



---

**Entry to Leading Universities**

**The Sutton Trust has analysed access to the top 13 universities (ranking based on the average of newspaper league tables) from statistics published by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). In addition to actual entry statistics, HEFCE also published benchmark statistics, which showed what the numbers should be based on entry qualifications and subjects taught at the institution.**

In summary this analysis shows that:

- ◆ Children from independent schools account for 7% of the school population and for 39% of the entry to top universities, compared to a benchmark of 28%.
- ◆ Children from less affluent social classes account for 50% of the school population and only 13% of entry to top universities and children who live in poor areas account for 33% of the population but only 6% of top university entry, both much lower than the benchmarks.
- ◆ The chance of getting into a top 13 university is approximately 25 times greater if you come from an independent school than from a lower social class or live in a poor area and is about double what it should be.

Figures for the top 5 universities show an even more exaggerated pattern of admissions in favour of independent schools with 4,600 from independent schools or almost half of the 9,600 total entry and only 980 from less affluent social classes and 450 from poor areas.

We believe the imbalance of entry to the top universities is due to two main factors: a low proportion of suitably qualified less affluent students apply and inadequacies in the admissions system which is in need of reform.

The Sutton Trust supports recent initiatives aimed at widening access to top universities by the universities themselves, the Government and HEFCE and is itself involved in a number of initiatives. Amongst these are:

- ◆ Annual summer schools at top universities for over 600 students and 125 teachers.
- ◆ Other university access projects such as appointment of recruitment officers, Saturday morning classes and linking universities with secondary schools.
- ◆ Commissioning research in the use of a SAT type aptitude test to be used in conjunction with GCSEs and A-levels.
- ◆ Funding open access independent day schools.

However, given the scale of the problem, we feel the funding and resources applied to top university access schemes are not adequate.

Our principal recommendations are to make A-level results available before university admissions decisions are made, introduce some form of aptitude test to be used in conjunction with A-levels and use extensive recruitment staff to 'talent spot' students as is done in the United States as well as expand other access initiatives such as summer schools.

We recommend more specifically that each university come up with an action plan to make measurable progress towards the benchmark in an agreed time-frame.

**Last December the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) published its first report on performance indicators to universities in the UK.**

The report gave statistics for each university including the numbers of students from independent schools, the numbers from families categorised as the less affluent social classes (III<sub>m</sub>-V) and the number of students from poorer areas (another measure of the number of less affluent students). In addition to publishing the actual entrance statistics, HEFCE also published benchmark statistics, which showed what numbers should be expected from entry qualifications and subjects taught at the institution.

## Results

**These statistics show that students from the estimated half of the nation's families categorised as the less affluent social classes (III<sub>m</sub>-V) make up a quarter of the university population, while students from the approximately third of the country's families who live in poorer neighbourhoods (identified as areas sending fewest students to university) constitute only 18 percent. In contrast students from independent schools form approximately 7 percent of the schoolchild population and 18 percent of the university population.**

When the Sutton Trust looked at access to the top performing universities as determined by using the average ranking from surveys published by *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* the field from which the country recruits its future elite turns out to be extraordinarily narrow.

At the top five universities (Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, LSE and UCL) 4,600 or almost half of the 9,600 young people who enter each year are from independent schools even though they amount to only 7 percent of the population. The number getting in from the 50 percent of the children who are from less affluent social classes is 980 and those from the third of families who live in poor areas number 450.

According to the benchmark statistics produced by HEFCE entry to the top 5 universities from independent schools is much higher than it should be: 4,600 instead

of 3,100, and entry from less affluent social classes and poor areas much lower: 980 instead of 1,360 and 450 instead of 730.

A similar analysis for the top dozen universities (the above plus York, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, St Andrews, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Durham being joint twelfth) produces a similar result. Each year approximately 600,000 children pass through the education system of whom approximately 50 percent or 300,000 are from the less affluent social classes, approximately a third or 200,000 live in poor areas and approximately 7 percent or 42,000 are privately educated. Of the approximately 300,000 children who are from the less affluent social classes only 3,500 or just over 1 percent get into one of the top 13 universities instead of the 4,600 who should based on entry qualifications and subject mix, and of the 200,000 who live in less affluent areas 1,700

get in or less than 1 percent instead of 2,300. In other words, the chances are slim to none and lower than they should be.

Contrast that with the children in independent education: of the 42,000 children per year in independent schools almost 11,000 or 25 percent get in instead of the 7,800 who should based on entry qualifications and subject mix. Put another way the probability of getting in to a top 13 university is approximately 25 times greater if you come from an independent school than from a lower social class or live in a poor area, and is approximately double what it should be.

Seven percent of students start out at independent schools and almost all of them stay on to do A-levels and they account for one third of top performers at A-level compared with two thirds in the state sector. Clearly independent schools bestow a considerable advantage on their pupils relative to the state sector for a number of reasons not least that spending per pupil is more than double the spending in the state sector. What the HEFCE figures show is that in addition to better achievement, independent students have a considerable advantage over and above their level of achievement in accessing leading universities. We are not advocating that leading universities take pupils in relation to school population but a minimum in relation to achievement at A-level, which is what the HEFCE benchmark figures are based on.

A number of studies suggest that it is far harder to get the grades you need to get into a top university if you are at a state school and are from a less affluent background than if you are at an independent school. So we should, in a more mobile society, be giving students from less affluent backgrounds a proper chance. The figures for those students should if anything be greater than the benchmark rather than less.

The reputation of any university depends on the quality of their graduates and it is in the interests of top universities to draw applicants from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible to ensure that they are admitting the most talented students.

### LEADING 13 UNIVERSITIES\*

UNIVERSITY	RANK
Cambridge	1
Imperial	2
Oxford	3
LSE	4
UCL	5
York	6
Warwick	7
Bristol	8
Nottingham	9
St Andrews	10
Birmingham	11
Edinburgh	12 -
Durham	12 -

\* As determined by using the average ranking from surveys published by *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times*.

## Leading University Access Statistics

TOP 5 UNIVERSITIES	ACTUAL		BENCHMARK*	
	No. of young entrants	%	No. of young entrants	%
From independent schools (7% of families**)	4,580	48	3,110	33
From social classes IIIm-V (50% of families)	980	10	1,360	14
Total	9,600		9,600	
From low participation areas (33% of families)	450	5	730	8

TOP 13 UNIVERSITIES	ACTUAL		BENCHMARK*	
	No. of young entrants	%	No. of young entrants	%
From independent schools (7% of families**)	10,690	39	7,830	28
From social classes IIIm-V (50% of families)	3,470	13	4,570	17
Total	27,600		27,600	
From low participation areas (33% of families)	1,740	6	2,290	8

\* Benchmark is what numbers should be based on entry qualifications and subjects taught at the institution.

\*\* Percentage of families in each category are the best estimates available.

Source: The Sutton Trust has derived these figures from 'Performance Indicators in Higher Education - 1996-97, 1997-98' (Published by HEFCE, 1999)

## Leading University Access Statistics

TOP 5 UNIVERSITIES	Estimated school population**	ACTUAL		BENCHMARK*	
		No. of young entrants	% of school population	No. of young entrants	% of school population
From independent schools (7% of families**)	42,000	4,580	11	3,110	7
From social classes IIIm-V (50% of families)	300,000	980	0.3	1,360	0.5
From low participation areas (33% of families)	200,000	450	0.2	730	0.4

TOP 13 UNIVERSITIES	Estimated school population**	ACTUAL		BENCHMARK*	
		No. of young entrants	% of school population	No. of young entrants	% of school population
From independent schools (7% of families**)	42,000	10,690	26	7,830	19
From social classes IIIm-V (50% of families)	300,000	3,470	1.2	4,570	1.5
From low participation areas (33% of families)	200,000	1,740	0.9	2,290	1.1

\* Benchmark is what numbers should be based on entry qualifications and subjects taught at the institution.

\*\* Assuming 600,000 school children per year, of whom independent are 7%, social classes III-V are 50% and low participation neighbourhoods 33%.

**Two main factors have been put forward to account for the discrepancy between entry to top universities from those from less affluent backgrounds compared to what it should be based on qualifications and subject mix. Firstly, a lower proportion of suitably qualified students from less affluent backgrounds apply to top universities. Secondly, the system of admissions which has evolved for entry to universities means that students from comprehensives are less successful at gaining acceptances to top universities than those from independent schools.**

The admissions process to universities relies on selection being made initially on the basis of predicted A-level performance. Contrast the situation for applicants from top independent schools or state schools with applicants from most comprehensives. The applicants from schools with a strong tradition of sending students to top universities will be assessed by their schools. They will be encouraged to apply for the right course and university to maximise their chances of getting in and their predicted A-level grades become a reliable source on which universities depend. Applicants from many comprehensives often do not know or think they are top university material and do not have access to the same information and contacts with these institutions.

The wastage of talent in this country is further demonstrated by a Bristol University study which showed that very few students go to Bristol from the bottom 50 per cent of schools. Additionally this study has documented evidence that a student from a below-average performing school can be accepted with lower A-level grades (by two or three points) and get a degree as good as, or better than, the student who comes from a high performing school.

Oxford University published an access report last year which shows that they are well aware of this problem. To quote two paragraphs from the report:

If the University is to meet its own objectives of fairness and excellence it has to address the serious imbalance that exists both in the applications it receives and, subsequently, in its student entry, between the maintained and independent sectors of secondary education. The problem is twofold. First, a large number of

able candidates from the maintained sector do not apply to Oxford, and second, when they do apply, their success rate is generally below that of candidates from the independent sector.

Year by year, Oxford admits more applicants from the independent sector than from the maintained, although the latter group contains approximately two thirds of those school leavers who obtain the highest A-level grades. Fairness to applicants and fulfilment of the University's mission alike suggests that the proportion of applicants accepted should be closer to the ratio of high grades at A-level, one third independent school pupils to two thirds maintained.

The Oxford report goes on to make a number of recommendations which would go a long way to solving the problem.

Other leading universities are also well aware of these problems and a number of access schemes, some of which we are involved in, are in operation. The universities themselves have initiated programmes and HEFCE are offering financial incentives to universities for the recruitment and retention of under represented groups. Special funding has been set up to support partnerships, innovation and development work. For example Bristol, on the basis of the study cited above, has piloted a scheme in the law department making some applicants lower offers on the basis of their schools' performance. This is now being rolled out to all departments in the university.

The Sutton Trust is involved in a number of initiatives aimed at widening access to leading universities:

## **i) University Summer Schools**

The Sutton Trust now funds summer schools for over 600 students at Bristol, Cambridge, Nottingham and Oxford universities and a

summer school for 125 teachers at Oxford University. The success of the summer schools has been confirmed by National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) evaluations and the fact that one third of students are offered places by the university where they attend the summer school. We are delighted that the Government this year will be running summer schools targeted at students from inner cities and applying them more widely to other universities.

### **ii) Complementary Testing for Aptitude and Potential**

The Sutton Trust has commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to run pilot tests to look at the feasibility of introducing an SAT type aptitude test in this country. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has also recently expressed interest in investigating the role which an aptitude test might have in widening access to universities. We hope to find a type of aptitude test which will identify students with high potential and thus assist in their recruitment. We regard this as a complementary measure to be used with GCSE results, first year AS results and predicted A-level results in addition to other factors universities consider relevant for selection. The Sutton Trust does not believe in positive discrimination towards state schools, or penalising independent schools. We believe in admission on the basis of merit and in identifying achievement, ability and potential at every social level.

### **iii) Appointment of Recruitment Officers**

Much more needs to be done to encourage recruitment at top universities using dedicated recruitment officers to go out to schools and persuade bright students from less affluent backgrounds to apply along the lines of top American universities. As a first step we are funding the appointment of a recruitment officer at Mansfield College on behalf of a consortium of Oxford colleges, directed at students in colleges of further education.

### **iv) Other University Access Projects**

The Trust is working with individual Oxford and Cambridge Colleges to develop their access programmes. In addition to the Mansfield project the Trust is funding Clare College, Cambridge for their project linking the College to two secondary schools and an FE college in the London boroughs of Southwark and Tower Hamlets. The Trust is funding Saturday Schools at the London School of Economics for students from inner-city London schools and colleges aimed at improving A-level performance as well as raising aspirations.

### **v) Open Access Independent Day Schools**

As many places at top universities are taken up by entrants from leading independent day schools we would like to make the benefits of attending them available for all who qualify. Many of these schools were former direct grant grammar schools and wish again to attract students from wider social backgrounds. In conjunction with the Girls' Day School Trust we have started an Open Access scheme at one of them – The Belvedere School in Liverpool. By Open Access we mean that all students are selected on the basis of merit, parents are means-tested, and either whole or partial funding is provided for all students who cannot afford the fees. Initial results have been encouraging. Thanks to the publicity achieved in Liverpool and to the efforts of a specially appointed Recruitment Officer, we have managed to increase applications by two and a half times over last year and from a far wider social spread. Three out of four pupils entering the school at 11 next September under the Open Access Scheme will be either wholly or partially funded. Belvedere is intended as a pilot which could be used as the basis for wider implementation.

### **vi) Independent/State School Partnerships**

The Sutton Trust is funding a number of Independent/State School partnerships both with the government and independently.



Two of the schemes with Dulwich College and Manchester Grammar School are aimed at top university entry, particularly Oxbridge. Students from comprehensives attend classes at the independent school, are given interview training and help with their applications. A number of comprehensive students have gained entry to Oxbridge and other top universities through these schemes and the feedback of the benefit to students has been excellent.

Given the scale of the problem, the impact of university access schemes is limited by the lack of money and resources devoted to them. The average yearly intake of undergraduates is over 2,000 at top British

universities for which there are usually two to three full time admissions staff working along side part timers. Contrast this with Harvard where the admissions department has 50 people working full time to admit 1,650 students per year. Harvard is not unique in this respect and top universities throughout the US have large admissions staff who actively recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds looking at a range of factors including SAT score, rank in class and extra-curricular activities. This is the level of commitment that needs to be given to university recruitment if we wish to utilise the talent available in our society.

## Summary and Way Forward

**For the first time the HEFCE tables have allowed us to reveal the extent of the imbalance in admissions not just to Oxbridge but to our leading universities. The Trust is not blaming the universities, most of which are doing their best to widen their entry with limited resources, but the university admissions system. Fundamental reform of the admissions system is required to address a central problem facing top universities today, that is, their failure to recruit bright youngsters from non-privileged backgrounds. The benchmark statistics provided by HEFCE demonstrate that the students from non-privileged backgrounds who are achieving high scores at GCSE and A-level are not gaining access to our top universities in sufficient numbers.**

A better way has to be developed of spotting and nurturing talent amongst all pupils. The reform of the qualifications structure for 16–19 year olds offers new opportunities. Central to this is making A-level grades available to students and universities before decisions are made about higher education. This would take away reliance on predicted A-level scores which work against so many students as would the use of an aptitude test to complement A-levels. In addition, the funding of extensive recruitment officers to identify and encourage students from less affluent backgrounds, together with their parents and teachers, as well as expansion of other access initiatives such as summer schools, would transform the intake of top British universities.

We recommend more specifically that each university come up with an action plan to make measurable progress towards the benchmark in an agreed time-frame.

The HEFCE statistics show that with proper recruitment and admissions procedures leading universities are able to increase significantly the proportion of students from non-privileged backgrounds without lowering A-level entry requirements and without any form of positive discrimination. Graduates from our top universities will form the future leaders in society so it is vital that the imbalance of entry to leading universities be corrected as soon as possible both on the grounds of fairness and to avoid further wastage of talent.



Heritage House  
21 Inner Park Road  
Wimbledon  
London SW19 6ED

---

Telephone 020 8788 3223  
Facsimile 020 8788 3993  
Email [sutton@suttontrust.com](mailto:sutton@suttontrust.com)  
<http://www.suttontrust.com>

---

Charity Registration No. 1067197