

AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

State pupils on same grades as private counterparts 'get better degrees'

28 March 2014 | By [Jack Grove \(URL=/jack-grove/1114.bio\)](http://jack-grove/1114.bio)

Contextual data debate likely to be reopened by landmark Hefce report



A major new study has reignited the debate on whether universities should discriminate in favour of state school pupils after it showed they got better degrees than private school applicants with the same A-level grades.

The landmark report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which analyses the achievement of 132,000 students over three years, says state school pupils are more likely to gain a 2:1 or first-class degree than independent school peers with the same A-level results.

State school pupils also achieved higher degree scores than their private school counterparts with the same GCSE grades, according to the report, titled *Differences in degree outcomes*, published on 28 March.

According to the report, 73 per cent of state school students with the equivalent of eight A grades at GCSE go on to gain a first or upper second, but this proportion drops to 69 per cent for independent school students with the same GCSE profile.

Some 52 per cent of students with eight B grades at GCSE gain a first or upper second compared with 43 per cent of independent school students, the report says.

It is likely to reopen the debate over whether universities should demand lower grades from state school pupils compared to private school applicants.

In its conclusions, Hefce says a male state school pupil with BBB was as likely to gain a 2:1 or first as a private school applicant with ABB at A level.

Commenting on the report, Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, said the study “underlines the importance of universities being able to consider a range of factors alongside applicants’ entry grades”.

“Many universities have always used such contextual information to help identify an applicant’s potential, which cannot always be determined from entry grades alone,” Ms Dandridge added.

James Turner, director of programmes at the educational charity, the Sutton Trust, said the research “confirms early Sutton Trust studies showing that when students from state schools get to university, they are likely to do well.”

“Many of the world’s leading universities – in the UK, US and elsewhere – recognise that it is much harder to excel academically in some schools than others, and they use contextual admissions to help recruit bright students from less advantaged backgrounds,” he added.

However, Wendy Piatt, chief executive of the Russell Group, which represents 24 research-intensive universities, said universities must be careful in how far it used the report’s conclusions.

“A ‘systematic’ or ‘blanket’ approach to the use of contextual information is highly problematic because it can rely too heavily on data which is limited in how far it can reveal a true picture of the candidate’s background,” she said.

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, said the report’s findings “will be disliked by some of the various organisations that represent private schools”.

However, he added that the research had come at a “less useful time than it might have done”.

“The Coalition’s determination to remove the student number cap from institutions means they will be free to recruit as many students as they desire,” Mr Hillman said.

“So fine judgements between different candidates based upon their individual characteristics could become rarer”, he said, adding that institutions will no longer be fined for over-recruiting.

Les Ebdon, director of fair access, also welcomed the “important research [which] shows that a student’s background influences their likely degree outcome”.

Madeleine Atkins, chief executive of Hefce, said the study made “an important contribution to the growing evidence base on achievement in higher education”, which would “inform discussion and debate” and “stimulate action”.

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Readers' comments (2)

- [Widcombe \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/widcombe/2020398.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/widcombe/2020398.publicprofile) | 28 Mar 2014 11:12am

The fundamental dishonesty in this piece of politically motivated research is to equate a degree classification from a high ranking university to that of a low ranking one. And this is compounded by glossing over the fact that subjects present different levels of academic challenge to obtain a degree. The study assumes that a 2:1 in Law from Nottingham equates to a 2:1 in Fashion Design from Nottingham Trent.

So if students from independent schools (whom the study shows to achieve an average 320 UCAS points as opposed to 280 from state schools) choose to go to Russell Group institutions where they take academically demanding degrees they are treated as being no different from state school pupils who choose low ranked institutions and who read less challenging degrees (creative media, sports studies etc.). Is it not highly probable that the former group go on to more taxing courses and higher ranked institutions? The study fails to address this and you have to wonder why this might be.

The authors also find that in 10 HE institutions the data showed that former independent students clearly outperformed state students with comparable qualifications. Yet it did not list this group. Why?

And, even if you accept all the previous assumptions about all degrees being equal, the headline conclusions about differential achievement only hold with data for students who got ABB and below. This suggests it's only the weaker indie pupils who don't achieve at least as well at university.

The data has been manipulated and cherry-picked to support a desired political stance. And this is quite shameful.

- [Ian McNay \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/ian-mcnay/2023053.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/ian-mcnay/2023053.publicprofile) | 28 Mar 2014 11:43am

This needs to be set alongside changes in the percentage of students awarded 'good' degrees in recent years. That percentage has gone up much more in the Russell Group universities where it was already higher than in modern universities, where right wing commentators might expect it to rise quickly from a lower base. Why the gap should have widened needs fuller research. It may be because of an influx of state schooled students to the Russell Group, but that shift has been small. It may be because the Russell Group universities make it harder for BME students to get in and so increase the percentage of higher graded white students, pushing up the average. It may be because the provision for widening access has been left to modern universities, with an impact on resources to support learning/achievement across the board. No doubt there are other hypotheses.

The assertion about comparable standards has no basis in research. If anything, comments from external examiners from pre-92 universities have suggested the opposite.

Professor Ian McNay