

The Meritocracy Strikes Back

Edward Hicks

Two recent events – the Oxford University referendum on whether to abolish sub fusc from examinations (which was rejected) and the UK General Election – have brought into sharp focus the issue of ‘Oxbridge’ in public life. Most obviously the internal referendum saw arguments mustered for and against the continuation of this ‘traditional’ or ‘archaic’ garb based around whether it did or did not harmfully reinforce an ‘elitist’ view of Oxford, and either acted as a deterrent or an appeal, an excluder or an equaliser, for potential applicants and current students from poor backgrounds. Yet the General Election also highlighted the hegemony of Oxbridge over public life. Cameron, Miliband and Clegg all attended Oxford or Cambridge. Equally striking was the comment of the victorious Australian Conservative election strategist Lynton Crosby. Condemning the commentators who wrongly predicted the outcome of the general election, Crosby scornfully remarked:

‘Most went to Oxbridge, talk only to themselves, and the last time they met a punter was when they picked up their dry cleaning.’¹

What struck me is that pejorative use of ‘Oxbridge’-- it is not uncommon. This portmanteau term is as often used for abuse as for describing two of Britain’s (and the world’s) oldest and most prestigious universities. A third event that helps to focus my article is the release of information on the school backgrounds of students admitted to Oxford and Cambridge in 2014.² My chief focus shall be on the undergraduate admissions system – partly because this is so often the battleground for allegations (on both sides) of bias for and against state school students.³

A Long-Running Debate

The vexatious charge of ‘elitism’ is in one sense nothing new. Tom Brown, in the sequel work *Tom Brown at Oxford*, is compelled to concur with his friend Hardy ‘that the worship of the golden calf was verily and indeed rampant in Oxford.’ Strikingly however the ideal of an alternative already existed: ‘why [Brown opines on one occasion], Oxford ought to be *the* place in England where money should count for nothing.’⁴ A century later, accusations that Oxford was remote and tacitly exclusionary (famously articulated in *Jude the Obscure*) and that an inferiority complex deterred even grammar school students from applying can be found in the pages of *The Guardian*, for whom Oxbridge seems a *bête noire*. Indeed, one apt sentence that still applies today,

is ‘The survey found that students from maintained schools are under-represented at Oxbridge, not because of dons’ bias, but because they do not apply.’⁵ So this is not a new debate,⁶ but one worth re-examining.

The first point that ought to be made is that Oxbridge arguably has improved over the last fifty years, albeit at a slow rate. In 1955 the Kelsall Report tabulated⁷ the number of British students at British universities to be as follows:

<i>School Type</i>	Cambridge	Oxford	Rest
H.M.C Independent ⁸	53	42	12
Direct Grant Grammar Schools ⁹	12	13	14
Local Education Authority Grammar Schools	27	39	68
Others (mainly Independent Schools)	7	7	6

Thus at minimum (assuming implausibly that all the direct grant grammar school students were originally from state-schools) Cambridge admitted 60% of its intake from private schools, and Oxford 49%.¹⁰ The situation where a majority of students came from private schools (and particularly from a small number of public schools) has now ended. The 2014 data showed 62.2% of students admitted to Cambridge were from state schools and 56.3% at Oxford.¹¹ Nonetheless the charge is that this is grossly disproportionate to the 7% of children who attended private schools as a whole. I shall begin by explaining the UK university admission and then the Oxbridge admissions process; address the chief criticisms of the system by suggesting the fixation on this 7% figure is a misleading criteria for judging admissions, and that interviews are not the rocket booster for privilege they are often asserted to be; offer some thoughts on proposed radical changes to the situation, and outline my thoughts on where the chief problems lie.

The Admissions Systems

To properly evaluate the fairness of Oxford and Cambridge’s admissions system, we ought to begin by considering how admissions work to UK universities in general and Oxbridge in particular. When a pupil is applying to a UK university (normally in their final year at secondary school) they will submit a UCAS personal statement, accompanied with references from their school and details of both their past examination grades and predicted grades

in forthcoming examinations (in England and Wales A-Levels). They can apply to five universities in total, including possibly Oxford or Cambridge but not both. Universities have discretion over other requirements – the grades they require of their students, the submission of written work, the undertaking of entrance examinations, and the obligation of interviews. The latter are not exclusive to Oxbridge, but they are only institutionalised and famous at Oxbridge. So to gain entry at Oxbridge you have to undertake A-Level examinations (or equivalents such as the International Baccalaureate or in Scotland Highers); you have to have practical expectation of obtaining at least 3As at A-Level, or greater in science subjects (especially at Cambridge); you then have to apply at an earlier date than other UCAS applications, submitting your personal statement and accoutrements; you must do all this before you enter the idiosyncratic Oxbridge entrance system.

Let us next briefly sketch the Oxbridge undergraduate admissions system. Applicants put in their application earlier than for other Universities. This is often followed by an aptitude test – such as the History Aptitude Test (HAT) or English Literature Aptitude Test (ELAT) – which focuses on obscure topics hitherto unstudied by school children (such as blood feuds in Viking Iceland or women in early 20th century Korea) to challenge an applicant's ability with unfamiliar material. This aptitude test is used, alongside the personal statement, references from teachers and their exam record to decide whether to shortlist the candidate for interview. The exam record includes contextualised GCSE results which are adjusted according to the GCSE performance of their school. Thus a higher score is awarded for someone with 10A*s if they are the only pupil in their school to have obtained any A*s than someone where the majority of pupils had done so. A flagging system is also used to identify 'access' candidates with disadvantageous backgrounds from schools with poor examination records. Candidates will have chosen a college and, normally, though not universally, that is where they are interviewed. Certain subjects, such as history, also have written work submitted and marked. At the end of December, after the conclusion of Michaelmas term, Oxbridge is flooded with applicants over a fortnight. Generally candidates are guaranteed at least two interviews at one college and in the sciences often have a guaranteed third interview elsewhere. At Oxford, after two days of interviews candidates are divided into four categories – definite choices which the college secure; very able candidates but who, owing to restrictions on the number of candidates any one college can reserve, are still available for other colleges to interview if they wish; candidates whose performance may not be stellar but whom it is thought worthwhile to give them another opportunity to be interviewed by a different college; and candidates who will be sent home.¹² So in my case, my original two interviews were at Magdalen, and on the third day I was interviewed again at St Peter's and St Anne's, ending up at the latter. Candidates are invariably

given a grade target they have to meet if they have not already taken their A Levels. Oxford are more inclined, especially in the humanities, to ask for 3As at A Level (or an equivalent); Cambridge incline towards including A*s grades in their offer. If a student meets the requirements of the offer, he or she is admitted. This then is the process candidates have to traverse if they are to gain admittance. Let us now turn to criticisms of this process and its outcome.

Admissions under Fire

Criticism invariably starts by noting the disparity between the 7% of private schools students as a percentage of the overall school population and their much higher proportion at Oxbridge. But it is worth asking if this is a fair comparison. On the one hand you have the entire school system of the United Kingdom, including all pupils of all abilities from the age of five to eighteen, a system you are legally obliged to attend, paid for by taxation, with none or (after sixteen) very few academic barriers to continuation, and an admission system predominantly decided by where you live relative to the school. On the other hand you have universities – which a minority of an age cohort will attend; where (excepting for Scottish students in Scotland) tuition fees are charged; where entry is dependent on having undertaken sixth form examinations such as A-Levels; where universities can choose whether to admit you; where your application is normally only with predicted final grades (which are often under-estimates of eventual performance),¹³ and admission dependent on achieving those specified grades. You can be a 3 A* candidate and potentially end up with no offers whatsoever.¹⁴

There are other problems with this comparison. First, to have any chance of going to university you have to stay at secondary school into sixth form. Looking at the Department of Education's data on school numbers in England for 2014,¹⁵ it is notable that the percentage of private school students as a total of the overall numbers leaps at ages sixteen to eighteen, making a leap from 8% of 11 to 15 year old pupils to 15% of sixteen-year-olds, 17% of seventeen-year-olds and 23% of eighteen-year-olds.¹⁶ Similarly, if we look at A-Level results 29.3% of independent school students obtained 3A*-A grades or better at A-Level and 42.6% achieved AAB or better in 2013-4, compared to 10.3% and 17.4% of state school students.¹⁷ Thus, private school students make up a disproportionately large part of the pool of high-performing pupils likely to apply and be admitted into Oxbridge. It is worth noting this disproportionality is a wider trend. If we look at the percentage of state school students at universities in general, four institutions perform worse than Oxford, two more (Bristol and St Andrew) worse than Cambridge, twenty four had under 80% state school intake, and sixty eight under the 93% number needed to make them representative of the school system. That twenty four included Warwick,

Exeter, Durham, UCL, KCL, LSE, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Bath and Oxford Brookes.¹⁸ Therefore focusing on Oxbridge partly obscures a wider problem that while access to universities as a whole has increased considerably over the last two decades, access has not increased to those universities asking for the highest A Level (or equivalent) grades.

The main criticism of the Oxbridge admissions system tends to focus on the interview system. This is partly because it is the most idiosyncratic element. The arguments raised against it largely fixate on its supposed unfairness towards better prepared private school pupils who bedazzle the academics. This has always struck me as a strange target of execration – and I have participated in it, abetted as an undergraduate interviewee helper, and helped with the administrative side of history interviews last year. After all, while not the norm, interviews are certainly not unheard of in other universities. For example I was also interviewed at King's College London. Interviews are also the norm in the workplace without ever being subject to similar opprobrium. The notion that interviews actually improve social mobility in access to universities was one posited by former Labour Minister Alan Milburn in 2012.¹⁹ Another feature of the interview is that it mirrors the tutorial system used at Oxbridge as the main method of teaching. Flourishing in the interview suggests adeptness for the tutorial system. Additionally, the premise that academics are both susceptible to manipulation and bedazzlement, and somehow would not have higher expectations of private school students if they have received greater preparations and accordingly adjust their judgements of the candidates would seem flawed.

So why does Alan Milburn endorse interviews as a way to improve social mobility? Partly because they add another layer to the application and an opportunity for students who might not have stellar personal statements or perfect examination results to demonstrate their aptitude and potential. To see why this is a plausible interpretation we need to divest ourselves of the encrustations of myths which have obscured its real nature. The goal of the interview is not to test knowledge – where a pin-point elocutionary masterpiece might indeed prevail – but to evaluate candidate's ability to adapt to previously unseen material. So to take the example of history – the interviews tend to involve candidates reading an academic article in advance of the interview and then being questioned on it. This approach is even more commonly employed in subjects where candidates may not have studied them at school (such as law) or in the sciences. The interview also affords an opportunity to challenge claims made in the personal statement (what did you think of the argument in this book you state you have read?) and the written work they may have submitted in a manner which presages the tutorial discussion of an essay.

Nevertheless it is worth also bearing in mind that, aside from having at least two interviews and therefore a chance to overcome pre-existing nerves which all candidates, however well-prepared, will have, interviews are but one part of the overall application system. Your prior and predicted grades are important factors in deciding whether you are shortlisted, and especially for borderline cases the quality of the submitted written work, the presence of an access flag, and performance in the aptitude test all come into play. As an investigation by *The Guardian* discovered, and I can equally testify having sat in the room where the decisions over candidates are being made, the decision process is thorough, rigorous and fair-minded.²⁰

Ideas for Reform

As with institutional reform of many types, such as the House of Lords, there is no shortage of ideas for how to radically change the situation. These range from having quotas (in effect the proposal of Simon Hughes in 2011),²¹ to establishing state school only colleges,²² or by admitting students with grades lower than the normal 3As because of the school they attend/their background/they qualified for free school meals etc.

It is worth considering these ideas. In one sense these approaches are an over-reaction, not because the disproportionality is irrelevant, but because there is no evidence that simply having more state school students apply will not increase the number of state school students admitted. Were there a huge disparity between applications and admissions then further action might be justified. But in this case the proposals all represent a major divergence from the existing premises of the admissions system – that instead of searching for the best candidate regardless of background the admission system should aim, perhaps artificially, at creating a ‘representative’ intake.

With regards to quotas the issue would seem to be this – if the admissions system is actively discriminative against state school students then evidence should be produced to demonstrate this; if it is not then the reason for the disparity either lies in a lack of applicants and increasing this would liquidate the need for quotas, or if there is a lack of 3A grade state school students who would otherwise get in then a quota would let in academically inferior candidates in the pursuit of social engineering. I suspect the situation is the former, and rather than employ a discriminatory quota system increasing applications would be preferable. It removes the impression of tokenism and it ensures an even application system where you aren’t disadvantaged on account of which school you went to.²³

A counter-argument put up is to claim that state school students generally do better at university than private school students, because once placed on an even playing-field their greater potential shines through which hitherto has been suppressed by a lack of resources and facilities. Intuitively this claim has much to commend it. More recently academic research has appeared to lend weight to this claim.²⁴ But this research needs to be used cautiously. It lends justification to Oxbridge's employment of weighted GCSE results and access flags on applications – so this idea is already a part of the admissions system. However the recent Higher Education Funding Council study referenced below contained some striking omissions. First they excluded medicine and dentistry students and what they termed 'high-performing independent schools' because the latter 'could have a confounding effect on our conclusions about school type.' It isn't clear whether other modelling approaches including these schools were tried and produced different outcomes.²⁵ More significantly research showed that while pupils who had attended the top 20% of schools or who had attended independent schools and obtained say ABB, BBB or BBC grades at A Level were notably less likely to gain a 2:1, but the same could not be said for those pupils achieving 3As.²⁶ Therefore if a university's standard offer were 3Bs at A Level then there would be clear evidence for expecting *on average* that state school pupils would out-perform private school students or students from the top 20% of schools would be out-performed by the remaining 80% (though this does not mean pupils from the worst 20% of schools will out-perform everyone else). However it is less clear this applies for students with 3As or better. Indeed Cambridge University's research on their students in 2005-10 found there was 'no obvious evidence that students from any educational background under- or out-perform their peers from other parts of the UK secondary education sector at Cambridge.' Among erstwhile comprehensive school students 83.6% gained a First or 2:1; 84.0% of former independent school students did likewise; compared to 84.6% of previously grammar school educated students and 82.8% of hitherto 'other state' students.²⁷

There are two obvious reasons for this. On the one hand these maybe the ablest students in whichever school in terms of aptitude and application and thus most likely to flourish thereafter. On the other, the restraints both of a formulaic examination marking scheme designed for a wider range of academic abilities and the ceiling imposed by having reached the top grades and obtained the maximum marks may have concealed their considerable potential. This is not to condemn the Oxbridge's use of access flags or contextual GCSE results, but it does undermine the claim that students with grades below three As ought to be admitted on the grounds of their greater potential. Research has tended to compare students with the same A Level grades, not those at the same institution with differing A Level grades, so this claim has no empirical

grounding and is weakened (for the highest performing universities) by existing empirical evidence of the type just examined. Additionally given the very high application failure rate among very able students of whatever background and schooling who subsequently obtain 3As at A Level or better, and some of whom later attend Oxbridge for post-graduate study, it would seem ludicrously unfair to entirely pass over all of them in favour of candidates who have not even reached that level. Indeed it might merely cause higher drop-out rates in certain subjects. If you have not mastered basic integration in mathematics then more complex integration is going to prove a struggle in the high-pressured, fast-working environment of a major British University, such as Oxford or Cambridge.

As with the idea of state school only colleges there is something inherent patronising about the suggestion pupils can only gain admission with lower grades or other special arrangements – not to mention unjust to schools such as the Mossbourne Academy in Hackney which have raised standards. Further issues additional research would need to address is that comparing students at the same institution who have already gained admission is not the same thing as comparing pupils prior to admission (where their ‘potentiality’ may be difficult to judge). Existing research is therefore of limited use in telling us what the opportunity cost of admitting one student over another will be, and in any case merely seems to suggest measures other than A Level should be more extensively used in deciding on admissions, something Oxbridge already do.²⁸

As for the idea of state school only colleges, this entire argument rests on an assumption – that state school students today are equivalent to women in the late 19th century. But the majority of British Oxbridge students are from state schools, whereas when women-only colleges were initially established no other colleges would admit them. Leaving aside the controversial nature of women-only colleges, which have already ceased to exist in Oxford and are declining in Cambridge; leaving aside also the question of where these new colleges will be built – consider how damaging would be the notion of an effectively segregated University. If one of the justifications for increasing state school intake is to encourage a more diverse student society this idea would seem to counter-act and undermine this goal. Thus I think it would be fair to conclude many of these ‘radical’ ideas are either unnecessary or highly flawed to the point of being counter-productive.

The Root of the Problem

What then explains the massive disparity between the percentages of state school students in general and state school students at Oxbridge? One obvious explanation is lower examination results among state school pupils. However

there is an even greater problem: pupils don't apply. Among UK-only applicants (a point I shall discuss later) 60% of applicants to Oxford in 2014 came from state schools.²⁹ Why are the rates of application so low? There are various explanations why people might not apply to Oxbridge even if they have the high grades needed to be competitive in the admissions process. A wish to study close to home; or (if in Scotland) free from the burden of tuition fees; or the cheaper living costs of living at home and commuting to a university as is common in London; or believing another institution is better at the subject you wish to study; or a wish to study a subject not offered at Oxford or Cambridge; or wishing to follow friends to a particular institution – all are plausible and uncontentious reasons. Perhaps a degree of pessimism about their likelihood of succeeding might also act as a deterrent. However the crucial controversial issue is whether the image of Oxbridge – of its Hogwarts-style building and garb and supposed 'elitism', toff-dominated intake – is a major factor. As we have seen the majority of UK students at Oxbridge are from state schools. This does not conform to the stereotypical image – and alas the image seems powerfully influential among teachers. Two surveys by the Sutton Trust in 2012 and 2014 revealed a worrying picture. In 2012 only 44% of teachers surveyed said they would advise academically-gifted pupils to apply to Oxbridge. Asked how many state school students were admitted to Oxbridge (that year 57%) only 7% thought it was over half, and almost two thirds thought it was under 30%.³⁰ In 2014 the figures had improved – the former creeping up to 47% of teachers who would always or usually advise pupils to apply, and 9% estimating a majority for state school pupils at Oxbridge (along with a high 29% don't know figure).³¹ Nevertheless it seems plausible many talented state school pupils are being deterred from applying by their teachers, possibly because those teachers have a mistaken understanding of the demography of Oxbridge.

The main counter-argument to the admissions claim is to argue there is a fall in state school students throughout the process. They make up 60% of applicants to Oxford in 2014, 57% that were shortlisted for interview, 56% of offers and 55% of acceptances.³² However this trend (and statistics) relies on excluding international students. With non-UK domiciles included the trend reverses – 41% of applications to Oxford; 43% of those shortlisted, and 46% of the offers and acceptances.³³ Then there is the argument that the acceptance rate for state schools is lower than for independent schools (21% compared to 25% in 2014). Again comparison with international students is instructive – the acceptance rate for overseas schools is 11%. Moreover to even these acceptance rates you would only need 133 (out of 3161 acceptances) more state school pupils in place of independent school pupils. Furthermore the discrepancy can also be explained by poor advice given to state school students over which A Levels to undertake, which can weaken their applications, especially in the sciences

where specific scientific A Level subjects are prerequisites for further study,³⁴ and by state students applying for the most popular subjects such as law and medicine. Evidently the more applicants per place, the less opportunity you have of gaining a place compared to someone applying for a less popular subject, such as classics.³⁵

Another counter-argument is that Oxbridge contributes to deterring disadvantaged students in two ways – a lack of access efforts and through its ‘archaic’ image with its historic buildings and rituals. Here we can truly get to the root of the problem. After all, teachers’ mistaken impressions about Oxbridge student numbers have to be shaped by something. As far as access is concerned, both the university and colleges, students and staff, put in considerable efforts – organising tours of colleges; running a highly effective Summer School targeted at schools with low rates of Oxbridge admissions; offering bursaries; visiting schools and providing mentoring assistance for potential applicants.³⁶ Oxford University in 2015-6 will spend, according to its agreement with the Office for Fair Access, £5.67 million on outreach programmes, along with £10.89 million in bursaries and tuition fee reductions.³⁷ As far as ritual goes, as the recent sub-fusc referendum showed, such traditional wear and institutions (such as formal hall) can be construed positively, as reasons *to* apply. The assumption that applicants only want something similar to their previous experiences, and don’t have their imaginations fired by the Hogwarts-style buildings and clothing; or are unable to look beyond such exteriors to consider the people within and judge an institution on that fairer, more substantial basis, is, I would suggest, highly flawed. Moreover there is an egalitarian element to such rituals – all wear sub-fusc for example. Equally the low prices of formal hall render it a far more accessible ritual than academic writing on the subject or a superficial impression might suggest.³⁸

Academics have not helped improve our understanding of this debate. There is disappointingly little research done into the Oxbridge admissions itself, though that which has been done is quite positive in its assessment.³⁹ Conversely the most recent work deliberately seemed to eschew addressing the validity of the arguments presented by the Oxford students they interviewed. Although the very title and the tone of the article suggest the authors disagreed with many of the opinions uttered, they never made an attempt to rebut the chief claim that numbers of applicants was the core explanation.⁴⁰

Their assumptions, and the mistaken view of teachers, are largely, I suggest, attributable to the stereotypical portrayal of Oxbridge in the press. The chief guilty party is *The Guardian* newspaper, whose website retains a permanent ‘Oxbridge and elitism’ section. Readers will have noticed many of the articles

hostile to Oxbridge cited in this piece originate in this newspaper, sometimes written by Oxbridge graduates. Such a catalogue of calumny has certainly not been helpful in encouraging applications. Indeed if a Cambridge Junior Research Fellow, writing in their pages, condones state school students not applying, they merely reinforce the problem they purport to wish to tackle.⁴¹ Certainly such a catalogue is not in the public interest – and a newspaper quick to cite the public interest defence to defend publication of illegally obtained material can be hoisted on their own petard by the query: if something is not in the public interest as you yourself define it, how can its lawfulness be an excuse for its publication? It would be hard for *The Guardian* to claim they think the status quo is in the public interest, thus their articles in reinforcing this run contrary to the public interest and therefore are harmful and inexcusable. Yet whilst *The Guardian* is the chief culprit they merely strengthen a public image which has grown up through books, films and television shows such as *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Riot Club*, and even *Lewis*. Notably these are all fictional publications, in the former case depicting an inter-war Oxford literally decades away from the modern city. Rarely do journalists actually bother to interview students or visit institutions – much easier to sit in an office turning out pap and publish it with a photograph of an appropriately ‘archaic’ building such as the Radcliffe Camera or King’s College Chapel. The irony of this media pandering is their complaints become self-fulfilling prophecies because they do nothing to dispel misconceptions – despite an almost universal commitment across the political spectrum in favour of greater social mobility.

Let me conclude with humility. Oxford and Cambridge are excellent institutions, though far from uniquely excellent institutions within the United Kingdom. Their admissions systems are rigorous and, as I have strenuously contended, fair for those who apply. But such systems are not infallible, nor are their participants. The great battle to widen participation both at Oxbridge and more widely, to universities in general, must ultimately be fought prior to university when would-be students are still babes in arms or pupils in the classroom. Nonetheless, if that great principle of academic excellence is to be retained with a truly meritocratic system of admissions then the encouragement of applicants from suitable candidates is vital. At the heart of this effort can undoubtedly be the students themselves, including those of St Anne’s College.

References

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th May 2015, No. 49,757, p. 1.

² *BBC News Website*, 29th May 2015, ‘Cambridge sees slight rise in state school students’ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32922699>

³ *The Guardian* has a whole section devoted to ‘Oxbridge and Elitism’ on its website. However such accusations are found in other newspapers – in 2013 Anthony Seldon

alleged there was bias against public school pupils (*Daily Telegraph*, 26th January 2013 ‘Bias against public school pupils is ‘hatred that dare not speak its name’

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9827691/Bias-against-public-school-pupils-is-hatred-that-dare-not-speak-its-name.html>) while a year later the same newspaper carried accusations of bias against state school pupils (*Daily Telegraph*, 8th March 2014, ‘Oxbridge have a state school blind spot’

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/10683471/Oxbridge-have-a-state-school-blind-spot.html>

⁴ T. Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, (London, 1864), pp. 66, 58.

⁵ *The Guardian*, 23rd October 1964, ‘Oxford ‘must sell itself to schools’’, p. 4; 20th May 1966, ‘Sixth-formers with inferiority complex over Oxbridge’, p. 6.

⁶ A more academic view was put forward by M. Brock, ‘Admissions: An Oxford View’, *Higher Education Quarterly* (1965), 19.3, pp. 259-66.

⁷ Cited in *The Guardian*, 19th April 1960, ‘Time for an Oxbridge reappraisal’, p. 4.

⁸ These are Independent Schools in the Headmasters Conferences broadly the ‘public schools’

⁹ These were independent grammar schools (including some of England’s oldest grammar schools such as Kingston Grammar School and Manchester Grammar School both dating from Tudor times) which received government funds in return for admitting a minimum of 25% of their students for free from state primary schools. They largely ceased to exist after the 1970s when they were obliged to become comprehensives in return for a continuation of state funds. Most instead chose to become independent schools

¹⁰ Complicating this debate is how one defines the direct grant grammar school. Including them as state schools means private school entry was below 40% in the 1970s and then leapt to over 50% at the beginning of the 1980s. F. Green, S. Machin, R. Murphy and Y. Zhu, ‘The Changing Economic Advantages from Private Schools’, *Economica* (2011), 79, p. 663.

¹¹ BBC News Website, 29th May 2015, ‘Cambridge sees slight rise in state school students’ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32922699>

¹² At Cambridge borderline candidates are putting into a ‘pool’ and maybe chosen without another interview or after an interview in the New Year.

¹³ *The Daily Telegraph*, 22nd October 2013, ‘Exam chiefs: most predicted A-Level grades are wrong’, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10397499/Exam-chiefs-most-predicted-A-level-grades-are-wrong.html>

¹⁴ Oxford and Cambridge do not participate in, but many other Universities do, in the ‘clearing’ process where, after the release of examination results students can apply to Universities on an informal basis

¹⁵ Found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2013-to-2014-revised>

¹⁸ https://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1897&Itemid=239#pi

¹⁹ *BBC News Website*, ‘Unis ‘should offer poor pupils automatic interview’’, 18th October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19990211>

²⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jan/10/how-cambridge-admissions-really-work>

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/jan/07/universities-intake-simon-hughes>

²² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/oxford-cambridge-colleges-exclusively-state-school-pupils?commentpage=1#comment-44107723>

²³ It appears even Simon Hughes fellow Liberal Democrats were critical of his idea: <http://www.libdemvoice.org/fix-our-school-system-and-stop-unibashing-22725.html>

²⁴ See for example *Differences in degree outcomes: Key findings*, March 2014.

https://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2014/201403/HEFCE2014_03.pdf

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 48, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 13-4, 16.

²⁷ http://www.cao.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.cao.cam.ac.uk/files/ar_gp_school_performance.pdf

²⁸ There is also a broader point about A Levels. If it is possible to 'adjust' for background, school performance, potential etc then why do the advocates of such an approach not suggest its use at a national level to produce national examination results? After all if it is good enough for University admissions surely it is good enough for the nation as a whole?

²⁹ http://public.tableau.com/views/UoO_UG_Admissions2/StagesofSelection?%3AshowVizHome=no#2

³⁰ <http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/less-half-state-teachers-advise-able-pupils-apply-oxbridge/>

³¹ <http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/summer-schools-aim-dispel-state-school-teachers-oxbridge-misconceptions/>

³² http://public.tableau.com/views/UoO_UG_Admissions2/StagesofSelection?%3AshowVizHome=no#2

³³ http://public.tableau.com/views/UoO_UG_Admissions2/StagesofSelection?%3AshowVizHome=no#2

³⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/17/poor-bright-pupils-aged-11-fall-behind-by-a-levels-study-finds>

³⁵ http://public.tableau.com/views/UoO_UG_Admissions2/AcceptanceRate?%3AshowVizHome=no#2

³⁶ 'Oxford entry more transparent, says outgoing admissions head', *BBC News* Website, 22nd September 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-29222233>

³⁷ 'University of Oxford Agreement with the Office for Fair Access 2015-6', p. 4. <http://www.offa.org.uk/agreements/University%20of%20Oxford.pdf>

³⁸ M. Domencio and N. Phillips, 'Sustaining the Ivory Tower: Oxbridge Formal Dining as Organizational Ritual', *Journal of Management Inquiry* (2009), 18.4, pp. 326-43.

³⁹ R. Nahai, 'Is meritocracy fair? A qualitative case study of admissions at the University of Oxford', *Oxford Review of Education* (2013), 39.5, pp. 681-701. Similarly supportive of the argument that a lack of applicants is an important explanatory factor for the outcomes of the UK university admission system is: M. Skinner & P. Noden, 'Why are you applying there?': 'race', class and the construction of higher education 'choice' in the United Kingdom', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2014), pp. 1-22.

⁴⁰ N. Warikoo and C. Fuhr, 'Legitimizing status: perceptions of meritocracy and inequality among undergraduates at an elite British university', *British Educational Research Journal* (2014), 40.4, pp. 699-717.

⁴¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/oxford-cambridge-colleges-exclusively-state-school-pupils?commentpage=1#comment-44107723>