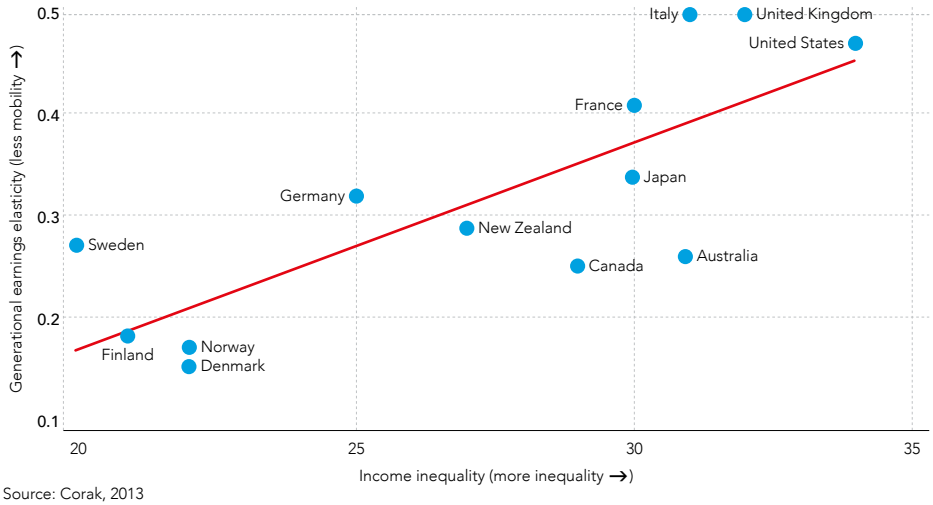
### Absolute vs relative mobility

There are two types of intergenerational social mobility: absolute mobility that measures whether (and by how much) living standards have increased or the extent to which people do better than their parents, and relative mobility that refers to the extent to which an individual's chances depend on their parents' education, class or income. Social mobility can be measured in terms of education, occupational status, individual earnings or household income.

Source: OECD, 2017

These 'sticky', sometimes invisible, impediments are often inherited through parents and concentrated in the same groups, creating multiple barriers to accessing opportunities. For example, a lack of good public healthcare for a family might increase time spent away from learning and be combined with a dearth of quality schooling in a geographic area. This can impede the individual's access to employment opportunities owing to a lack of skills that prospective employers could value. This may be further compounded by a lack of personal connections, compared with others who are competing for the same opportunities. Inequality can also exacerbate social mobility. The Great Gatsby Curve (see Fig 1.5), devised by economist Miles Corak, demonstrated that intergenerational mobility was worse in countries with higher inequality for a number of reasons. For example, lower incomes for the less well off meant that they could access fewer opportunities. It also could mean less influence in shaping policies that might benefit those on lower incomes (Corak, 2013).

**FIGURE 1.5:** The Great Gatsby Curve




Source: Corak, 2013

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> Economic advantages may be accruing disproportionately to those who can best access higher-value opportunities.

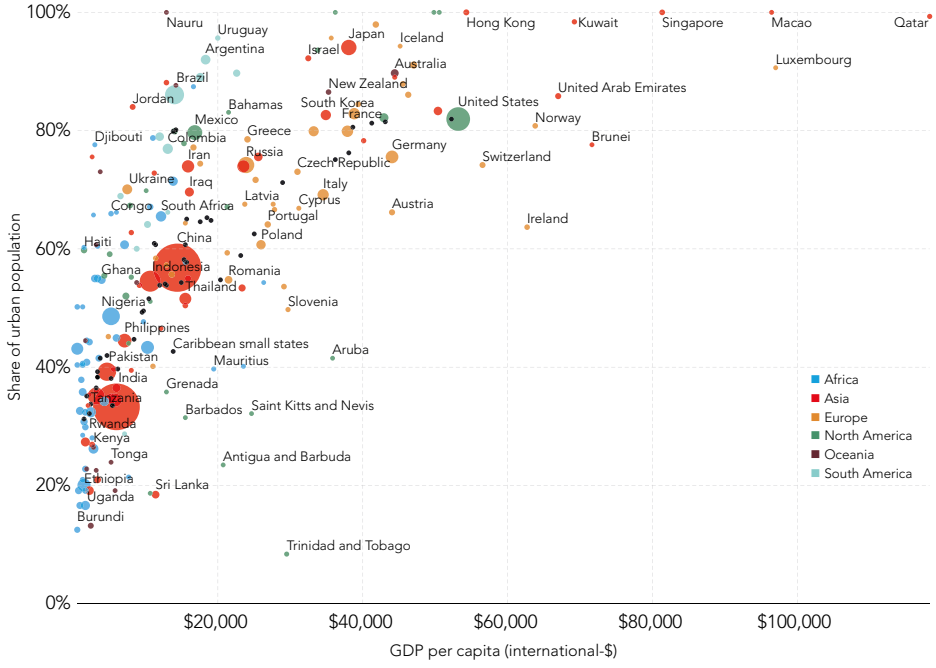
## ECONOMIC GOOD TIMES

When a country's economic prospects are good, these issues, while persistent and important, receive less attention. This could be because of an assumption by national administrators and others that, despite weaknesses, expanding economies that generate opportunities are doing a good enough job for many people and that benefits percolate across the population as a whole. There can be no doubt that one story of the world over the last generation has been that as economies grow and, for example, transition from rural to urban and from making things to providing services, more people have been able to find work in higher-value employment than might have been possible before (see Fig. 1.6).

While this has been important, there is a problem. The gains have tended to be disproportionately conferred upon the higher skilled and better connected. Hence this expansion and shifting economic makeup has the potential to mask problems that are blocking people from accessing opportunities to live well, prosper and thrive. And there is further distortion of the perception of good times for many: as economic advantages may be accruing disproportionately to those who can best access higher-value opportunities, those who cannot are then further separated from these higher-value opportunities.

And so moving up the income scale becomes harder as the 'rungs of the ladder' in society end up further apart. For governments, making the most of economic good times is difficult, not least when generational issues about upward social mobility require bold investment in education quality, skills development and addressing labour market access issues. Even more so when such needs can at times appear to be subordinate to the demands of participating in international trade and accessing global capital flows. But more can be done. When their economies appear to be doing well, governments are not under pressure 'to fix the roof while the sun is shining', nor are they able to concentrate on policy discourses that stretch beyond electoral cycles and across generations with the required focus, determination and boldness.

**FIGURE 1.6:** Urban population vs GDP per capita, 2016




Source: World Bank – WDI; Urban population vs. GDP per capita, 2016 https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/urbanization-vs-gdp

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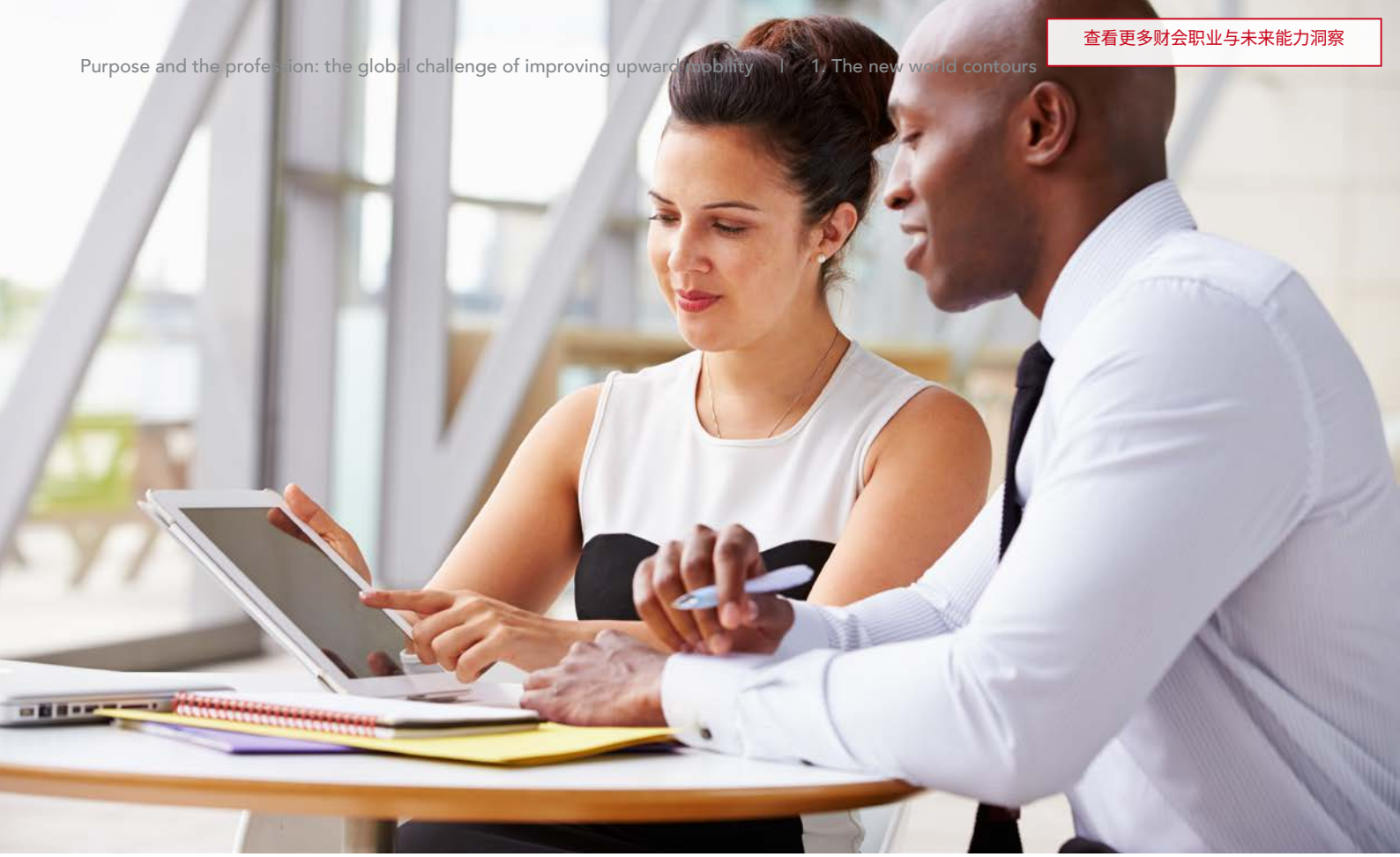

## Areas of interlinked focus include:

1. **Education quality, training and retraining opportunities** – as economies change a greater focus is needed in developing the new skills required by the economy, and what it will take to provide meaningful livelihoods in the future.

2. **Rebalancing geographic concentration of opportunities** – enabling investment and legislating in areas that lack opportunities to encourage job creation; support for SME-led growth and entrepreneurial development, as well as engagement with larger companies value chains.

3. **Effectiveness of antitrust laws, competition policy and related regulation** – policies that reverse disadvantages that smaller businesses suffer against larger incumbents. Addressing this matters, as decreasing the diversity of business activity reduces incentives for incumbents to invest in making their business better by hiring more people, raising wages or spending on research and development.

4. **Improving labour legislation that supports workers** – commitments to living wage policies, transparency around gender pay ratios and implementing flexible working practices can address barriers to workforce entry and improve work quality. These go hand in hand with advocating for the benefits of workplace social diversity.

## TURBULENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

During times of economic volatility and lower aggregate demand, when shifting economic paradigms, uncertainty or technological change – or a combination of all three – mean that less higher income job creation is the norm, not only are these issues even less likely to be addressed but their lack of resolution deepens problems further still.

Consider two near-term scenarios related to the impact of technology on inclusive, quality job creation.

1. **Artificial intelligence (AI)** broadly defined, for example, may dramatically reduce the need for high-skilled employees as tasks once carried out by a skilled person are instead performed by software. In turn, with fewer people needed to perform the same tasks, labour markets could swell with qualified people who have training and experience, depressing salaries. Competition for fewer positions would intensify with the likely result that those without the additional skills, resources and personal networks will be even less able to access opportunities. For some businesses, company-level productivity will increase and they will have greater

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Companies using platforms have been identified as motivated by easy access to scalable manpower, reduced costs and an elimination of conventional hiring barriers.

power in the labour market to access the best candidates. But what happens to those with the least likelihood of having the requisite mix of skills? And as those who access scarcer opportunities pull further ahead, the rungs of the ladder in society grow even further apart.

2. **Platform-based working**, that has grown rapidly for lower paid service sector employment, might become more commonplace for higher-value service sector opportunities, with more contracting able to replace ever greater proportions of traditional permanent employment, thanks to advances in digital resource management tools and labour marketplaces. The online labour index (OLI), which tracks the growth and composition of online labour platforms around the world, showed that the online gig economy grew by 25.5 percent over the year to 30 June 2017. Professional services are coming into the orbit of the index fast. OLI researchers noted that while professional services currently account for less than 3% of the overall online work economy, they were the fastest growing jobs, growing at over 43% over the last year (Lehdonvirta 2017).

Companies using platforms have been identified as motivated by easy access to scalable manpower, reduced costs and an elimination of conventional hiring barriers. In this way, they can benefit by taking advantage of numerical, functional and financial flexibility (Corporaal and Lehdonvirta, 2017). But contractor opportunities are unlikely to be equally accessible, for a number of reasons. Labour platform matching optimises for experience over accessibility, and favours those with the right skills. The ability to make the most of 'digital smarts' (using digital technologies for training and education) may vary owing to learners' ages, their access to technology or the business sector concerned. People able to work on a contract basis through digital platforms may have sufficiently high overall incomes to be able to smooth income volatility over a year and not require the stability that a consistently regular income brings. As more work moves to freelancers in digital marketplaces, the penalty for needing to seek out full-time employment opportunities will grow, lowering accessibility as well as earnings potential for those in society who need greatest access to opportunities.

Hence, technological change, though transformative and having the potential for positive returns, can also increase social divisions, particularly in countries where unequal access to opportunities is a greater issue than in others owing to additional factors.

Technological change is but one growing area with the potential to block access to opportunities for those without the 'right' background and to favour those who already have the desirable skills, experience and personal connections. When combined with other existing impediments to living well, prospering and thriving in the modern world, the scale of the challenge becomes clear. Active political engagement with these issues can play a substantial role. But some responsibility also lies squarely with business and the ecosystem around it including finance. For both sides, questions about accessibility of opportunity must factor into wider questions currently being asked about impact of technology on the workplace.

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# 2. The professions and social mobility

**Professional occupations have a central role to play in addressing access to opportunities issues.**

As with other sectors, the professions are in no small part being affected by technological change. They are also held up for being elitist, replete with employment and promotion acquired through personal connections, and having a strong tendency to exclude. And their role in society is more than just the jobs that they create. They are often the poles from which societal norms emanate and the conduits through which institutional trust is conferred. For example, a lawyer helps with access to the judicial process, a doctor advises and treats the health of citizens, a finance professional decides on what or who is creditworthy and a professional accountant monitors and assesses the validity of business activity.

In the past, access to work within the professions has too often been a closed shop. Accessing these well-paid jobs has traditionally relied on personal connections, paid for qualifications and strong support networks. Without these attributes it has been near impossible to gain entry. This in turn determines the characteristics of those who create social norms. Apart from whether this is appropriate, is it effective for society? Can these professions function properly and ensure quality livelihoods for all citizens – and particularly for those who are less well off – if they do not truly reflect the societies in which they operate? Judging by the lack of improvement in social mobility across many countries and the widening of the rungs of the social ladder, the answer must be no. The professions must recognise their position in society and make it their goal to improve social mobility. The positive returns for countries where the professions take this lead should not be underestimated. They will be an important factor in determining how well their countries are able to respond to economic changes and societal demands of the future. These include those coming from technology but also those related to overarching interconnected issues that are made worse by poverty and inequality, such as climate change, migration, population growth, urbanisation, ageing and healthcare provision (WEF 2018).

## PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANCY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Although addressing a lack of accessible opportunities and removing artificial barriers is taking place, the accountancy profession is still falling short. For example, hiring practices that favour candidates with the right work experience or internships discriminate against those who have been unable to secure work experience or have lacked the resources to take, often unpaid, internships. Once inside companies, promotional practices can discriminate against those who may not 'fit the mould' and share the same traits as those already in senior positions. Notable changes are coming into effect, from more access to work experience for disadvantaged groups to better hiring practices, but how can everyone compete fairly if educational outcomes and other opportunities diverge so much from a young age?

A professional accountancy qualification can provide individuals with the financial acuity to contribute meaningfully to the business world or the public sector. It can be a means of mobility in more senses than one, as it can act as a global passport – recognised equally in different countries, affording the qualification-holder the opportunity to access opportunities that were not previously available to them in their original geographic location. But while geographical mobility is an asset for the individual, what of the place that is left behind by the qualification-holder, which is then deprived of their skills? Issues of place and geographic distribution of opportunities are becoming increasingly recognised as important issues for advanced and emerging economies alike, as cities swell and left-behind areas are abandoned. More must be done to promote retraining, infrastructure development and enabling of investment in left-behind regions. There is a strong role for the profession in making this happen and for professional bodies to use their resources, knowledge and networks to make training in financial management and accountancy available and accessible to people who are unable to move to urban areas.

> Deepening people's understanding of the benefits of a professional qualification and making it a genuine option has not been pursued with enough vigour.

Lack of awareness of professional accountancy as a career choice is a key barrier and one that professional bodies must work harder to remove. Children born to parents with university degrees and professional qualifications are likely to achieve similar levels of education. Children born to parents without university or professional qualifications are less likely to take them up. Deepening people's understanding of the benefits of a professional qualification and making it a genuine option for their consideration has not been pursued with enough vigour, to the detriment of professional bodies and associated institutions. The perception that 'this is not for me' is a dangerous stigma to be attached to a profession. This is in part because the archetypal image of a professional accountant is still probably middle aged, white and male. While this may be an anachronism in today's world, that it endures demonstrates the width of the divide that needs to be bridged.

## SPOTLIGHT ON THE UK – ACCESSIBLE ACCOUNTANCY

The United Kingdom experience is instructive when exploring the challenges posed by a lack of upward social mobility, the steps taken by the profession and its future pathways to improvement. The professions have long been valued due to their key role in the post-war first great upsurge in social mobility in the UK. But over time this has flattened out (The Panel on Fair Access to the Profession 2009). In 2017 The UK's Social Mobility Commission, a government body, called out the professions for their role in hoarding advantage. They found that the odds of someone from a professional background ending up in a professional job was 2.5 times higher than the odds of those from less advantaged backgrounds reaching the professions. They also discovered that within the professions, those from working-class backgrounds were earning on average £6,800 less than colleagues from professional and managerial backgrounds. (Social Mobility Commission 2017).

In 2017 Access Accountancy, a group of professional accountancy firms and bodies (of which ACCA is a member), together with The Bridge Group, a social mobility research charity, produced a report that analysed socio-economic diversity data relating to almost 140,000 school leaver and graduate applicants to the profession. The report found that 40% of applicants had parents with no experience of higher education and that 76% attended publicly funded state education (as oppose to fee-paying schools).

It highlighted a number of areas for improving how the accountancy profession can make opportunities more accessible. These included, more accessible and openly competitive work placements; more proactive co-creation of curriculum based activities with universities to provide real life, relevant information about what a career in accountancy is like (as oppose to a focus on employer marketing) and a committment to reviewing messaging and branding that can be off-putting for candidates from lower socio-economic groups.

In terms of selection of candidates, it recommended avoiding using examination results in selection criteria – and where they are used, to use them in context. It asked employers to consider carefully how to interpret work experience and other attributes of a candidate which may only be available to more affluent applicants. It also suggested broadening assessment centres outside of London.

Significantly, it also called for a redefinition of 'talent' – how it is identified and how characteristics associated with it might correlate with socio economic background (Access Accountancy 2017).

While the report showed that there is work that needs to be done, lessons from the UK can be applicable to employers and policymakers in other countries. Professional accountancy firms and bodies have worked to find ways to open up access to opportunities. In 2017 Grant Thornton topped a ranking of the top 50 UK employers for improving social mobility, with KPMG coming second and Deloitte and PWC also appearing in the top 10 (Social Mobility Foundation 2017). Some of the types of work that the firms are involved in include engaging with specialist third parties to open up work placements to people from underprivileged backgrounds, removing examination requirements from selection criteria (Grant Thornton 2015), and collection and publication of data on socioeconomic background of parents of employees (KPMG 2016). Not only does this work improve social diversity performance, it highlights issues around social mobility inside the firm and provides momentum to others in the sector to do the same.

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# 3. Tangible steps for professional accountancy

**Professional accountancy can make a meaningful contribution to improving social mobility around the world.**

By making opportunities available for all regardless of their background, removing artificial barriers and advocating for improving social mobility with government, the profession can embed this issue as part of its reason for existence. In so doing, it can build on and reshape its role in economies and societies that are undergoing dramatic change, are exposed to new risks and, in some cases, are dealing with the negative externalities of long-term practices that have made access to opportunities highly unequal.

For the accountancy profession, improving social mobility can go hand in hand with playing its role in building enduring and sustainable, inclusive economic dynamism at a variety of scales and in numerous contexts around the world. By active engagement, it can move beyond piecemeal corporate responsibility initiatives that are at odds with the systemic, complex nature of current challenges, and become a leader among the professions in demonstrating the value of improving social mobility in enhancing performance.

Active engagement will allow the accountancy profession to embed an emphasis on social mobility into its own priorities as it adapts to a changing world. Addressing social mobility issues must not be an ineffective 'add-on' but be done in a way that is truly embedded into the profession's future. It can strongly link into the technical and ethical components of the profession that set it apart and that, in today's world, are more important than ever as globalisation and technological developments create ever more challenges. Some practical steps are suggested below.

### Awareness: making the profession better known as a career choice

There is a need to make the profession better known as a career choice among those who have not grown up among family and friends with professional qualifications or university degrees and those that live in areas that lack opportunities.

Increasing the number of people who study and qualify as professional accountants whose parents did not go to university or have a professional qualification means reaching beyond traditional networks and larger urban areas. It requires meaningful engagement with schools and careers services to ensure that they are equipped with the information they require to present professional accountancy as a career option.

### Removing barriers: making qualifications and employment opportunities more accessible

Making qualifications more accessible means continuing to improve flexibility in learning and examinations to meet the education needs of current student cohorts. Flexible learning that is more digestible, more relevant and more targeted than traditional methods will continue to be demanded, alongside traditional practices. Increasingly flexible approaches allow individuals who may not previously have been able to access qualifications, owing to work or family commitments, to be able to study at their own pace and for a part of the qualification that is meaningful for them.

For professional accountancy firms, barriers in the hiring processes, particularly of young people, must be lowered to remove biases that can affect the success of candidates. For example, while work experience may be valuable, some candidates may not have had the opportunity to take up a work experience position owing to their circumstances. The same applies for internships. Promotion must be handled in a similar fashion to avoid merely 'hiring in the hirer's image'. These activities make

> Providing financial literacy skills and promoting lifelong learning must remain the driving purpose behind professional accountancy qualifications.

business sense and equip the company with the diversity of perspectives that are so necessary for today's world.

### Skills and the changing world of work: new skills and lifelong learning

Providing financial literacy skills and promoting lifelong learning must remain the driving purpose behind professional accountancy qualifications. The world of work is changing, being driven not only by technology but also by other factors. If qualifications fail to provide people with the tools to operate in a more complex world, they fast become redundant. Catering for a more diverse set of career opportunities – for example, environmental accounting, computational thinking and data analytics, broadens the usefulness of the accountancy profession and can help it become a career choice to those for whom it may not have been relevant previously.

### Data: Greater data collection on social diversity imperative

Understanding the issues around social mobility is one part of tackling it. For businesses, making the case internally and externally requires evidence. Collecting more social diversity data from employees can help inform decision making and help improve social diversity within a company so that this can become a measurable part of strategic performance and a board level issue.

### Networks: democratic connections

Digital social networking applications present an opportunity to democratise the role of personal connections. Personal connections, be they through family, schools or universities have long been a factor that affords opportunities based on circumstances over merit. Those without connections are at a disadvantage when it comes to areas such as securing work experience, interviews or career progression. Over the last decade, the growth of careers based digital social networking and other workplace related social applications have provided people with ways to express themselves at work, demonstrate their abilities to a wide audience and connect with peers who might be able to offer them support in furthering their careers. Services such as Linkedin, group messaging on platforms such as Whatsapp and in-company intranets provide spaces for new starters or others within companies to coalesce, share experiences and interact. More recently, this has gone hand in hand with the growth of other workplace communications and collaboration tools. For example, Slack, the cloud–based collaboration tool launched in 2013, today has four million active daily users and is used by over 77% of the Fortune 100 (Von Wilpert 2017). The next iterations of these will likely be even more collaborative and potentially connecting with workplace matching services. Elsewhere, 'worker tech' digital platforms, such as Coworker, are emerging that allow workers to organise and campaign on issues that matter to them in ways that traditionally may have been the remit of groups such as trade unions.

These new tools, if geared towards removing artificial barriers and opening up opportunities could, in future, have a large role to play in redefining how personal connections function for a digital age. For example, they could use existing data sources to favour people from disadvantaged backgrounds in a way that supports greater workplace social diversity. They also have the potential to be algorithmically geared towards matching people with opportunities not just based on their experience but also in a way that is more equitable.

While employers may be outside of these networked conversations, they have a role in allowing them to flourish. This could involve participating in networked conversations related to work (rather than mediating them) and providing meaningful ways for those seeking to enhance their opportunities. In so doing these new networks can play their part in broadening talent pools.

As contingent workforces rise and platform based working grows, with more people working in a freelance capacity, meaningful use of social networking that avoids biases and promotes inclusion will be an increasingly important feature of the employment landscape.

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> As a professional accountancy body, ACCA can act as an anchor for firms and professional accountants in business who want to engage actively with improving social mobility.

### Social policy

Professional accountancy firms and professional bodies have a key role to play in actively engaging and advocating with policymakers across many different spheres, from education to planning ministries, digital to finance and national statistics offices.

They can also play a role in making this issue a larger part in governance performance and a true board-level issue by advocating better integration of social diversity into the burgeoning environmental, social and governance (ESG) investment sector, which is moving ever more into the mainstream of finance.

## ACCA AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

ACCA was founded in 1904 as a response to the 'closed shop' nature of the professions. ACCA was committed to opening up routes to the profession that were not previously available. ACCA is still committed to open access, working to remove barriers to entry, raising awareness of the routes into the profession and accountancy as a career choice and in playing a role in addressing wider social mobility challenges. ACCA's long-held values are: opportunity, diversity, innovation, integrity and accountability. When seen through the lens of improving social mobility, these five values imply a dedication to creating a strong, equitable society for all.

As a professional accountancy body, ACCA can act as an anchor for firms and professional accountants in business who want to engage actively with improving social mobility. ACCA's qualification is strongly open access, and does not require a university degree. The qualification's flexibility extends to multiple annual exam sittings, to allow learners to choose an exam time that fits with their other commitments. The online learning programme ACCA-X provides free and affordable on-demand courses designed to help individuals gain financial literacy skills.

### Capacity building

The role of the profession in building professional accountancy capacity in less developed parts of the global economy is a fundamental part of its purpose. As less developed economies grow, urbanise and change at an increasingly rapid pace, their need for professional accountancy skills that can serve society is clear and well understood. It is also evolving.

From facilitating trade and growing the investment climate, to promoting ethical practices and adherence to international standards, professional accountancy is a core part of the development and growth of healthy socio-economic ecosystems.

As globalisation increases in velocity, new challenges become more urgent and as technology costs fall, the role of the professional accountant will change in developing countries too.

Beyond traditional pressures facing developing countries, they also face rising social, economic and environmental threats from issues including overly rapid urbanisation, climate change, water scarcity and extreme weather. These will impact both public and private sector effectiveness and add to an already challenging context. Combined, these issues demand an unprecedented level of collaboration to tackle effectively. Professional accountants are a core part of this collaborative ecosystem of actors taking on these challenges, as they work to support effective public service delivery, business growth and a transition to high value and sustainable development – while at all times working to protect the public interest. From digital tax collection enhanced by mobile technologies that help countries develop their tax base and build their ability to fund much needed public services, to engaging with practices such as integrated reporting that help in accounting for social and environmental capital, professional accountants can play their role in supporting development that is equitable, sustainable and ready for the future.

Within a context of a growing need for skilled professional accountants, the issue of social diversity and supporting the disadvantaged to build financial skills is a core component of developing broad-based economic growth. Ongoing support from the profession to develop these skills that contribute to holistic future prosperity creation will build the foundations of the future of the global economy.

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# 4. ACCA member and student survey

**13,653 ACCA members and students around the world responded to a survey exploring issues related to social mobility.**

ACCA also convened seven roundtables in the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan , Malaysia and China bringing together members and students to discuss issues and challenges of social mobility and how they have impacted their experiences in professional accountancy.

**FIGURE 4.1:** Gender of respondents

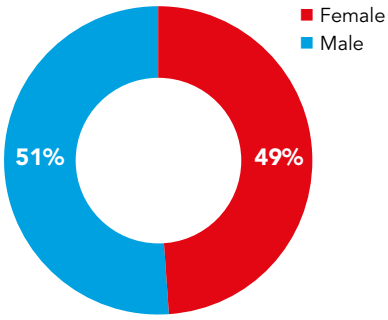
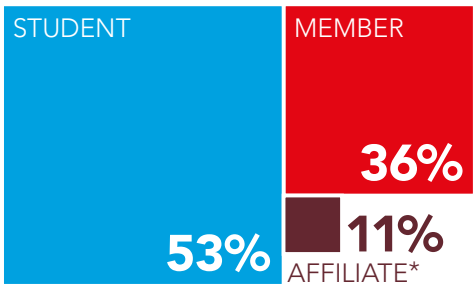
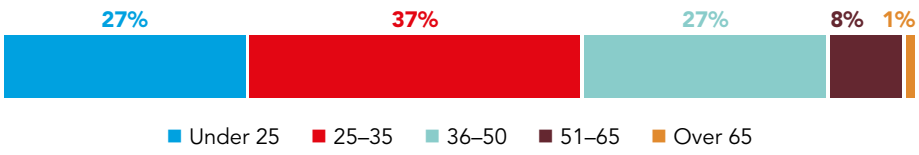



**FIGURE 4.2:** Respondents status




* An affiliate has completed the ACCA qualification but not completed their professional experience and registered as an ACCA member.

**FIGURE 4.3:** Age of respondents




**64%**

of respondents are under 35 years old

# 92%

of respondents felt it was important that people should have access to career opportunities regardless of their social background

| COUNTRY | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kazakhstan | 43 | Myanmar | 55 | Vietnam | 131 | Ghana | 259 |
| Nepal | 44 | Ukraine | 68 | Sri Lanka | 135 | Hong Kong SAR | 269 |
| Qatar | 44 | Botswana | 70 | Malawi | 144 | India | 295 |
| Bulgaria | 46 | Tanzania | 78 | Australia | 147 | United Arab Emirates | 302 |
| Luxembourg | 46 | USA | 84 | Canada | 148 | Nigeria | 332 |
| Barbados | 47 | Greece | 91 | Uganda | 156 | Zimbabwe | 337 |
| Ethiopia | 47 | Malta | 93 | South Africa | 158 | Singapore | 353 |
| Cameroon | 50 | Jamaica | 99 | Kenya | 190 | Mauritius | 392 |
| Bahrain | 52 | Saudi Arabia | 99 | UK – Scotland | 197 | Ireland, Republic of | 433 |
| Switzerland | 52 | Poland | 110 | Cyprus | 210 | Malaysia | 905 |
| Czech Republic | 54 | UK – Wales | 111 | Trinidad & Tobago | 226 | Pakistan | 1012 |
| Oman | 54 | Romania | 117 | Russia | 227 | China, People's Rep of | 1265 |
| | | Bangladesh | 131 | Zambia | 233 | UK – England | 2306 |

* These are the top 51 reporting countries and regions by number of respondents.

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**15%**

of respondents started studying for their ACCA qualification when they were over 30 years old

## SOCIAL MOBILITY MATTERS

**92% felt that people should have access to career opportunities regardless of their social background.**

Respondents overwhelmingly felt that social mobility matters to them. 74% felt that ACCA was accessible compared to other professional accountancy qualifications. While this is positive news it shows that there is some ground to cover to make to make the qualification itself even more accessible.

60% agreed with the statement that the ACCA qualification has enabled them to access opportunities regardless of their background. Purpose and access mattered to survey respondents.

**13%**

of respondents were influenced by a school or university teacher, or by a careers advisor, to pursue a career in accounting and finance

## STARTING OUT IN PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTING

**13% were influenced by a school or university teacher, or by a careers advisor, to pursue a career in accounting and finance.**

When asked who influenced respondents in choosing to pursue a career in accounting and finance over half stated that they came to the decision themselves. However, only 13% stated that they were influenced by a school or university teacher, or, by a careers advisor. While improving significantly over the age range (see Fig 4.5), this low number of people receiving advice via a careers service or from a teacher demonstrates that there is a large gap to fill in the profession being proactively offered to students.

Though over 60% of respondents began studying ACCA when they were under 25, 15% started the qualification when they were over 30 years old. This significant number of later starters underscores the importance of the choice of a professional qualification being accessible to people of all ages. It also highlights the need for a greater diversity of channels and messages for offering structured advice about a career in professional accountancy.

**FIGURE 4.4:** At what age did you start the ACCA qualification?

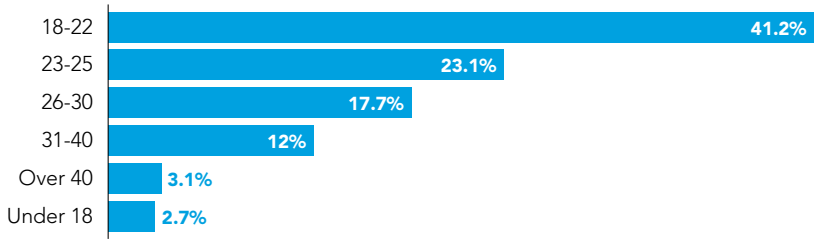
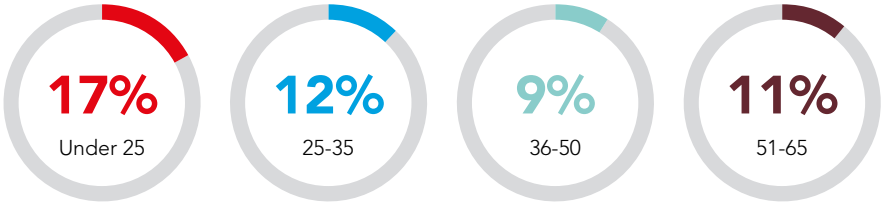



**FIGURE 4.5:** Influenced by school, university teacher or careers advisor to pursue a career in accounting and finance

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**52%**

of respondents had parent(s) or guardian(s) who did not go to university*

## PARENT OR GUARDIAN EDUCATION

**52% of respondents had primary-income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) who did not go to university.**

That over half of respondents come from families where the primary income earner did not attend university or achieve an equivalent finance or accounting qualification reflects the opening up of access to education around the world (see Fig 4.6). It also shows that accountancy is an accessible and valued route into a professional career. The fall in this number over the age ranges (see Fig 4.7) again points to this opening up and highlights the challenges of raising awareness of those whose parents still do not have the means or ability to access university education.

**FIGURE 4.6:** Maximum level of education achieved by parent(s) or guardian(s)

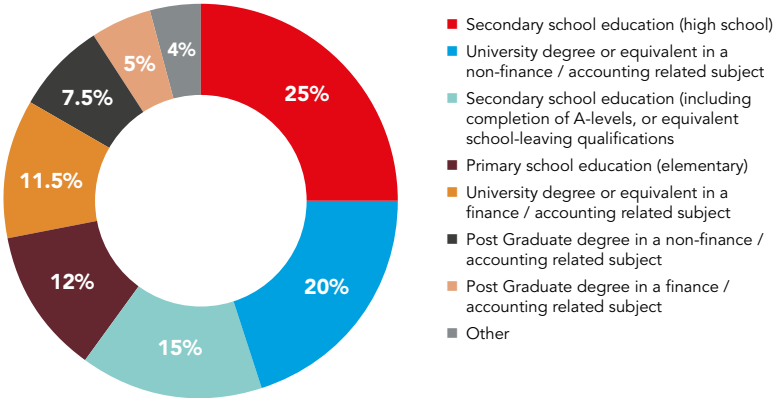
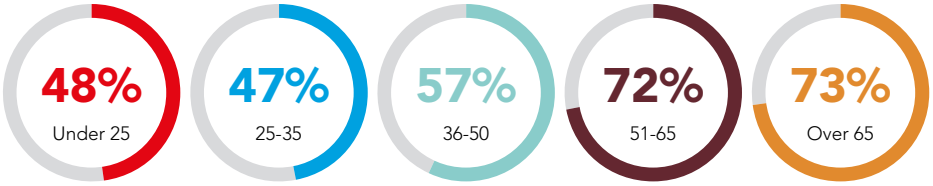



**FIGURE 4.7:** Parent(s) or guardian(s) did not go to university




* All instances of 'parent(s) or guardian(s)' in survey results refer to primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s).

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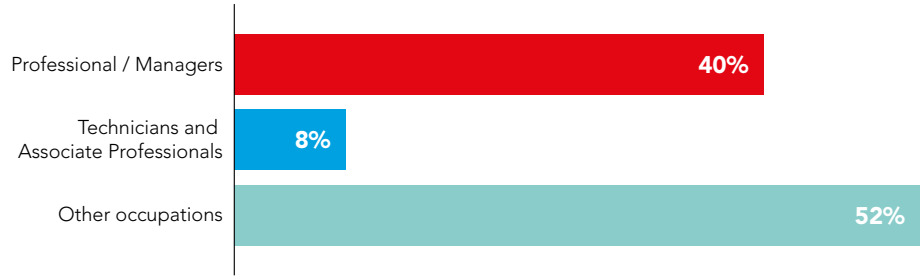
**60%**

of respondents had parent(s) or guardian(s) who were not managers or professionals

## PARENT OR GUARDIAN EMPLOYMENT

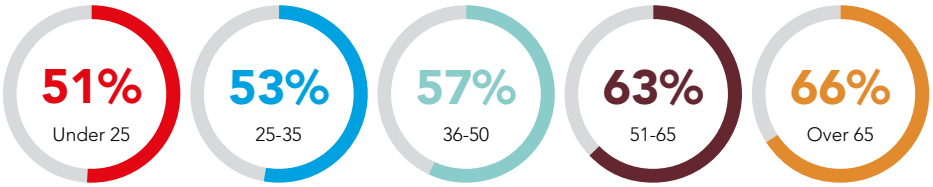
Echoing this finding, 60% of primary-income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) at the time respondents were between the ages of 11-16, were not managers or professionals. This finding further emphasis both how professional accountancy is an accessible route into a profession and how professional careers have expanded across the world over the last generation.

**FIGURE 4.8:** Occupation of parent(s) or guardian(s) at the time respondents were between the ages of 11-16




**Other occupations include:** Services and Sales Workers; Clerical Support Workers; Craft and Related Trades Workers; Elementary Occupations; Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers; Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers; Armed Forces Occupations

**FIGURE 4.9:** Parent(s) or guardian(s) did not have a professional or managerial job when respondents aged between 11-16

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Respondents' aspirations were that they would access a higher earning occupation than their parents – and they felt that after studying accountancy they would be able to do so.

## SURVEY CONCLUSIONS

### Purpose and social mobility

Respondent answers provided a clear view that purpose really mattered to them. They felt strongly that it was important that opportunities were available to people regardless of the advantages that they may have had. Across the age ranges and regions of the world – from advanced to emerging and from millennial to gen x – equal access to opportunities resonated. This was echoed across the student-member roundtables where participants shared their fears related to rising inequality in their countries and across the world. At the same time, roundtable participants also felt that the purpose and social mission of the company that they work for is important to them. This provides a picture of their expectations as to what type of economy and society they want to live and also participate in. It demonstrates a clear case for all actors to push themselves to go beyond platitudes into concrete action in their sector.

### Accessing the profession and age

That only 13% of respondents had been influenced to begin a career in accounting and finance by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor demonstrates a clear gap that must be addressed in raising awareness of the profession. Low awareness of professional accountancy as a career choice was a theme that came up in many roundtables – participants felt that they had benefitted greatly from choosing professional accountancy and wanted awareness of its benefits to be made clearer to their compatriots. Routes into the profession for those who lack the means, social capital, family or personal connections to point them towards it, is an area for policy makers, professional bodies, and employers to continue to focus. And with many beginning their studies later in their lives, their need for greater flexibility and equal consideration must not be ignored. As the world's population ages and workforce demographics change – albeit at different speeds – this growth in later starters will likely continue. Learning from experiences as to what works will be invaluable as countries and companies try to ensure that they have diverse, high quality talent pools to make the most of opportunities and to ensure that work opportunities are equitably shared across their populations.

### Parent or guardian education and occupation

That over 50% of respondents had a primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) who did not have a university education demonstrated both the changes in education levels globally and also that studying professional accountancy was an accessible education pathway that could lead to those who chose it being rewarded with a successful career. This was echoed by the percentage of respondents whose primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) did not have a managerial or professional career. Respondents' aspirations were that they would access a higher earning occupation than their parents – and they felt that after studying accountancy they would be able to do so. As the world moves from one era of globalisation into another, all actors must work to ensure that this remains the case, thereby ensuring the profession can continue to deliver for those who seek it out as a pathway to prosperity.

### Focus on an inclusive future

While the world's economy has expanded opportunities, the fragility of this growth is becoming a feature in the volatility of people's careers, their earning potential and their future ability to live well, prosper and thrive. Remaining an accessible career path for those without privilege must be a foundational part of the profession's future. This means greater focus on awareness of the benefits of the profession in today's modern global economy. In this way, it will contribute to building more equitable growth, becoming a cornerstone of a more inclusive form of capitalism and play a significant role in the next era of global prosperity creation.

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# Appendix

# United Kingdom

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**94%**

of respondents in the UK

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

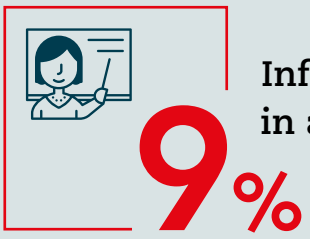
### Began to study ACCA

Under 22 years old

**30%** (global 44%)

After 30 years old

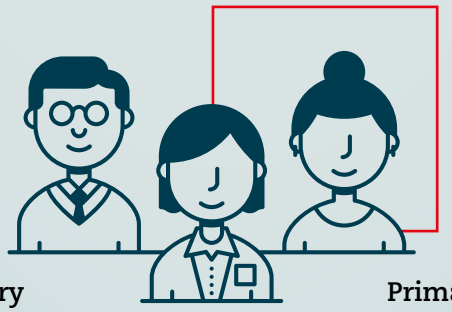
**22%** (global 15%)



**9%**

**Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor**

*Global = 13%



**64%**

*Global = 52%

**Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)**

**59%**

*Global = 60%

**Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16**

# China

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**85%**

of respondents in China

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

### Began to study ACCA

**Under 22 years old**

**80%** (global 44%)

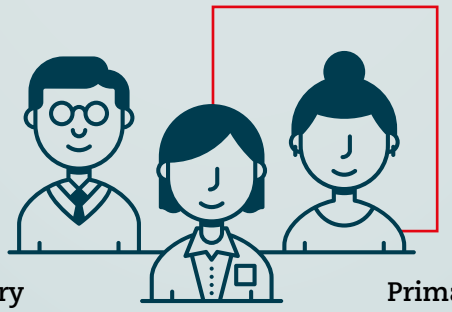
**After 30 years old**

**5%** (global 15%)

**26%**

*Global = 13%

Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor



**48%**

*Global = 52%

Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)

**54%**

*Global = 60%

Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16

# Hong Kong SAR

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**85%**

of respondents in HK SAR

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

### Began to study ACCA

Under 22 years old

**32%** (global 44%)

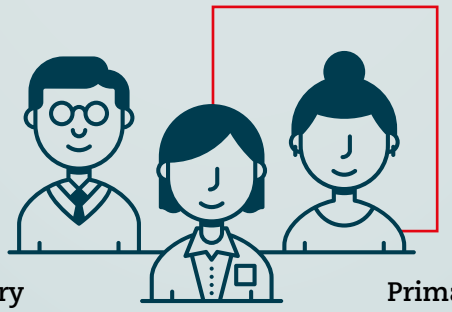
After 30 years old

**17%** (global 15%)

**13%**

*Global = 13%

**Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor**



**67%**

*Global = 52%

**Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)**

**62%**

*Global = 60%

**Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16**

# India

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**94%**

of respondents in India

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

### Began to study ACCA

Under 22 years old

**70%** (global 44%)

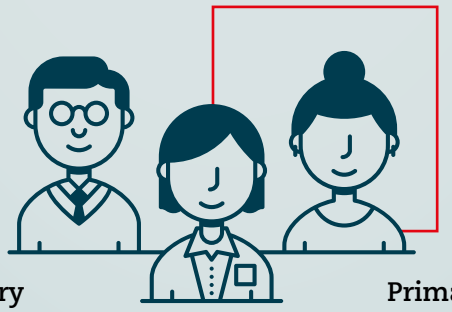
After 30 years old

**7%** (global 15%)

**8%**

Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor

*Global = 13%



**31%**

*Global = 52%

Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)

**39%**

*Global = 60%

Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16

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# Republic of Ireland

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**95%**

of respondents in Ireland

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

### Began to study ACCA

Under 22 years old

**38%** (global 44%)

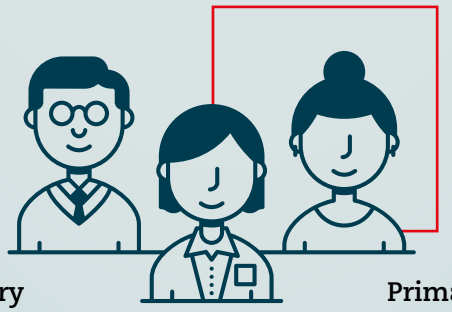
After 30 years old

**21%** (global 15%)

**11%**

*Global = 13%

Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor



**68%**

*Global = 52%

Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)

**66%**

*Global = 60%

Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16

# Malaysia

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**93%**

of respondents in Malaysia

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

### Began to study ACCA

**Under 22 years old**

**59%** (global 44%)

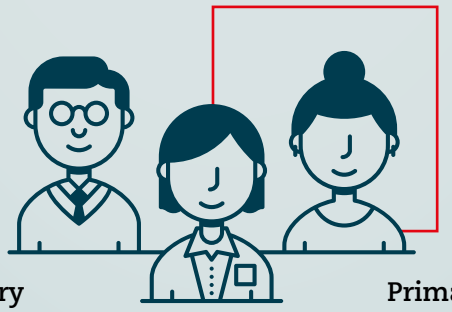
**After 30 years old**

**3%** (global 15%)

**17%**

*Global = 13%

**Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor**



**66%**

*Global = 52%

**Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)**

**57%**

*Global = 60%

**Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16**

# Nigeria

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**97%**

of respondents in Nigeria

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

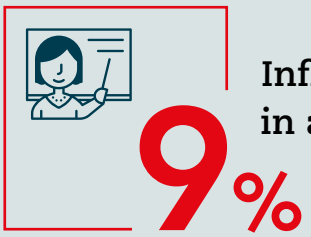
### Began to study ACCA

**Under 22 years old**

**17%** (global 44%)

**After 30 years old**

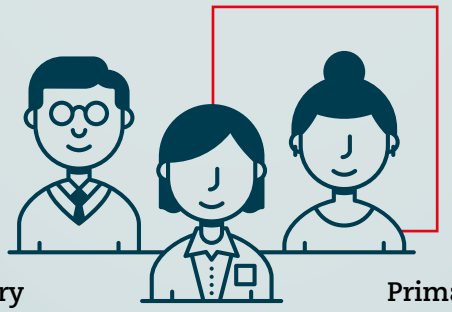
**9%** (global 15%)



**9%**

**Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor**

*Global = 13%



**32%**

*Global = 52%

**Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)**

**46%**

*Global = 60%

**Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16**

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# Pakistan

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**86%**

of respondents in Pakistan

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

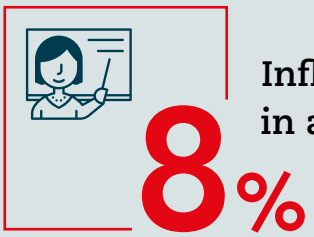
### Began to study ACCA

**Under 22 years old**

**79%** (global 44%)

**After 30 years old**

**2%** (global 15%)



**8%**

**Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor**

*Global = 13%

**34%**

*Global = 52%

**Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)**

**42%**

*Global = 60%

**Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16**

# Singapore

## It is important that career opportunities are available to people regardless of their social background

**91%**

of respondents in Singapore

*Global = 92%

ACCA Think Ahead

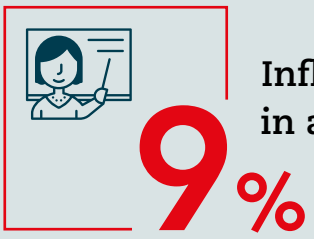
### Began to study ACCA

Under 22 years old

**37%** (global 44%)

After 30 years old

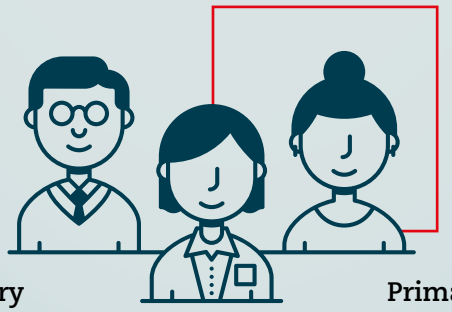
**15%** (global 15%)



**9%**

Influenced to start a career in accountancy by a school or university teacher or a careers advisor

*Global = 13%



**66%**

*Global = 52%

Completion of secondary school is the highest education level of primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s)

**58%**

*Global = 60%

Primary income earning parent(s) or guardian(s) in non-managerial or professional job role when respondent aged between 11-16

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