Social Disadvantage and Widening Access to Universities

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Acknowledgement

CEER wishes to express its gratitude to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference and the Girls' Schools Association. In 2014 they commissioned a briefing on the relationship between school type, school results and degree qualifications as background to, and as covered in, the Issues Paper 2014/03 published by the Higher Education Founding Council for England in March that year. CEER's interest has broadened since then to encompass the influences of gender, ethnicity, family income and neighbourhood, as well as keeping abreast of the evidence on school types. CEER is now ready to publish its findings on 'disadvantage' in its various guises. Much of the early thinking was carried out for the HMC/GSA briefing document. The two Associations have kindly allowed us to draw on this and reproduce some of the evidence from it.

Alan Smithers
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Contents

Executive Summary **i**

1. Introduction **1**

2. State and Independent Schools **4**

3. Gender, Ethnicity, Family Income and Neighbourhood **10**

4. Beyond Degrees **14**

5. Potential and Context **16**

6. Driving Equality **18**

7. Evidence and Policy **23**

References **26**

Executive Summary

It has become a political imperative to get more students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university. This report argues that the approach adopted is deeply flawed: the evidence base is insecure; the logic is faulty; and understanding is partial.

HEFCE research has clearly shown that degree results are linearly related to A-level grades. When the student population is sub-divided by gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, neighbourhood, or type of school attended, small differences are found.

Of these, school type has attracted most attention. HEFCE claims, that making allowances, students from state schools do better at university than those from independent schools. This has led to calls for state school pupils to be admitted on lower grades.

We have examined the analysis and argument in detail in *HEFCE's Blunder* (2015). Essentially, we find that if HEFCE's method were applied to football, Bournemouth would be placed above Manchester United in the premier league.

Students from grammar schools performed similarly to those from independent schools, and it has been suggested (Crawford, 2014) that higher entry grades should be expected of them also.

Females, those from higher income backgrounds, those who are white, and those from more affluent neighbourhoods get proportionally more good degrees. But these differences have tended to be glossed over since they are in the wrong direction for the widening access agenda.

The government's figures on social disadvantage are those for low participation areas. HEFCE data for 2013-14 graduates show that only 66 per cent of the students from these areas gained a good degree compared with 77 per cent of those from high participation areas.

Minority ethnic pupils are both more likely to be admitted to university and do less well there.

DfE data show that 64 per cent of Asian applicants and 61 per cent of Black applicants with A-levels obtained university places in 2012-13, but only 45 per cent of the White.

Degree outcomes were the reverse. Of the 2013-14 graduates, 76 per cent of White students gained a first or upper-second degree compared with 63 per cent of the Asian and 49 per cent of the Black.

Successive governments have through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) attempted to widen access by increasing the take-up of disadvantaged students through, respectively, performance indicators and access agreements.

Since disadvantaged students tend to do less well, government pressure creates a dilemma for the universities. If they stick to offering places on merit then their intakes will be unbalanced, but if they comply and prioritize diversity they will struggle to keep up their degree standards.

There are undoubtedly bright students who, because of their situation or background, do not get the school results they could. Ideally, there would be a way of identifying them. But A-levels have been found to be a better predictor of degree success than either of the two measures of academic potential that have so far been devised.

SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions) has urged universities to use contextual data. Universities have traditionally taken into account individual circumstances, but SPA has been disappointed that they have not adopted general contextual rules. But this is because there are none that can be confidently applied.

The pursuit of equality, admirable in itself, is leading the government to some poor policies. In the case of university admissions, the evidence on widening access is, as this report shows, decidedly shaky.

The logic is faulty. The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission are continually drawing attention to differences in outcomes, but interpreting these as bias in opportunities without considering whether they could be due to differences in the people themselves.

The reluctance to accept that some people are smarter than others is to look at reality through a distorting mirror. There is no difficulty about recognizing excellence in sport, the arts and business, but when it comes to the intellect there is a tendency to back away.

'Disadvantaged' is a convenient construct for politicians. It implies that something has happened to cause people to be in the situation they are in, and it can be put right. If the roots lie within people themselves, doing something about it becomes much more difficult.

Removal of the cap on how many students a university can enrol dramatically transforms the higher education landscape. Since there is no longer a fixed number of places, requiring universities to comply with benchmark percentages becomes meaningless. Pressurizing universities to take more students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds is both misguided and unnecessary.

Introduction

1.1 Recent UK governments have adopted as a political imperative the need to create a fairer society through increasing social mobility. The watchwords are equality, social justice, diversity and inclusion. In higher education the focus has become widening access, not just more people gaining places, but more people from a wider range of backgrounds. This reports examines the dilemma it poses for universities.

1.2 The Labour Government which swept to power in 1997 under Tony Blair made much of its commitment to education as a means of achieving greater equality. Its Department for Education and Employment issued a mission statement (DFEE, 1998) declaring that its purpose was: "to give everyone the chance, through education, training and work, to realise their full potential, and thus build an inclusive and fair society and a competitive economy." At the 1999 Labour Party Conference, Blair set a target of 50 per cent of young adults to go into higher education in the next century. In the same speech, he declared that "the forces of conservatism, the elite, have held us back for too long" and that "we owe it to every child to unleash their potential. They are of equal worth. They deserve an equal chance." Blair's prioritization of equality has continued to the present day.

1.3 In the run-up to the May 2015 election, David Cameron underlined a future Conservative government's commitment to widening access to higher education. He set the goal, unnoticed at the time because it was in a footnote to a press release headed, 'Half A Million Young People Out of Tax Under A Conservative Government':

> that by 2020, the most disadvantaged young people will proportionately be twice as likely to enter higher education than they were under Labour, up to 28% in 2020 from under 13.6% in 2009 and 18.2% in 2014.

These percentages have been taken from a report from UCAS (2014) where 'disadvantage' is defined as living in an area from which few young people go to university[1].

1.4 The government's thinking has been amplified in speeches by Jo Johnson, the Minister for Universities and Science, presaging a Green Paper. Addressing the Universities UK on 1 July 2015 he reiterated the commitment to doubling the entry rate from disadvantaged backgrounds and added: "In particular, I want to see more progress being made in the most selective institutions." By the time of the annual Universities UK conference on 9 September 2015 the aims had spread beyond low participation neighbourhoods: "We also want to see a 20% increase in the number of black and minority ethnic students going to university by 2020, with matched improvements in their completion rates and progression into work." He also highlighted the underperformance in education of white British boys eligible for free school meals, of whom fewer went to university than disadvantaged boys of ethnic minority heritage.

[1] The measure used is POLAR2 developed by HEFCE, which puts small areas across the UK into five groups according to how many young people from the area go on to higher education. There is another version POLAR3 with different boundaries to the areas which HEFCE and OFFA (BIS 2014) used to project that 20 per cent participation from the lowest quintile had already been reached by 2011-12. There would appear to be endless scope for statistical confusion.

There has been no mention so far of disadvantage by type of school – state as opposed to independent – which had been prominent in the statistical comparisons.

1.5 Much of the evidence fuelling the widening access agenda has been collected by the Sutton Trust, a charity devoted to increasing social mobility. It takes the view that any imbalances in the entrants to schools, universities and occupations is *prima facie* evidence of a problem. It has devoted considerable resources to counting and publishing the numbers from various social groups going to the leading universities and rising to the top of major professions (2000, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b and 2010c).

1.6 Its message has been taken up by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC). In its 2014 report, *Elitist Britain?*, the SMCPC states that 75 per cent of judges, 59 per cent of the cabinet and 33 per cent of the shadow cabinet, 57 per cent of permanent secretaries, 50 per cent of diplomats, 47 per cent of newspaper columnists, 44 per cent of public body chairs attended either Oxford or Cambridge University compared to less than one per cent of the population.

1.7 Counting the numbers from different social groups in a university or profession is to look at outcomes rather than opportunity. It could be the different groups had the same opportunity, but there were differences between them that led to different outcomes, for example in their qualifications. Correcting imbalances would not be a problem if the qualifications were invalid. It could be assumed that all the groups were similarly talented and, therefore, intakes should be representative.

1.8 At one time it was maintained that A-level results did not signify very much. Dylan Wiliam in Clare (2002) asserted that "A-levels are only slightly better than tossing a coin as a way of predicting who will do well at university." In part he was drawing on a review of twenty published studies spanning forty years (Peers and Johnston, 1994) which concluded that, "the predictive value of A-levels is questionable."

1.9 But the analysis was flawed. They took the published correlation coefficients at face value and failed to correct for the thin slices of the ability range with which they were dealing – those who passed A-levels and those got degrees (Smithers and Robinson, 1989). When adjustments for the attenuation were made the correlations become highly significant.

1.10 The myth of the uselessness of A-levels was finally scotched by Bekhradnia and Thompson (2002). They had several advantages: the ability range at university had broadened; they had access to the data and resources of the body which funded the universities, the Higher Education Funding Council for England; and they had the wit to go beyond calculating correlation coefficients. Given the doubts about the efficacy of A-levels, their main finding was startling. There was an almost linear relationship between A-level grades and the likelihood of getting a first or upper-second class degree. An entrant with three B grades was over four times more likely (probability ratio 4.3) to get a good degree[2] as an entrant on three E grades, but four times less likely (probability ratio 0.28) to do so than an entrant with straight 'A's.

[2] Good degree is used throughout the report as shorthand for a first or an upper-second.

1.11 Although Bekhradnia and Thompson (2002) had conclusively shown that the best predictor of degree performance is A-level results, this all-important relationship has tended to be left hovering in the background. Those who believe that university admissions are unfair have concentrated on the small differences between sub-groups. Sometimes these have been deemed a problem and sometimes disregarded. In the next chapter we examine the comparisons between state and independent schools which have led to calls for action. Then, in Chapter 3, we turn our attention to comparisons which have been ignored because they are inconvenient for the widening access agenda.

2. State and Independent Schools

2.1 The claim that students from state schools do better at university than those from independent schools has been gaining traction over the past two decades. A front page splash in *The Independent* on 26 October 1998 by Judith Judd was headed 'State school students do best of all at university'. It reported that in a study of 60,000 students who graduated in 1992 from the universities of the time (polytechnics were not yet universities) those from state schools were a fifth more likely to have been awarded a first-class honours degree. The research was eventually published in 2002 by McNabb, Pal and Sloane, when it became apparent that the observation relating to independent schools was incidental to a study of gender differences in student attainment and that these differences there were bigger than those for school type.

2.2 Nevertheless, the difference between school types received some support from Naylor and Smith (2002) and Smith and Naylor (2005) who again analysed data for the pre-1992 universities. They found that, with the same A-level grades, male students who had attended independent schools were 6.5 percentage points less likely, and their female counterparts were 5.4 pp less likely, to obtain a good degree than those from state schools. The effect was, however, very variable, across the A-level attainment range with little or no difference for top scorers. There was also wide variation across independent schools with students from some more likely to obtain a good degree than those from state schools with the same A-level scores and of the same gender and social class.

2.3 Hoare and Johnston (2010) in the Bristol University geography department, analysed first-year and degree results of students applying with A-levels admitted in the three years 2002-03 to 2004-05. They found in the population of 4,305: "those who had attended independent schools performed better in the A-level examinations than those who attended state schools. But they did not also outperform students from state schools in their university degree programmes: indeed they were less likely to get a first-class degree and more likely to get a lower second class grade or less." Bristol has had a policy of favouring state schools over independent schools when evidence of potential justified this, and these students have, in general, performed well. School type was not the only factor studied. Controlling for A-level score, non-white students, on average, did less well, as was the case for students from blue-collar households. Neither school achievement nor neighbourhood participation rate appeared to be associated with degree result.

2.4 At Oxbridge a different picture emerged. The then Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University provided figures in 2000 for the proportions of graduates by degree class and school background at his university (Education and Employment Committee, 2001, Q730, page 156). They showed no difference with school type - 20.8 per cent of the independent school pupils obtained firsts compared with 20.3 per cent of the students from maintained schools, 60.7 per cent upper-seconds against 59.7 per cent, 16.4 per cent lower-second against 17.5 per cent and 2.0 per cent thirds against 2.5 per cent. More recently, Parks (2011) has analysed performance at Cambridge by school background and again found no difference with school type.

2.5 Oxford Brookes University, however, in contrast to its senior neighbour did find a link. Henry (2013), using the Freedom of Information Act to gain sight of the University's internal analysis, reported that its students who had been to a state school or a further

education college were more likely to get a good degree, particularly those entering on A-level grades of CCC or below. The university was considering making lower offers to some state school candidates. Henry also also obtained data from admission tutors at Cardiff University which showed they had found that degree performance was correlated with age, gender, ethnicity and type of school attended.

2.6 Moore, Mountford-Zimdars and Wiggans (2013) critically reviewed the evidence on university admissions for the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA), a body set up to promote fair admissions. They found that much of the published research had crucial weaknesses, including being small-scale often at just one university, using volunteer samples, employing different measures of prior attainment, having different definitions of university performance, and applying limited analysis.

HEFCE (2015)

2.7 Moore *et al* concluded that the findings were too inconsistent to be useful. But a series of studies from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003, 2005, 2013, 2014, and 2015) has analysed data from all the institutions which it funds. Chart 2.1 summarizes the data from Annex H of it latest report (HEFCE, 2015/21). It compares the degree performance by qualification level of the 222,180 graduates for whom the last school attended is known.

Chart 2.1: Students[1] and Good Degrees[2] by Entry Qualifications[3]

Entry Qualification	Independent School			State School		
	N	% Students	% Good Degree	N	% Studnts	% Good Degree
3+ A Grades at A-Level	8,390	34	93	20,295	10	93
AAB-CCC at A-Level	11,630	47	80	73,395	37	83
UCAS Points[4]	2,920	12	67	46,175	23	66
Other[5]	1,665	7	80	50,600	26	60
None	-			450		64
Unknown	200	1	79	6,430	3	60
Total	24,830	100	?	197,350	100	?

1. Home domiciled graduates from English HEI in 2013-14 whose schools were known. The total population is given as 284,515, so 62,335 (22%) are not included in the analysis because their schools were not known or for some other reason. This is more likely to be the case for mature students.

2. First or upper-second class honours degree.

3. Entry qualifications as defined by HESA: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2379#entryquals.

4. Tariff score for those whose three best A-level grades are not know

5. Includes access courses, vocational qualifications and higher education qualifications.

Source: HEFCE 2015/21, Annex H, Table H1.

2.8 HEFCE (2015) initially reported that 82 per cent of those educated at state schools obtained a first or upper-second compared with only 73 per cent of those from independent schools[3]. These were headline figures in the media coverage (Coughlan, 2015. Garner, 2015, Harris 2015, *The Times*, 2015). But, as can be seen from the comparisons of Chart 2.1, this is obviously wrong.

[3] HEFCE 2015/21, Executive Summary, point 17, page 5 and Table H1 Annex H,

2.9 When CEER recalculated these percentages, it found them to be the reverse of those which had been reported and publicised. Graduates who had attended independent schools were nine percentage points ahead in terms of good degrees - 82 per cent against 73 per cent. When we queried the published figures with HEFCE it admitted in an email to us dated 8 October 2015 that the overall percentages had been entered in the wrong columns, and that these erroneous entries had then been used in the text and press release.

2.10 HEFCE has now corrected its huge mistake. Nevertheless, the original percentages are still out on the internet and ready to be googled at any time. Given the coverage at the time and the authoritative source they are still likely to be believed by most people.

2.11 HEFCE has changed the figures in the appendix and in three places in the text. But it leaves an odd section in the executive summary which now suggests that while those from independent schools are ahead in good degrees, those from state schools still do better. It reads:

> In 2013-14, 73 per cent of state school graduates gained a first or upper second class degree compared with 82 per cent of independent school graduates…The observed nine percentage point difference is more than explained by other factors (such as the different distribution of A-level achievement) which results in an unexplained four percentage points advantage to state school students.

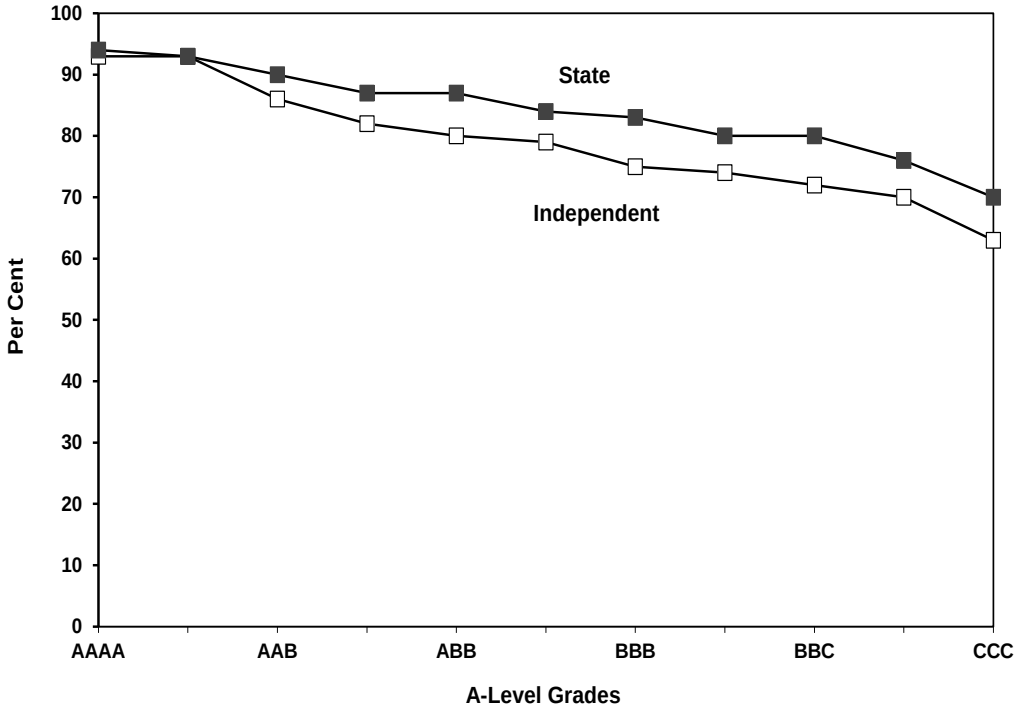
In the original version this read:

> In 2013-14, 82 per cent of state school graduates gained a first or upper second class degree compared with 73 per cent of independent school graduates. Of the observed nine point difference, only five points are explained by the model, leaving four percentage points unexplained.

2.12 *HEFCE's Blunder* (Smithers, 2015) has examined this curious statement that while students from independent schools are actually gained nine percentage points more good degrees, with statistical adjustment this was a four percentage point lead to state schools. This is arrived at by assuming the state school pupils were similar in every way to those from independent schools other than going to a state school. That is they would have the same prior attainment, background, postcodes and ethnicity. This is akin to saying that if Bournemouth had the players and resources of Manchester United they would be above them in the premier league. They would be doing better than expected, but in reality they still fall far short of the top teams.

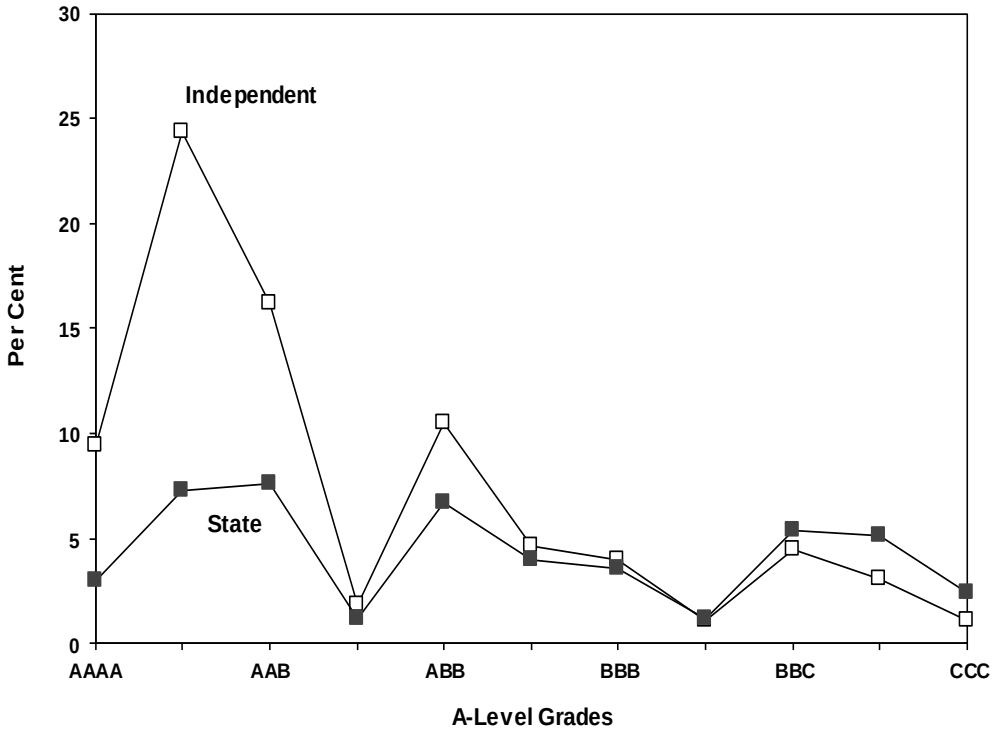
2.13 HEFCE seems to have convinced itself – and left itself open to making the huge mistake which it did - that students from state schools do better by drawing graphs like Chart 2.2. It shows that in the relationship between degree obtained and A-level grades the line for state schools runs above that for independent schools for some grades. Although the difference looks to be conclusive, it has to be remembered that it only covers some entry qualifications and takes no account of how many achieved at these levels. It turns out that the difference is relatively small, amounting to 2,200 students or one per cent of the 197,350 students from state schools.

Chart 2.2: Good Degrees by School Type and A-Level Grades



Source::Table H1, Annex H, HEFCE 2015/21.

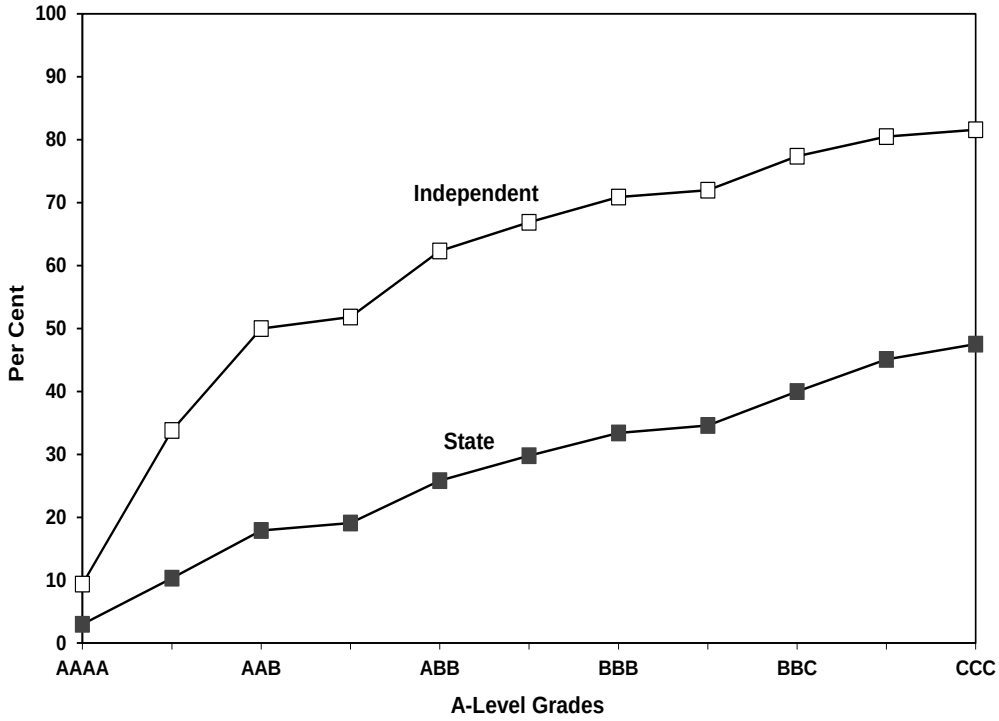
Chart 2.3: A-Level Grades of Graduates by School Type



Source::Table H1, Annex H, HEFCE 2015/21.

2.14 Chart 2.4 presents the same data as cumulative percentages. Altogether 80.6 per cent of those from independent schools entered on three C grades and above compared with only 47.5 per cent of those from state schools. The remaining 20 per cent of those from independent schools came mainly within the top UCAS points category (rising to 999), other qualifications and degrees or diplomas from universities. In these categories they heavily outscored those from state schools, probably because high level entry qualification such as the International Baccalaureate and the Pre-U were included.

Chart 2.4: Cumulative Percentage by A-Level Grades[1]



Source::Table H1, Annex H, HEFCE 2015/21.

2.15 Comparisons of achievement by A-level grades, therefore, present only a partial picture and certainly do not justify the claim that state schools students get the better results overall. Even when it comes to A-level grades below straight 'A's but above three 'C's where those from state schools were ahead, it was by only 83 per cent to 80 per cent. The actual result in 2013-14 was that 82 per cent of the students from independent schools gained good degrees compared with 73 per cent of those from state schools.

Crawford Report (2014)

2.16 A major study funded by the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Economic and Social Research Council looked at sub groups of schools within the state and independent categories (Crawford, 2014). It had available to it data on pupils eligible to take GCSEs in England for each year between 2001-02 and 2007-08, totalling over half a million pupils per cohort. As well as higher education, it had data on type of school attended, attainment at various ages, and background characteristics.

2.17 Crawford's team found that when the state and independent sectors were split into selective and non-selective schools, the selective schools were more similar to each other than they were to their non-selective counterparts. Students from selective schools - whether community, 'other state' or independent - were about ten percentages points more likely to get a first or upper-second class degree[4] They were also more likely to complete their degree studies within five years and less likely to drop out within two.

2.18 The research team found that pupils from selective schools were also more likely to go to university in the first place, but: "once we compare pupils with the same background characteristics, Key Stage 2 scores and Key Stage 4 attainment, the differences in HE participation fall to less than 4 percentage points in terms of participation overall and to less than 1 percentage point in terms of participation at a high-status institution"[5]. Crawford interprets her findings as showing that: "the fact that different types of pupils attend different schools explains a substantial proportion of the raw differences we see"[6].

Conclusion

2.19 The picture emerging from the HEFCE and Crawford studies is that students from independent schools do obtain better degrees overall than those from state schools. This this difference owes much to the schools being selective. Students from state grammar schools also obtained better degrees than their counterparts from non - selective schools.

2.20 When individuals were compared for the same A-level grades above three grade 'C's, about three per cent more of the state school students gained good degrees. A likely explanation is that independent and grammar schools seem to enable pupils to realise more of their potential. It is likely, therefore, that in non-selective schools there are some pupils who are more talented than their A-levels would suggest.

2.21 This would not, however, be true of all of them, or even the majority. A relatively small difference on average cannot be turned into the general rule that applicants from non-selective schools should always be favoured in university admissions. Some means of identifying the bright but underqualified is needed. In Chapter 6 we will see if this can be achieved by devising a measure or by taking into account contextual factors. Universities have traditionally looked at individual applications in the round and made allowances where they seemed appropriate. The issue is whether this can be improved upon.

[4] Crawford (2014), Figure 12, page 57.
[5] *Ibid*, page 38.
[6] *Ibid*, page 54.

3. **Gender, Ethnicity, Household Income and Neighbourhood**

3.1. Studies by HEFCE (2003-2015) and Crawford (2014) have cast light on the relative university performance of those from state and independent schools. Overall students from independent schools get the better degrees. But for matched A-level grades below straight As but three grade Cs and above, the students from state schools tend to be somewhat ahead. This has led to universities being urged to consider admitting state school pupils on lower A-level grades on the grounds that the grades do not fully reflect their potential (Curtis, 2009; Boliver, 2013a,b; Milburn, 2013; Crawford, 2014).

3.2. There are several reasons for being wary of leaping from the evidence to recommending this practice. First, it is a relatively small difference in relation to the strong overall correlation between A-level grades and degree outcomes. Chart 2.2 shows that, given the difference in degree performance, it would not be justified, to drop the requirement for state school pupils by more than a grade, and not always that. Secondly, it is a difference, on average, so that it does not mean that all state school pupils have more potential than their grades show. It follows that it cannot be turned into a general rule. Thirdly, when Crawford (2014) drills down there are important differences in state sector, with grammar schools showing a similar pattern to independent schools.

3.3. But it is a fourth reason we explore in this chapter. This is that the gap between state and independent schools is not the only, nor even the biggest, difference to show up in comparisons. Yet it has been singled out for attention. This suggests that the interpretation of the data has not been entirely logical or dispassionate. Chart 3.1 shows the extent of the differences in degree performance for a number of factors in the HEFCE (2014) and (2015) studies for students entering on three B grades or their equivalent.

Chart 3.1: Per Cent Good Degrees1 for BBB Entrants

Comparison	**Percentage Point Difference**	
	2010-11	**2013-14**
State vs Independent School	+9	+8
Female vs Male	+8	+7
Black vs White	-19	-13
Asian vs White	-16	-12
Poor vs Rich Neighbourhood[2,]	-9	-

1. First or Upper Second

2 Based on.IDACI which measures the proportion of children under the age of 16 who live in low-income households.

Sources: HEFCE 2014/03 and 2015/21

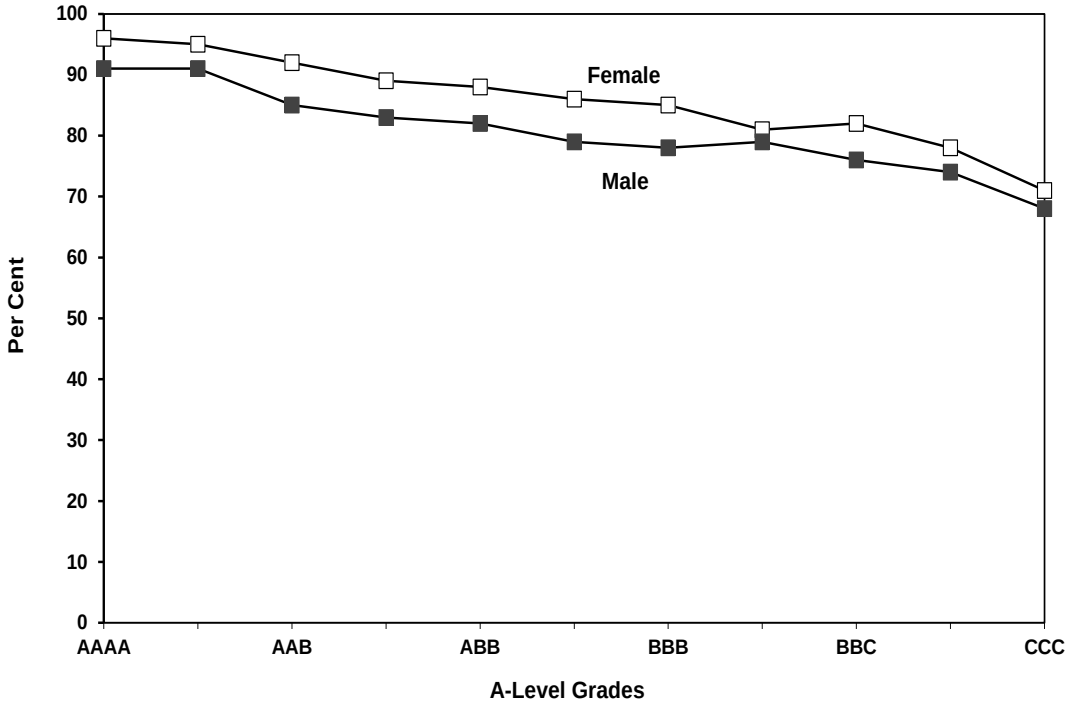
3.4. There is, indeed, a difference with school type, but it is similar in extent to the difference between neighbourhoods. In this case, however, it is the students from high income areas who do better, but there is no suggestion, nor would it be thinkable, that they be admitted on lower grades. The differences between ethnic groups is considerably higher, with Whites achieving the best results, but there would be cries of racist if it were to be proposed that Whites should be offered places on lower grades because they seem more potential. But that is the logic which is being employed when it comes to state and independent schools.

3.5. Interestingly, as we shall be discussing in Chapter 6, universities are being required to go against the grain of this evidence by admitting more students from poor neighbourhoods and ethnic minorities.

Gender

3.6. The magnitude of the difference between the sexes is similar to that between school types. Chart 3.2 looks very much like Chart 2.1. But the differences are viewed very differently. There is absolutely no discussion of whether females should be admitted on lower grades and, in fact, it would contravene the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act (HEFCE, 2003).

Chart 3.2: Good Degrees[1] by Gender[2]



1. First or upper second.

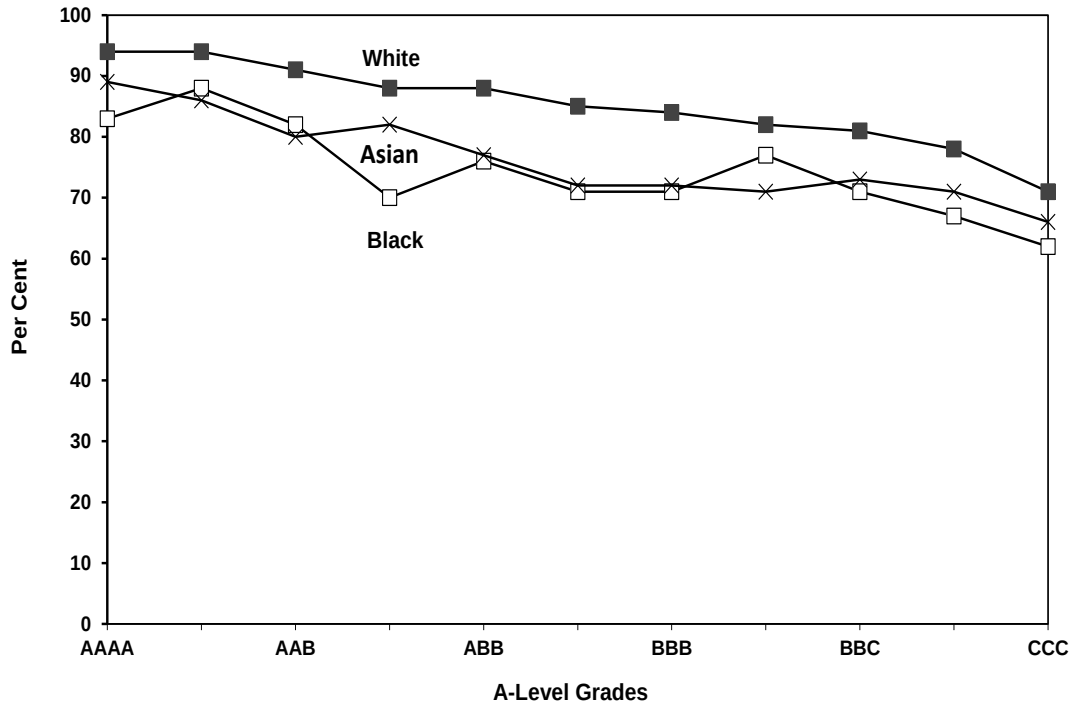
2. Entrants with at least three A-levels at grade CCC and above. The others entered on fewer or poorer A-levels, A-levels whose grades were not known, other qualifications, a higher education qualification, no recognisable qualification or qualification unknown.

Source::Table E1, Annex E, HEFCE 2015/21

Ethnicity

3.7. Universities are being required by the Office for Fair Access to admit more students from ethnic backgrounds on the implicit assumption they are under-represented and likely, therefore, to have more potential. But HEFCE (2014, 2015) finds bigger differences between the ethnic groups than it did between state and independent schools. White students, on average, obtained the better degrees across the range of A-level performance. Taking students graduating in 2010-11 entering on three Bs as an example: 72 percent of White students gained a good degree, compared with 56 per cent of Asian students and 53 per cent of Black students.

Chart 3.3: Good Degrees[1] by Ethnicity[2]



1. First or upper second.

2. Entrants with at least three A-levels at grade CCC and above. The others entered on fewer or poorer A-levels, A-levels whose grades were not known, other qualifications, a higher education qualification, no recognisable qualification or qualification unknown.

Source::Table G1, Annex G, HEFCE 2015/21

3.8. Chart 3.3 shows that for the 2013-14 graduates the difference is again large and consistently puts White students ahead across the A-level grades. Overall, they are 27 percentage points more likely to get a first or upper second than Black students and 13 percentage points more likely to get a good degree than Asian students. Yet the universities are under pressure to increase their intakes from ethnic minorities.

3.9. The drive to recruit more from ethnic minorities is also based on a misconception. DfE data show that fewer White students who took A-levels or equivalent qualifications in 2012-13 went on to higher education than did the similarly qualified from ethnic minorities (Havergal, 2015). It was a substantial difference: 45 per cent of White students against 64 per cent from Asian backgrounds and 61 per cent of Black heritage.

3.10. Far from being excluded, ethnic minority applicants are more likely to gain places, but also to do less well than White students.

Household Income

3.11. HEFCE (2014) and Crawford (2014) both look at the relationship between household income and degree performance. HEFCE used the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) which measures the proportion of children in an area under the age of 16 living in low-income homes. It found a "clear and consistent difference" of about 10 percentage points in degree performance between those from the top and bottom quintiles. But, inconveniently perhaps, it was those from the most affluent quintile who did best.

3.12. Crawford (2014) also explored the relationship with family income. Her measure was the proportion of children in the school attended who were eligible for free school meals (FSM). This yielded a similar result. Students from schools in the highest quintile for FSM-eligibility, that is with most pupils from low-income households, were, on average, 5.4 percentage points more likely to drop out in the first two years, 11.0 pp less likely to complete their degree and 21.8 pp less likely to graduate with a first or upper second compared with student from schools in the lowest quintile, those with the fewest pupils from low-income households

Neighbourhood

3.13. Admission to university from some areas is notably lower than from others. This is expressed in HEFCE (2015) in terms the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) index which measures the proportion of young people from an area who go to university. In the executive summary, HEFCE reports that: "66 per cent of graduates from the lowest participation neighbourhoods gained a first or upper second class degree. This is 11 percentage points lower than the highest participation neighbourhoods, where 77 per cent of graduates gained a first or upper second class degree."

3.14. Looking at the full spread of entries it is clear that the low participation areas are poor qualification areas. Over half (55.4%) of those from the high participation areas entered on A-level grades of three 'C's and above compared with only about a quarter (27.6%) of those from the low participation areas. The others entered on lower UCAS point scores, other qualifications, unknown qualifications, or none.

Conclusion

3.15. The data of this chapter point to two conclusions. The first is that the differences between those who had attended state and independent schools are little different from those in comparisons between other sub-sets of the graduate population. Independent schools seem to have been in the spotlight because the difference here, unlike the others, fits the widening access agenda.

3.16. Secondly, together, the HEFCE (2014, 2015) and Crawford (2014) findings show that degree attainment is not uniformly distributed across the population. Some groups are under-represented in higher education because, on average, the people in them have poorer qualifications.

3.17. Universities seeking to comply with the demands to increase diversity and become more inclusive face a dilemma. If they stick to offering places on merit then their intakes will be unbalanced; but if they attempt to smooth out the imbalances then they will struggle to keep up their degree standards. Think what would happen to sprinting if quotas were applied to the Olympics 100 metres final.

4. Beyond Degrees

4.1. Exam grades and degree outcomes have been the focus of much research interest, because they are readily quantifiable, but it should not need saying that there is a lot more to education than exam performance. HEFCE has looked beyond university to employment. In HEFCE (2013) it focused on four employment outcomes of young UK-domiciled students starting a full-time first degree course in the academic year 2006-07: (1) achieving a degree; (2) gaining a first or upper second; (3) completing a degree and employed or studying six months after qualifying; and (4) as 3, but employed in a post requiring a degree.

4.2. Chart 5.1 compares the percentages from independent and state schools reaching the four levels. Graduates from independent schools outscored their state school counterparts at all the levels. HEFCE also reported that those with poorer entry qualifications, those from lower participation neighbourhoods, black students, and male students were less likely to achieve at these levels than their comparison groups.

Chart 5.1: Per Cent University Outcomes by School Type

Outcome	Ind Sch	State Sch	Unknown
Degree Qualified	89.1	82.4	72.3
First or Upper Second	64.9	52.7	43.2
Degree & Employed or Studying	76.9	71.5	62.6
Degree and Graduate Job or Study	60.4	46.8	41.1
Cohort at Outset2006-07	24,360	184,580	16,830

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2013). *Higher Education and Beyond: Outcomes from Full-Time First Degree Study*. Issues Paper 2013/15. Bristol: HEFCE.

4.3. Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles (2013 and 2014) have also found that graduates from independent schools fare better in the jobs market. They drew on a Higher Education Statistics Agency longitudinal study following up the 2006-07 graduates in 2010. Occupations were categorized using the National Statistics - Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). They found that comparing graduates with the same prior attainment, from the same institution, and with the same postgraduate qualifications, those from independent schools were 2.5 percentage points more likely than those from state schools to work in a top NS-SEC occupation three and a half years after graduating.

4.4. Sub-dividing the leading occupations into professional, higher managerial and others, graduates who had attended independent schools were six percentage points more likely to be in a profession, 2.6 pp in a higher managerial position, but 1.7 pp less likely be in the 'other' group. This group included 'scientist', 'architect' and 'headteacher'. Macmillan *et al* interpret these findings as showing that even the highest attaining graduates from state schools tend to opt for different types of career from their independent school counterparts. The networks to which a graduate has access have an effect on the likelihood of working in a top NS-SEC occupation, but it is not the only factor.

4.5. The analysis does not definitively answer why graduates who were pupils at independent schools appear to be at an advantage when it comes to careers. They speculate it could be "differences in unmeasured human capital (non-cognitive skills),

differences in cultural capital (conversation topics in interviews) and differences in financial capital allowing the privately educated graduate a longer period of job search."

4.6. The preponderance of the independently educated in the top occupations is seen by some as a major problem. The Sutton Trust (2005a, 2005c, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b, and 2010c) has devoted much time and effort to comparing and publicizing the school backgrounds of people in the professions. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013), heavily influenced by the Sutton Trust, sees this as a source of concern:

> The top professional jobs are still more likely to go to men from a private school and privileged background. The hope that the phenomenon of a social elite dominating the top jobs would fade over time seems misplaced. The professions need to redouble their efforts to make access open to a far wider pool of talent.

4.7. Elsewhere it says: "non-graduate routes should become the norm across professions. It has followed the Sutton Trust in counting up the members of professions by school background. It entitled its report *Elitist Britain?* (SMCPC, 2014). Alan Milburn, the Chairman of the Social Mobility Commission, in launching a report which it commissioned from Macmillan and Vignoles (2013), is quoted (Chorley, 2013) as saying: "middle class children are being held back by 'entrenched elitism' which means that the rich and privately educated are a third more likely to get top jobs." And: "it was time to 'break open the closed shop' at the top of society."

4.8. But is it sensible to focus so heavily on the background characteristics of people in senior positions rather than what they can bring to the posts. Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles (2013, 2014) conclude, as did Crawford (2014), that apparent school-type effects depend to a considerable extent on the pupils who go to the school. Young people are by no means uniformly distributed across school types. Those attending independent schools have been selected in two ways: by ability and through the willingness of parents to pay for their education. They are likely to include some of the brightest and most supported young people in the country. Many of the independent schools were in existence before a state system was even a prospect. They would not survive in competition with free provision if their alumni did not do well.

4.9. Instead of attacking the success of independent schools and seeking to lower the bar (by making, as has been suggested by the SMCPC, non-graduate routes the norm across professions), it would be better to devote efforts to ensuring that across society people are able to develop their talents to fullest and to progress on the basis of what they achieve. There is room for considerable improvement in the state school system. I wonder how many people would silently agree with the senior public figure who said to me:

> Thank god for the independent schools; without them, given the present state of education, where would we actually get our senior judges, army officers, top civil servants and the like from?

5. Potential and Context

5.1. HEFCE studies (2014, 2015) suggest that there are some applicants from non-selective schools who could do better than their A-level grades suggest. Hence the argument for admitting such students on lower grades. But how can they be identified? This is a serious practical problem.

Identifying Potential

5.2. There have been two major attempts to construct a measure of a student's potential for higher education beyond what the A-level results show. The first was conducted under the auspices of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of the then universities in the late 1960s. A Test of Academic Aptitude was devised at the National Foundation for Educational Research consisting of 90 verbal and 60 numerical items. It was first trialled in 1967, when it was taken by 27,000 sixth-formers, of whom some 7,000 entered university in 1968. It was found that the test did not do as well as A-levels in predicting performance at university. In all, the trial was run three times. The overall conclusion of Choppin *et al*, (1973, 1976), something of a surprise at the time, was that the Test of Academic Aptitude scores "were a far weaker predictor of first-year degree performance than school assessment or A-levels."

5.3. The second attempt, forty years on, was a massive study costing over £1 million funded principally by the Sutton Trust (2010a) with support also from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the National Foundation for Educational Research and the College Board of America. Like the CVCP project the work was carried out by the NFER. The aim was to adapt the College Board of America's SAT (formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test) for the British scene. The SAT is the main instrument for university admissions in the United States where there is no external national exam comparable to A-levels at the end of schooling. The SAT consists of three main components: critical reading, mathematics and writing. As adapted, it consisted of nine sections to be taken within a total of three hours and twenty minutes. Over 9,000 took the test in 2005 of whom 2,754 graduated from university in 2009. Its key findings were: "Of the prior attainment measures, average A-level points score is the best predictor of HE participation and degree class, followed by average GCSE points score." And: "In the absence of other data, the (adapted) SAT has some predictive power, but it does not add any additional information, over and above that of GCSEs and A-levels (or GCSEs alone), at a significantly useful level."

5.4. Both were major attempts to come up with a 'thermometer' for student potential and both found that A-levels were superior. There is as yet no accurate measure of academic potential. Across a wide range of studies prior attainment results has been found to be by far the best available guide to university performance.

Contextual Factors

5.5. In the absence of any valid test of potential, it has been suggested that making allowance for 'contextual factors' is the way to compensate for underperformance. The HEFCE (2014, 2015) and Crawford (2014) studies found that the relationship between A-levels and degree performance depended to a small extent on type of school attended, ethnic background, family income, and gender. It seems fair that some allowance should be made for these factors. This is the argument heavily promoted by the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA). This was set up in the wake of the Schwartz Report (2004) on admissions to higher education which recommended that:

"there should be a UK-wide source of expertise and advice on admissions issues." SPA is based at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in Cheltenham and in its current form it is focused mainly on England. Its funding is provided by HEFCE, UCAS and Universities UK, with a contribution from the Department for Education and Learning Northern Ireland.

5.6. In *Fair Admissions to Higher Education* (Bridger et al, 2012) and *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence* (Moore *et al*, 2013) SPA classified the range of contextual information available in terms of:

(1) the area/community (postcode data such as IDACI, POLAR);

(2) the school (performance level, value added. percentage FSM);

(3) the individual (parental education, income, care);

(4) attendance at widening participation activities (summer schools etc).

SPA takes the view that higher education providers should contextualise admissions "as a way of discerning potential in a competitive applicant pool and ensuring the diversity of the student intake." It has thus broadened the objective from enabling universities to admit the most talented students, irrespective of their background, to recruiting a more diverse intake - something very different. It has expressed disappointment that: "Only a minority of the providers covered by the research used contextual data to make differential offers."

5.7. But the reluctance of universities to respond to SPA's exhortations, and pressure from elsewhere, is understandable. The differences found in the HEFCE, Crawford and earlier studies are small differences on average. They cannot be turned into general rules. One cannot say, for example, that all children from low income homes or low participation areas will do better than their A-levels suggest. Among them there are some, but probably only a few.

Conclusion

5.8. If the expectation is created that all students from particular social groups should be looked upon more favourably, then this will be less fair than what happens now. There is the risk that students who have worked hard to achieve their best possible A-level grades will be overlooked in favour of someone who has done less well, but who happens to belong to one of the so-called 'disadvantaged' groups.

5.9. Not only is it unfair, but it is counterproductive. It confuses parents. Should they seek out a high-performing school for their children, or will this damage their chances of getting to a top university? It also takes the universities' eye off the no-easy task of selecting the most talented among those applying to them. Neither will those let in on lower grades necessarily benefit. They may feel that the other students are better than they are. Once at university, if they cannot keep up, it will be a waste of a year or two of their lives and the tuition fees they have incurred.

5.10. Universities have always taken into account individual circumstances and continue to do so. It is up to those who would improve on this to demonstrate that there is a better way.

6. Driving Equality

6.1. Policies are one thing, making them happen another. On coming to power, the Blair government declared its mission was "to build an inclusive and fair society and a competitive economy" (DFEE, 1998). University admissions were identified as a key point at which to intervene. The government sought to do so through two main levers. It asked the body through which the universities in England obtain most of their money, the Higher Education Funding Agency for England (HEFCE), to publicize existing imbalances in university intakes by compiling Performance Indicators. In 2004, the government with some difficulty passed an act freeing universities to charge tuition fees up to a maximum of £3,000. In order to reassure the numerous critics that this would not deter potential students from low-income households, it established in the same Act an Office for Fair Access (OFFA). This was empowered to cap the tuition fees charged by individual universities at a lower level if they did not make provision for widening access.

University Performance Indicators

6.2. The Performance Indicators focus on under-represented groups. They were first published in their current form by HEFCE in 1999. It continued to publish them until 2003 since when responsibility was passed to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Three access indicators were adopted[7].

- The percentage of students who attended a school or college in the state sector.
- The percentage whose parents' occupation is classed as skilled manual, semi-skilled, or unskilled.
- The percentage whose home area, as denoted by its postcode, is known to have a low proportion of 18 and 19 year olds in higher education.

6.3. For every university the percentages for each of these three groups is shown alongside a benchmark calculated from the qualifications of the entrants and the range of subjects offered. Chart 6.1 shows those universities for which the percentages of state sector entrants fell markedly below their benchmarks in the first HEFCE compilation, that for the 1997-98 intake.

6.4. Apart from Oxford Brookes and City University, it is the leading universities that are the most deviant. In 1997-98 for Oxford (and also Oxford Brookes) the gap was 18 percentage points, Imperial College London was a similarly adrift, Bristol and University College London had gaps of 16 pp, for King's College London and the London School of Economics it was 13 pp, and for Cambridge 12 pp.

6.5. Chart 6.1 also shows admissions and the benchmarks in 2012-13. Fifteen years on most of these universities had increased their intakes from the state sector, with Durham an exception. There were, however, still substantial shortfalls because the benchmarks had been raised also. A clue as to why it should be the top universities which appear to have been the most remiss is provided by considering the intakes into Specialist Colleges.

[7] HEFCE 99/66, page 5.

Chart 6.1: Actual and Benchmark Percentages of Students from State Schools

University	1997-98			2012-13		
	% State	Bench mark	Diff	% State	Bench mark[1]	Diff
Bristol	55	71	-16	59	76	-17
Cambridge	52	63	-11	63	72	-9
City University	72	83	-11	91	90	0
Durham	62	74	-12	63	76	-13
Exeter	66	77	-11	69	76	-7
Imperial College, London	53	71	-18	65	75	-10
King's College, London	63	76	-13	71	78	-7
LSE	57	70	-13	71	72	-1
Newcastle	66	76	-10	70	81	-11
Oxford	47	65	-18	57	71	-14
Oxford Brookes	67	85	-18	74	90	-16
University College, London	58	74	-16	66	75	-9

1. HESA also now calculates a benchmark adjusted for location, which is generally lower, but for comparison with the earlier figures and to avoid confusion, the unadjusted one is shown in this table.

Sources: Higher Education Funding for England (1999). *Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK*. Report 99/66: Bristol: HEFCE and Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014). Table 1a: *Young Full-time First Degree Entrants 2012/13. By State School Marker, NS-SEC Marker and Low Participation Marker POLAR3.* Low Participation Data. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/urg/.

6.6. Chart 6.2 provides a similar tabulation of the 2012-13 data for the colleges specialising in music, drama, and agriculture. Some fall so far short of the benchmark that the differences for the universities pale into insignificance.

Chart 6.2: Recruitment to Specialist Colleges

University	2012-13		
	% State	Bench mark	Diff
Central School of Speech and Drama	84	93	-9
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama	86	95	-9
Courtaud Institute of Art	59	68	-9
Guildhall School of Music and Drama	68	91	-23
Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts	87	94	-7
Royal Academy of Music	38	88	-50
Royal Agricultural University	50	88	-38
Royal College of Music	44	90	-46
Royal Northern College of Music	61	90	-29
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance	80	92	-12

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014). Table 1a: *Young Full-time First Degree Entrants 2012/13. By State School Marker, NS-SEC Marker and Low Participation Marker POLAR3.* Low Participation Data. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/urg/.

6.7. Against a benchmark of 88 per cent, the Royal Academy of Music admitted 38 per cent from state schools, fully 50 percentage points adrift. The Royal College of Music, the Royal Northern College of Music and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama also fell well short, with the gap ranging from 46 pp to 23 pp. The music colleges will obviously be selecting on musical talent above all else. It does not look as though this talent and the opportunity to develop it during the school years is evenly distributed across the population. The intakes will, therefore, necessarily be out of line with the benchmarks.

6.8. A similar explanation would account for the intakes to the leading universities. They are all highly selective. They have the opportunity to recruit the most talented in the subjects they offer. If those talents are not uniformly distributed then there will be imbalances. These universities will find it difficult to meet benchmarks, which, in any case, are derived from a calculation based on particular assumptions.

6.9. HEFCE through publicising its access indicators tries to shame the universities into taking more students from state schools, the working classes and areas where few go on to higher education. Since it is the funding body they will be inclined to comply, though it does not force them to. This is the province of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). In order to charge the maximum tuition fees payable, the universities have to reach an annual access agreement with OFFA.

Access Agreements

6.10. The Access Agreement involves, among other things, reporting on progress towards meeting HEFCE's benchmarks. As an example, we can take a table from the 2014-15 Agreement made by King's College London (KCL), reproduced with the addition of the current benchmarks in Chart 6.3.

Chart 6.3: Benchmarks and KCL's Agreed Targets for 2016-17

Indicator	Benchmark		KCL Plans	
	Original	Location Adjusted	Baseline 2010-11	Target 2016-17
State Schools	78.2	75.4	70.3	76.3
Socio-Economic Classes 4-7	22.1	21.8	22.0	22.0
Low Participation Neighbourhoods (POLAR3)	6.3	4.4	3.6	4.3
Ethnic Minority	-	-	41.7	44.0

Sources, T1a: *Young Full-time First Degree Entrants 2012/13*. By state school marker, NS-SEC marker and low participation marker POLAR3 low participation data. And https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/urg/ and King's College, London *Access Agreement 2014-15* http://www.offa.org.uk/agreements/KCL_NSP_revised_merged.pdf/.

6.11. KCL has agreed with OFFA that, in line with its adjusted benchmarks, it will by 2016-17 have increased the proportion of students from state schools by 8.5 per cent, from low participation neighbourhoods by 19.4 per cent, and from ethnic minorities by 5.5 per cent. This is in spite of the evidence from HEFCE presented in Chapter 3 that the performance of students in the latter two groups is, on average, below both that of students from high participation neighbourhoods and students who are white. The Access Agreement, therefore, appears to cut across the pursuit of excellence.

6.12. Bristol, in its Access Agreement, presumably influenced by the research of Odell (1999) and Hoare and Johnston (2010) at the university, has agreed to raise its intake of

students from low performing schools/colleges from 17.9 per cent in the 2011 intake to 22.0 per cent by 2016. But, whatever the University's internal researches may have found, HEFCE's (2014) national analysis concludes that: "A student from a low-performing school is not more likely to gain a higher degree classification than a student with the same prior educational attainment from a high-performing school."

6.13. Oxford also sidesteps the benchmark of percentage from state schools. In its Access Agreement it offers its own target of increasing the percentage of UK undergraduate students it takes from schools and colleges that historically have had limited progression to Oxford. Its submission stresses that it provides a range of access and outreach activities, but there are factors beyond its control that may impact on the outcomes.

6.14. Durham has moved less than other leading universities towards its benchmarks. Sixty per cent of its students came from state schools in 1997-98 and 63 per cent in 2012-13. It has offered a target of 62.3 per cent for 2016-17 recognising that this is 11.7 percentage points below its benchmark. It explains its approach thus: "Durham is a highly selecting institution, with demanding degree programmes and a high ratio of very highly qualified applicants per place. The University works hard to identify those with the greatest merit and potential amongst applicants from all backgrounds."

6.15. Cambridge has also made a stand. Its Access Agreement states that its principal objective is to increase the proportion of its UK undergraduate intake from schools in the UK state sector. But it has rejected the 72 per cent benchmark. It argues that it recruits almost entirely from those who have achieved at least three A grades at A-level, and its research shows that, on this basis, state schools could be expected to contribute 63 per cent of the entrants. It put to OFFA that its intention was to make this its target, and it seems to have been accepted.

Present Policy

6.16. The higher education landscape has recently been dramatically transformed with the lifting of the cap on intakes from 2015-16. The universities are thus free to take as many students as they think appropriate. This renders the percentages of the Performance Indicators and Access Agreements irrelevant. Taking a student from an under-represented group no longer has to deprive a perhaps better qualified applicant from a group that is well represented. The University of Bristol is clear about its implications: "The University plans to grow overall undergraduate numbers substantially over the next few years. The intake-related measures articulated as percentages in our 2012 Agreement are therefore no longer meaningful."

6.17. While having the power to enforce its requirements, the Office for Fair Access FFA up till now has accommodated the universities' explanations of why they cannot meet the benchmarks. But the present government looks likely to expect it to take a tougher line. On 9 September the minister (Johnson, 2015) said he would be writing to OFFA asking it to focus in the 2017 and 2018 Access Agreements on White British boys from disadvantaged backgrounds of whom only 10 per cent go to university. He recognised that poor attainment in schools was a major factor, but believed it was also a matter of attitude.

Conclusion

6.18. HEFCE's and OFFA's use of benchmarks is driving universities to place social characteristics above talent. As an attempt to make admissions fairer it risks them becoming less fair. Instead of open competition with the same standards being applied across the board, it implies different treatment for different groups in order to get the required outcomes.

7. Evidence and Policy

7.1 It is an admirable intention to give everyone the best possible chance in life, irrespective of from where they are starting. But the approach adopted by successive governments to university admissions is deeply flawed. The evidence base is insecure. The logic is faulty. Understanding is partial.

Evidence

7.2 A-level results consistently emerge as the best guide to university performance. This is what the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals[8] (Choppin *et al*, 1973, 1976) and the Sutton Trust (2010a) found in their attempts to construct a measure of academic potential. Bakhradnia and Thompson (2002) analysing the national data on degree performance found there was an almost linear relationship with A-level grade. When sub-groups, for example, by school type, gender, ethnic heritage or postcode are compared, relatively small differences are found. Yet the spotlight has been on these, particularly school type, rather the strong relationship overall.

7.3 Much of the evidence comes from counting up those in various social categories (Sutton Trust, 2000-2010c; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Any imbalances are seized upon as a bad thing. Policy is formulated on the basis that they must be corrected. David Cameron in campaigning in the 2015 election has promised that the proportion of entrants to university from disadvantaged backgrounds will be doubled by 2020. 'Disadvantaged' in this case is living in an area where relatively few go to university. Little thought seems to have been given as to why it is that many more young people go to university from some areas than others.

7.4 The interpretation of evidence can be distorted by the political narrative. Even an august body like HEFCE has been so caught up in the belief that state schools pupils do better at university that it is has published percentages the wrong way round. In HEFCE (2015) it reported that 82 per cent of those from state schools got good degrees in 2013-14 against the 73 per cent from independent schools. This was widely taken up in the media (Coughlan, 2015. Garner, 2015, Harris 2015, *The Times*, 2015) and is well on its way to becoming an accepted 'fact'. But, actually, it was those from independent schools who did better - by nine percentage points - as HEFCE's recent correction[9] acknowledges (Garner, 2015).

Logic

7.5 The flaw the Sutton Trust's and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's campaigning and the government's drive through HEFCE and OFFA for greater equality is that Equality of Outcome has become confused with Equality of Opportunity. While the rhetoric emphases Opportunity, the evidence is on Outcomes. The difference has been neatly described by Saunders (2011):

- Equality of Opportunity holds that every individual should be in a position to achieve the best they can in life, given their talent and their willingness to work hard.

- Equality of Outcomes is "where everyone ends up with roughly the same wealth and status irrespective of their work or talents".

[8] A forerunner of Universities UK.

[9] Rebecca Titchiner, Analytical services, HEFCE in an email dated 8 October 2015, in response from one from me query the percentages dated 2 October 2015. The 2015/21 report has now been corrected.

7.6 Although sounding similar and frequently confused, as Hayek (1960) has recognised, they point in quite different directions.

> From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result will be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them in an equal position is to treat them differently.

7.7 A fair university admissions system is defined in terms of equality of opportunity (Schwartz Report, 2004). But the policies that are emerging are directed more at equality of outcome.

Understanding

7.8 There is a need to progress beyond the simplistic assumptions and crude number crunching of equal outcomes to an understanding of the roots of inequality of opportunity. HEFCE (May 2015) commissioned a report to do just that. But it got nowhere. It adopted an elaborate analytical structure embracing three levels - the macro, meso and micro – and four types of explanatory factors. But the report had to admit that: "The complexity of the data presents challenges to understanding the causal factors of differential outcomes." The researchers were undertaking no easy task. But they made things much more difficult for themselves by leaving out what is probably the main cause of inequality of outcome: that some people are smarter than others and groups differ in this respect.

7.9 This fundamental aspect of human behaviour tends to be left to one side in educational research and policymaking. It is difficult to find an acceptable language to address it. In every day experience people have no difficulty in recognizing that some people can do some things so very much better than others, whether it be in sport, the arts or business. It is accepted that they are especially talented. But when it comes to the intellect there is a diffidence. Words like 'intelligence', 'ability' and 'gifted' can trigger a strong reaction. It becomes even more problematic when there is any hint that genetics may be involved[10]. Without an acceptable and accurate language it becomes hard to address the issue and to think precisely.

7.10 But the barriers to understanding why there can be such large differences between social groups in admissions to, and success at, university are more than that. The crucial question that is rarely asked is: why is it that people are in the situation they are in? Why do some families have low incomes or live in particular neighbourhoods? They are evidently doing less well in life. To what extent is this due to a lack of ability and motivation? If these are important factors then there is a ready explanation of why children from such families go to university less often and do less well there. I am not proposing these as answers; only stressing the importance of not starting from where people are, but look at how they come to be there.

7.11 The language that is used influences where politicians direct their solutions. 'Disadvantaged' suggests that something from the outside has happened to put people in the situation they are in. It implies that whatever it is can be fixed. This is convenient

[10] The House of Commons Education Committee invited Robert Plomin, Professor of Behavioural Genetics at King's College London, to give evidence in December 2013 to help it with its inquiry into the Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children, yet makes almost no reference to it in the report which appeared in June 2014, HC 142, Session 2013-14.

because it suggests that there is something government can do about it. If the roots lie within people themselves, than they may have to change.

Conclusion

7.12 Setting targets for universities to recruit from 'disadvantaged' groups without knowing why they are disadvantaged in the first place risks compromising fairness by bringing in extraneous factors. Attempts to over-ride dispassionate assessment of talent by the imposition of social criteria will weaken the universities and ultimately society itself.

7.13 Who gets university places should be less of an issue now that the institutions are free to admit as many students as they want. An offer to a pupil from one social group will not necessarily exclude a pupil from another. The percentage benchmarks make little sense in these changed circumstances. It makes even less sense to tie the universities' funding to percentage increases of students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds as is being considered for the latest higher education Green Paper.

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