

## Universities 'given go ahead to favour state school pupils'

Research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England finds that state school pupils perform better at university than privately-educated peers with the same A-level results, prompting fresh calls for a reform of the admissions system



HEFCE research finds that students from state schools perform better than those from the fee-paying sector at university. Photo: Alamy

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

6:00AM GMT 28 Mar 2014

Universities will come under renewed pressure to discriminate in favour of teenagers from state schools after a major study showed they gained better degrees than peers educated in the private sector.

Research by the Government's Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) showed that pupils recruited from the state system were more likely to graduate with a first or 2:1 – despite scoring the same A-level results at 18.

Some 76 per cent of state-educated pupils who left sixth-form with an A and two Bs went on to gain a good degree compared with 69 per cent of private school counterparts with the same results.

Figures show the divide was maintained at all ability ranges but narrowed significantly among the

very brightest pupils – those with straight As.

It also emerged that men performed much worse than women at university and “significant variation” was seen between different ethnic groups, with white students outscoring those from black and Asian backgrounds.

The conclusions are likely to fuel the debate over admissions and give institutions the green light to favour students from state schools.

Universities across England have been told to set ambitious targets to widen participation among under-represented groups in return for the right to charge up to £9,000 in tuition fees.

Many admissions tutors now accept pupils from poor-performing schools with lower entry grades – marking out their potential to succeed and compensating pupils whose exam results understate their true ability.

Separate data published on Thursday from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) showed 19 out of 24 members of the elite Russell Group admitted proportionately more students from state schools last year – effectively cutting numbers from the independent sector.

Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, the vice-chancellors’ group, 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 information to help identify an applicant’s potential, which cannot always be determined from entry grades alone,” she said.

Rachel Wenstone, vice president of the National Union of Students, 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.”

But private school leaders branded the findings as “flawed”, saying they failed to take account of the large numbers of poor pupils enrolled in fee-paying education with bursaries.

On the whole, private school pupils were also much more likely to gain the very top A-level results, they said.

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.

"Our schools have been signed up to an agenda of fair access for decades, as is demonstrated by the fact that one third of Oxford University's bursary students are alumni of independent schools.

"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."

The study analysed the achievements of 130,000 students who enrolled at universities across England in 2007. It followed a similar study a decade earlier.

The study controlled for the type of course studied and the selectivity of the university attended.

On the whole, pupils from private schools scored much better A-levels at 18. Some 67 per cent also went on to score a top degree, compared with 64 per cent from state comprehensives.

But researchers said state school pupils "tend to do better in their degree studies than students from independent schools with the same prior educational attainment".

It found that 50 per cent of state school students with CCC grades at A-level went on to gain a good degree, compared with 40 per cent of similarly-qualified candidates from the independent sector.

Among students with BBB grades, 70 per cent of those from the state system gained a good degree compared with 61 per cent of students from independent schools.

At the highest ability range the difference narrowed significantly. Some 88 per cent of students with AAA grades from both state and independent schools gained good grades.

Among those with four A grades or better, some 88 per cent of those from the state system scored a top degree compared with 86 per cent of privately-educated pupils.

The Office for Fair Access has repeatedly criticised top universities for failing to admit enough poor students, warning that institutions must be more "ambitious" in their efforts to create a diverse student body, particularly after a sharp rise in tuition fees.

Separate data published by HESA on Thursday showed all but five members of the Russell Group admitted more students from state schools last year - the first year that tuition fees increased to £9,000.

Cambridge alone saw the proportion rise from 57.9 to 63 per cent, while Durham increased its state school intake from 59.2 to 63.4 per cent.

Only Oxford, Bristol, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Glasgow saw numbers drop.

James Turner, director of programmes at the Sutton Trust, the social mobility charity, said: “HEFCE’s 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.”

How we moderate

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