
State-educated students ‘achieve better degree passes at university’

Finding bolsters case for ‘contextual admissions’ to break stranglehold of independent schools

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Students from state schools are more likely to achieve top-grade degree passes than those from the independent sector with the same A-level results, a major study suggests.

The findings of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), released today, have prompted calls for leading universities to place more emphasis on applicants’ backgrounds when offering places to study, and fuelled demands that some state-educated pupils should be asked for lower grades than their private-school peers to secure a place on the same course.

It makes no difference whether undergraduates attended a community comprehensive, faith school or grammar school because they all outperform their independently educated counterparts later in their academic careers, the report says. “Students who have remained in the state-school sector for the whole of their secondary education tend to do better in their degree studies than those with the same prior educational attainment who attended an independent school for all or part of their secondary education,” it concludes. “This improved performance is not affected by the type of state school.”

The findings were welcomed by teaching unions and campaigners for educational equality. Sally Hunt, the general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU), said the study strengthened the case for action to prevent children from wealthy families obtaining an unfair advantage in the education system.

“The UCU supports the principle of contextual admissions and measures which focus on students’ potential to succeed, as well as their performance to date. Our members want to teach the best and the brightest from all corners of society, not just those who have been given a step up because of their background and schooling,” she said.

James Turner, the director of programmes at the Sutton Trust education think-tank, said the report confirmed its own research but that there remained wide variations between state schools. He said: “We wouldn’t advocate differential admissions decisions being made solely on the basis of school type, but we do think school performance and other background factors should be taken into account in admission decisions.

“For us, it is not just about which students go on to get better degrees, but also about the value top universities add to low- and middle-income students, the benefits of a diverse student body in a university and the importance of future leaders coming from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds.”

The HEFCE found that a male student with three B grades at A-level from a state school was as likely to achieve an upper-second-class or first-class degree as a student with an A and two Bs from an independent school. However, it did not find evidence to support offering lower admissions grades to pupils from particularly deprived state schools, as opposed to state schools generally.

It found that pupils who attended poorly performing state schools did not go on to gain more top degree passes (a first or a 2:1) than those who obtained the same grades at more successful state schools, or independent schools.

"A policy of making discounted offers to students from lower-performing schools is based on the assumption that, all other things being equal, students from a lower-performing school will go on to higher achievement [in higher education]," the report says.

However, the evidence shows "decreasing school performance does not necessarily lead to an expected increase in HE achievement". "We found that... those from the most disadvantaged areas have consistently lower higher-education degree outcomes than those with the same prior education attainment from other areas," the report says.

The researchers looked at the performance of 130,000 students who began university courses in 2007. They found white students, particularly girls, were more likely than those from ethnic minorities and with the same A-level passes to graduate with top degrees. The figures show 72 per cent of students with three grade-B passes are likely to get a first or 2:1 if they are white. Only 56 per cent of Asian students and 53 per cent of black students are likely to do so.

Among those obtaining two As and a B at A-level, 79 per cent of white girls got top degree passes compared with 70 per cent of boys.

Professor Madeleine Atkins, HEFCE's chief executive, said: "The study presents a robust and independent set of findings to inform discussion and debate, and to stimulate action. Further work will be needed to understand why these effects are happening and what sort of interventions will be most effective in bringing about positive change."