

SUTTON TRUST PRESS RELEASE

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**STATE SCHOOL PUPILS FAIL TO RECOGNISE DIFFERENCES IN
UNIVERSITIES' EARNING POWERS**

Half of state school pupils do not think that they will be better off financially by going to certain universities over others, and teachers in the maintained sector are reluctant to discuss the different status of universities, suggest two new pieces of research commissioned by the Sutton Trust.

A survey of over 3,000 young people by PeopleSurv (see note 1) revealed that 51% of those educated in state schools believed there is no difference in earnings between higher education institutions, compared with 35% from independent schools. Young people from poorer backgrounds were also less likely to recognise differences than their better off peers (68% versus 38%), even though studies show that graduates from universities with higher academic status have significantly higher earnings than those from other universities (note 2).

In separate research undertaken by the Institute of Education (note 3), researchers found that, even in schools with good track records in admissions to highly-selective universities, the emphasis in briefing sessions was on entry to higher education in general: "Teachers are generally reluctant to draw attention to status differences between universities, and many students appear to have only a vague notion of status." The exception to this is Oxford and Cambridge, partly because Oxbridge applicants are openly given extra assistance with applications and preparation for interview.

The Institute of Education study also reported that the children with two graduate parents were much more likely than others to discuss university entry at home and were therefore less reliant on information provided by the school. They also began to think about applying to university much earlier in their school careers.

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust, said: "The UK's diverse higher education sector has institutions of many different strengths, and it is right that young people consider a range of factors when making their choices.

But we believe it is important that all young people should be aware of all the relevant information on different courses at different universities. Pupils should not be disadvantaged in making these decisions by their background or the type of school they happen to attend. We need to spread best practice on information, advice and guidance on higher education choices from a handful of schools and colleges to the rest of the sector.”

The Institute’s research built on an earlier Sutton Trust report, which showed that there are relatively few comprehensive schools that send significant numbers of students to the most prestigious universities, and those that do so tend to have relatively advantaged students. The new study sought to identify what factors had enabled a few state comprehensives to have relatively high levels of admission to prestigious universities at the same time as having a higher than average proportion of disadvantaged pupils.

Professor Geoff Whitty, a member of the Institute team, said: “Even with similar predicted grades, students from families where neither parent went to university are much less likely to apply to prestigious universities than those with two graduate parents. All students, but first generation students in particular, need earlier information and help from the school if they are to make appropriate choices about which subjects to study and which universities to apply to.”

Notes to editors

The Sutton Trust is a charity founded in 1997 by Sir Peter Lampl with the aim of providing educational opportunities for young people from non-privileged backgrounds and improving social mobility. It funds a wide range of research and projects covering parenting and early years, schools, universities and access to the professions.

Note 1

The survey was carried out by PeopleSurv on behalf of CitizenCard. 3,113 CitizenCard holders (aged between 11 and 24) were asked to complete an online questionnaire.

Note 2

Two forthcoming studies support this:

Wage Returns to Quality of Higher Education Institute Attended by Iftikhar Hussain, Sandra McNally, Shqiponja Telhaj, London School of Economics

This study uses data from a series of Graduate Cohort Studies to assess the wages of graduates four years after leaving university. It uses a range of factors - including research ratings in the Research Assessment Exercise, the retention rate for students, average pre-university test scores in A-levels and other exams - to estimate the status of different universities. The calculations control for range of individual characteristics of students including A-level points score, subject of degree, gender, age, type of school attended, ethnicity and parental education. It concludes that the wage returns for graduates from a top-ranked institution using these measures are over twice as high as the returns for graduates from an institution ranked much more lowly. The study also suggests that these differences in returns may be increasing over time.

Graduating and gradations within the middle class: the legacy of an elite higher education by Sally Power, Cardiff University and Geoff Whitty, Institute of Education

This study surveys the outcomes of a small cohort of graduates who left university in the mid-1990s. It creates a ranking of elite universities from various published 'performance' tables. These include Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial, King's College, London, London School of Economics, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London. It finds that nearly one fifth (19%) of those who went to elite universities were earning over £90,000 per annum - compared with only 8% and 5% of those who went to other 'old' and 'new' universities respectively. 33% of the graduates from elite universities now own their home outright, compared with 21% of graduates from other universities and 13% of non-graduates.

Note 3

The Institute of Education study, *Primed for Success*, is available at www.suttontrust.com. The Executive Summary is attached to this release.

For further information: Tim Devlin, Press Officer, Sutton Trust, on 07939 544 487.

PRIMED FOR SUCCESS? THE CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF STATE SCHOOLS WITH GOOD TRACK RECORDS OF ENTRY INTO PRESTIGIOUS UK UNIVERSITIES

A report on research carried out for the Sutton Trust

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over recent decades, there has been an increase in participation in higher education in the UK. There has also been a growing concern that this participation is unequally distributed. It seems that middle-class children are not only disproportionately likely to go to university, they are also disproportionately likely to attend the most prestigious universities.

The relationship between social class, schooling and university is complicated, but one of the ways in which educational privilege can be perpetuated is through the close connection between private and selective schooling and students' access to the most 'prestigious' universities. The challenge for policy makers will be to decide how participation in higher education can be widened, *not just increased*, especially in the context of such under-representation at these universities of pupils from state-maintained comprehensive schools. Previous research by the Sutton Trust (2007) indicated that relatively few of these schools send significant numbers of pupils to prestigious universities.

It was against this background that the Sutton Trust commissioned this project. The research aims to explore the characteristics and practices of non-academically selective state schools which have a successful track record in sending students to the more prestigious universities.

Research Objectives

The research set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of state-maintained comprehensive schools that are successful in sending students to the most prestigious universities?
2. What institutional processes are put in place to support students in their progression?

3. What lessons can be learnt from these schools which will inform policy and practice elsewhere?

To explore these questions, Sutton Trust data on top non-selective, state-maintained schools (Sutton Trust 2007) was examined. Five schools from across England were identified for further research on the basis of their success in sending students to the most prestigious universities (defined here as the Sutton Trust 13 and the Russell Group), despite having above average levels of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). Within these schools, interviews were undertaken with a range of key personnel to collect information on their strategies and procedures for promoting HE transitions. A questionnaire survey of Year 13 students was also undertaken and, on the basis of this survey, a sample of students was interviewed to explore their experiences and aspirations in more depth.

Principal Findings

1. School characteristics

- **Within the state-maintained sector, there are relatively few comprehensive schools which appear to send significant numbers of students to the most prestigious universities, and those which do so tend to have relatively advantaged students.** In fact, it proved difficult to find schools for this study which both sent students to the most prestigious universities and had higher than the average number of students eligible for FSM.
- **The overall profile of students entering the case study sixth-forms is more advantaged than that of Year 7 to 11 students.** Three of the five schools recruited large numbers of students from elsewhere into their sixth-form. It is possible that, even within the case study schools, high rates of progression to prestigious universities might be attributed to the background of the students as much as to within-school processes.
- **All of the schools expressed a strong commitment to encouraging their students to progress on to university.**
- **Schools showed varying levels of outreach activities, often through *Aimhigher* and the National Academy for Gifted and Talent Youth (NAGTY).**
- **Having disproportionately large sixth-forms may benefit the performance of students in these particular schools.** Research evidence shows that a larger sixth-form is associated with better results while a small sixth-form appears to have a negative effect. All the case study schools had a sixth-form within or above the optimum size range highlighted by this particular research (three of the schools were particularly ‘top heavy’ due to a considerable influx into the sixth-form of students from other schools).

2. *School practices*

- **Links with universities were often based on personal contacts rather than a more strategic approach.** While these links had a significant impact on a few individuals, their overall influence appears patchy.
- **All the schools explicitly encourage students to progress to higher education, and also emphasise the importance of sixth-form students as role models for younger students.**
- **The earliest that most of the schools begin to systematically address the route to university is in Year 9, around the time of deciding GCSE options.** Students from graduate families often plan to progress to higher education from a younger age.
- **On entry to the sixth-form, potential Oxbridge applicants are identified, and all the schools take advantage of outreach activities from Oxford and Cambridge.**
- **Oxbridge applicants are given extra assistance with their application and preparation for their interview.** Having staff members and/or parents who have graduated from these institutions is also viewed as a valuable resource upon which to draw during the application process.
- **Within all the schools, students receive strong direction and help with the UCAS process.** This involves starting the application process early, with tight monitoring from senior teachers. Students receive intensive support with writing their personal statement, and this takes up a considerable amount of senior staff time.
- **In briefings on higher education, teachers are generally reluctant to draw attention to status differences between universities, and many students appear to have only a vague notion of status. Proximity of the university appeared to be one of the most important factors affecting a student's decision.** This calls into question the extent to which students who have no familiarity with higher education are making the most informed choices.
- **The predicted grades of 'first generation' HE aspirants were generally lower than those of their fellow students.** These students were also likely to apply to the more prestigious universities only if they were predicted very high grades. **Students whose parents had attended university were more likely to apply with lower predicted grades to prestigious universities.** These different levels of expectation and aspiration, on the part of students and staff, may be one of the factors which contribute to the under-representation of disadvantaged students at prestigious universities.
- **A number of teachers felt that the main issue with regard to guiding student choice was students' over-aspiration.** They felt that some students held 'unrealistic' expectations in wanting to apply to more prestigious

universities than could be justified by their predicted grades. However, teachers can have too low expectations of some students.

- **The curriculum in all the schools focussed predominately on A-levels with few, if any, vocational alternatives.** However, all the schools offered a range of extra-curricular activities, which may be important in developing the 'soft' skills also sought by prestigious universities and employers.

Policy implications

Encouragement of students

- Explicit encouragement to consider university entry should be given by schools much earlier than appears to be common practice. This is especially relevant for first generation higher education applicants. It is also particularly important in 11-16 schools, where the visible role model of high aspiring sixth-form students is missing.
- Greater efforts should be made to encourage appropriate students from schools without sixth-forms to enter 11-18 schools with academically successful sixth-forms, as well as sixth-form colleges.

University Links

- University outreach work needs to be maintained and developed, especially in schools with few university links. Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of outreach services, and state schools should be encouraged to make more use of these.
- More generally, links between schools and universities should be encouraged, and greater attention given, within schools, to developing links with a broader spectrum of universities, especially where there are few prestigious universities in the immediate vicinity.

Applications Process

- Schools should provide information about the relative status of universities in order that students not already 'in the know' are not disadvantaged.
- League tables are often used by students to help them 'sift' through the multitude of UK HEIs. Greater discussion is needed about their methodology and use. A recent HEFCE Report (2008) questioned various aspects of league tables. It recommended promoting greater public understanding of both league tables and alternative information about universities.

- In line with the recent announcement by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) about having to publish their admissions policies, universities should be more transparent about their admissions practices so that schools can concentrate on what matters most. For example, universities could be clearer about the importance of the personal statement and extra-curricular activities.
- It would be helpful to establish, and evaluate, some pilot programmes of extra support for the application process in schools less experienced in gaining access to prestigious universities.

Post-Qualification Application

- First generation higher education students tend to take decisions on higher education later than others, and also often have lower predicted grades. The current proposal whereby students can revise their choice of university after receiving their results could enable more such students to enter prestigious universities.

Size of sixth-form

- In relation to the particular issues with which this report is concerned, a further proliferation of small sixth-forms would seem undesirable.

New Universities

- Decisions about the establishment of new higher education institutions and their potential university partners should take account of geographical inequalities in the current distribution of prestigious universities.

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