

State school students do BETTER at university than private pupils, study shows

- Findings appear to show fee-paying schools are better at pushing pupils to achieve the best A-level results their abilities will allow
- Figures may be used by universities to justify lowering entry requirements for state school pupils
- Independent school leaders warned against 'crude' division of schools into categories

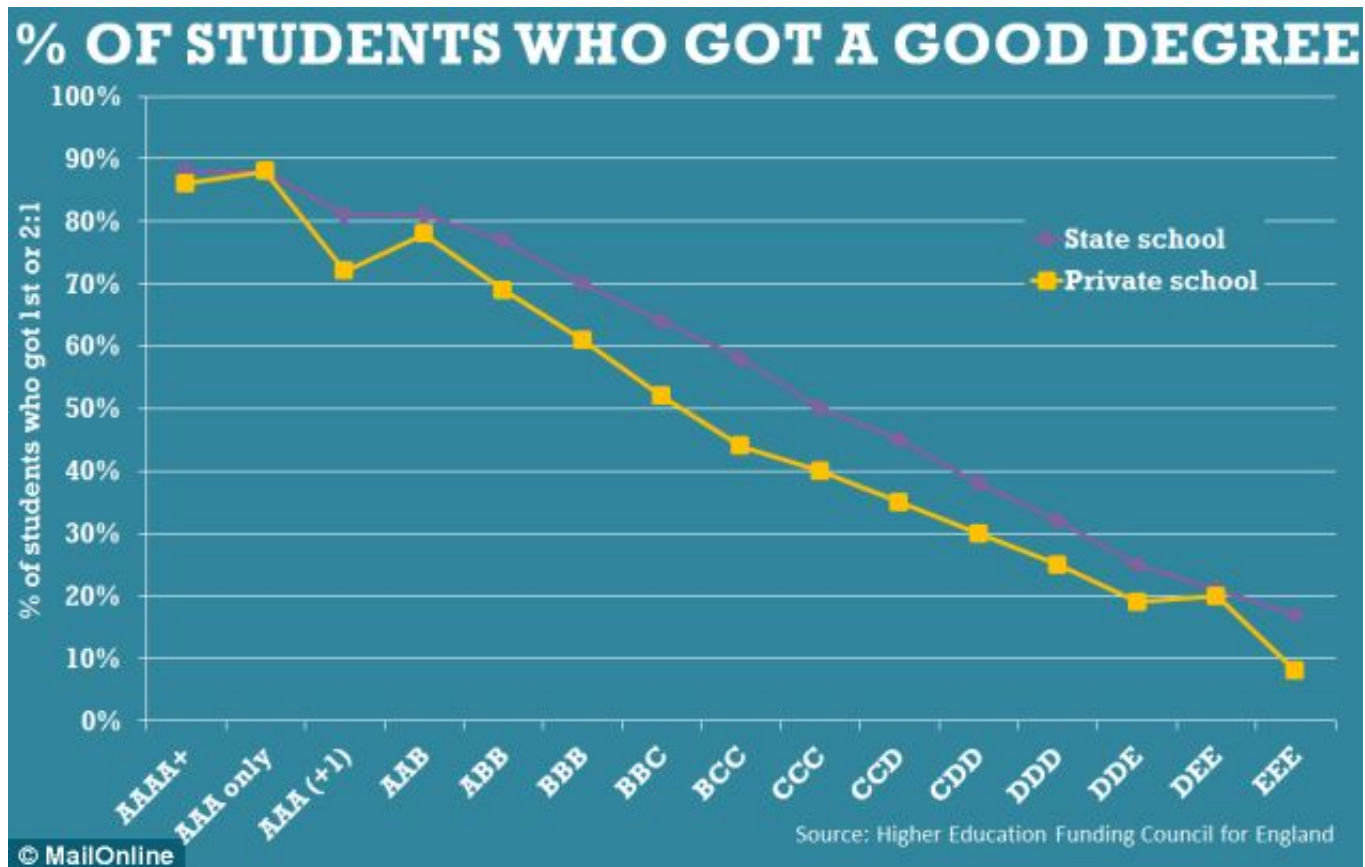
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Universities are set to discriminate in favour of state school applicants following research which found they get better degrees than privately-educated pupils with the same A-levels.

A major new study found that two thirds of state school pupils who achieved Bs and Cs at A-level went on to gain first or upper second class degrees - compared with just half of their private school peers.

The findings appear to show a significant 'independent school effect' - that fee-paying schools are better at pushing pupils to achieve the best A-level results their abilities will allow.



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More state school pupils get a good degree than those who go private school, regardless of the A-level grades they achieve



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Study: State school pupils were found to get better degrees than privately-educated pupils with the same A-levels

They are likely to be used by universities to justify schemes that involve lowering entry requirements for state school pupils or giving them places ahead of private school counterparts with similar results.

Critics have claimed such policies - aimed at compensating for missed educational chances - risk crude 'social engineering' and undermine attempts to improve academic standards in state schools.

But the study, which involved 132,000 students who started degrees in 2007, produced further findings which will disappoint supporters of so-called 'contextual' admissions.

It discovered that pupils who achieved mainly As at A-level stood roughly the same chance of gaining a good degree regardless of whether they attended a state or private school.

And the research also suggested that 'contextual' admissions policies which take into account the average performance of an applicant's school are flawed.

It claimed that the performance of a school - whether high or low-achieving - made little difference to a pupil's chances of achieving a first or 2.1 at university.

The findings were released as separate figures showed most elite universities significantly increased their intake of state school pupils in the year £9,000-a-year tuition fees were introduced.

Out of universities in the 24-strong Russell Group, 19 turned over more places to state-educated students in 2012/13, with only five, including Oxford, Bristol and Edinburgh, giving less.

The trend suggests universities responded to Government pressure to recruit a more diverse student body in return for charging £9,000-a-year fees.

In line with demands from the university access watchdog, many leading universities have set targets specifically to attract more state school pupils and other 'under-represented groups'.

But independent school leaders warned against 'crude' division of schools into categories.



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Advantage: The findings appear to show that fee-paying schools are better at pushing pupils to achieve the best A-level results their abilities will allow

The study of degree results, by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), found that 65 per cent of state school pupils with A-level grades of BBC achieved a first or 2.1 - compared with 53 per cent of private school peers with the same grades.

However the gap significantly narrowed for pupils with three As at A-level.

It also emerged that pupils who were 'top of their class' did better at university than those with the same grades who were average performers in their year group.

Rachel Wenstone, National Union of Students vice president, said: 'If those from state schools are out-performing similarly qualified peers from independent schools, those students should be given a fair chance to fulfil their potential and this must be recognised in admissions processes.'

'These figures confirm the case for using contextual data when making decisions about university entry to help widen participation in higher education.'

But Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council, said: 'It is widely recognised by serious researchers into school education that dividing the school population into "state" and "private" is too crude to yield anything of value.'

'The majority of our pupils' A-levels were graded A or A* last summer and we note that HEFCE, despite their best efforts, are unable to show that our pupils did less well at university than other groups.'



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Crude: Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council, suggested the statistics were misleading

He added: 'All those many universities who are using school performance data in their contextual admissions process will now have to question whether they were right to do so.'

'For me, the most important finding of this research is that degree outcomes are not affected by school performance.'

'This finding will come as a great shock to many universities, who have been using school performance data to influence their admissions policies, understandably you might say. This data is saying they were wrong.'

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, a think-tank, said the research suggested 'it is school type, rather than school performance, that is important'.

'In essence, it matters less whether you went to a bog-standard or top-performing school but it does matter whether you went to a state or an independent one,' he said.

This was 'out of kilter with many universities' recruitment practices, which take account of individual school performance,' he said.

He also warned it would be 'tricky for institutions to work out which applicants should have their schooling taken into account and which shouldn't'.

In further findings, black and Asian students were significantly less likely than white pupils with the same A-level results to gain good degrees.

Women also outperformed men with the same prior achievement but only in achieving upper seconds. The proportion of women and men achieving firsts was the same after taking into account A-levels.

Professor Madeleine Atkins, HEFCE chief executive, said many of the findings were 'disturbing' and called on universities to examine their policies on recruitment and retention of students.