

Top British universities exclude poorer students

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Among the surest signs of a society strangled by inequality is its determination of a person's life chances from the moment they are born.

When a child enters education, social background is set to remain the decisive influence on their achievement. No amount of hard work, enthusiasm or patronising media success stories, championing the ability of either to lift whole generations up the “social ladder”, can stand up to the reality of dead ends and stunted chances faced by working class children.

One in five children in Britain receives free school meals, meaning that their carer is either unemployed or earns such low pay that they receive welfare benefits such as working tax credits, income support, etc. Of those children, just one in a hundred receives a place at either of the top two British universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

At the other end of the spectrum, the most prestigious 100 schools in the country—84 of which are private—secure for themselves 30 percent of places at Oxbridge. This is not just an indication of traditional prejudice, but the tip of an iceberg of systematic and rigorous repression of working class aspiration. Among the top universities in the Russell Group, which includes Oxford and Cambridge, the average number of pupils receiving free school meals in secondary school was just 64 out of the thousands admitted in 2011.

The Russell Group continues to come under fire for failing to provide places to students from state-schooled and disadvantaged backgrounds. While the estimated number of state pupils entering these universities increased by 2.6 percent between 2002 and 2012, the increase was 7.9 percent among privately educated pupils. Nearly half of the new places went to independently educated students, who represent just 7.2 percent of the children currently in education.

Research conducted by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in June 2013 suggests a further handicap, stating, “There is evidence of a state school ‘penalty’ in the admissions process equivalent to one A-level grade: that is to say, on average a state school student who applies to a Russell Group university would need to achieve one grade higher in their A-levels (e.g. AAB rather than ABB) to be as likely to be admitted to a Russell Group institution as an otherwise identical privately educated student.”

This bias has been confirmed by Durham University lecturer Dr Vikki Boliver, whose recent study concludes that state school applicants were “less likely to be offered places at Russell Group universities” when “compared to private school applicants with the same grades.”

Clearly the advantages of applicants of a certain “social calibre”, and particularly of wealthy alumni, outweigh any pretensions of a meritocracy in the fiercely competitive higher education sector.

Of the more than one million pupils on free school meals in 2009, just 232 achieved three As or equivalent in their final year of sixth form college. Such trends are not limited to the area of high achievement.

“England stands out [as one of] a handful of nations where social background determines reading skills,” an OECD study found late last year. A recent article on the OECD web site detailed the ghettoisation of primary and secondary education and how those children educated in advantaged geographical areas are three times as likely to go to university as those in the most disadvantaged areas.

As for the high results achieved by private schools and their pupils, the facts are hardly surprising. Average state spending on a pupil stands at around £5,000, just over a third of the £14,000 average school

fees for privately schooled pupils.

A recent *Guardian* article by Oxford Geography lecturer Danny Dorling showed how the academisation and free schools programme pursued with military efficiency by the present Conservative/Liberal Democrats government is intensifying segregation. Research revealed that those state schools which had been allowed to convert to Academy status, on account of their “Outstanding” government inspectorate Ofsted rating, had far below average numbers of poorer children (those eligible for free school meals). The same discrimination was found in faith, grammar and free schools.

Although the same research stated that overall levels of income-related segregation were falling, this was only because the increasing numbers of people are falling into economic deprivation—spreading the numbers of children on free school meals more evenly across the country.

At the other end of the scale, says Dorling, the privilege of private education is becoming an increasingly exclusive injustice. The number of children enrolled in fee-paying schools in Britain fell for the fifth year in a row in 2013, down to just over 500,000, according to the Independent Schools Council. That the fall was not larger was a result of the influx of pupils from overseas, whose parents’ wealth is used to acquire the best available education in the world.

Dorling does not draw the necessary conclusions from his evidence. Instead, he retreats to the safety of the petty-bourgeois politics of the “99 percent”, laying the blame at the feet of the one percent and their “selfish” psychology and calling for young people to learn “how to better control the richest people in our society.”

This perspective holds no solutions for the working class. Its practical aim, as was seen with the Occupy movement, is to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth among the top 10 percent of society not to fundamentally change the way society functions and social wealth is distributed.



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