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Working-class revolution not reaching 'posh' universities

It's no secret that few poorer students go to elite universities, but a new analysis today ranks institutions to reveal the true picture

[The data in full](#)



Rowenna Davis
The Guardian, Tuesday 28 September 2010



Claire Lucas came from a working-class background but applied to Oxford University. 'The only definition of posh where we grew up was being clever,' she says. Photograph: Linda Nyland for the Guardian

Claire Lucas grew up in Cumbria, the daughter of a lorry driver and a housewife. Many of her friends and classmates left school to go to work in a local factory. Neither of her parents went to university, but Lucas decided she wanted to get a degree. Thanks to her teachers at Nelson Thomlinson school in Wigton, she felt confident enough to apply to Oxford University to study engineering. It was only after she took up her place that she realised this was actually quite a big deal.

"The only definition of posh where we grew up was being clever. I didn't even contemplate the impact that [social class] would have when I got here," says Lucas, who is now a year into her DPhil at St Cross College after completing her degree at Worcester College. "I became aware that there was a crowd of people who knew each other already. That the JCR and the union were mostly full of people who seemed to have experience in leadership – and therefore not normally working-class people. That I couldn't afford to go on the varsity ski trip, and that some people's parents bought them amazing houses to live in." But despite all that, Lucas settled in well. "Luckily, I was encouraged to develop skill and confidence by very patient tutors."

It is no secret that there aren't huge numbers of [students](#) from working-class backgrounds studying at the most prestigious universities. But an exclusive new analysis of statistics shows the true extent of the issue. In a survey of over 150 institutions, eight of the 10 universities with the lowest proportions of working-class students were in the prestigious Russell Group of research-intensive universities.

Lucas has naturally reflected on her fortunes and gives credit to her school. "A fair number of farmers, hairdressers, truck drivers and factory workers' kids at my school went to Oxbridge over the years," she says. "The school was nowhere near a grammar or private school, so children from middle-class professional families came in – I think that their success helped to raise aspirations for the school."

With just 11.5% of its intake coming from working-class families, Oxford is bottom in

this particular table. Cambridge is next, with 12.6%, and Bristol, another member of the Russell Group, comes in third at 14.2%. Just two of the universities in the bottom 10 – Durham and Bath – come from outside the Russell Group (both are members of the 1994 Group).

The figures, based on the occupation of students' parents, compares with an average working-class intake of 32.3% across all universities in the country. In total, 37% of the UK's population is estimated to come from routine and manual occupations. The figures – from the [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(Hesa\)](#) – of students entering full-time education in 2008-09 (the latest data available) may not even show the true extent of the underrepresentation because students from long-term unemployed families are not included.

Dr Wendy Piatt, director general of the Russell Group, defends her members' record, insisting that the "underlying cause" of the problem was occurring long before university. Too few students, in short, have the support and encouragement offered by Lucas's school. "Low aspirations, lack of quality guidance and, most important, underachievement in school still remain significant barriers to participation and can only be tackled by government, among others," she says. "We are also concerned by evidence that some teachers may not be encouraging their students to consider Russell Group universities.

"Research shows that pupils from top independent schools make twice as many applications to the most selective universities as their equally well qualified peers from the best comprehensive schools. We can't offer students places if they don't apply for them."

Education Guardian's analysis finds that the subjects students choose are also heavily weighted by socio-economic background. Medicine, dentistry and veterinary science are the subjects least often chosen, with just 18.2% of the students on these courses coming from working-class families. Figures for historical and philosophical studies are also low, at 24.2%, and languages, at 25.9%.

But experts outside the Russell Group argue that the problem isn't just at school level, and that universities must share some responsibility. "Elite universities have always valued traditional subjects taught by particular schools," says Miriam David, professor of education at the Institute of Education, who has carried out research projects on class and inclusion.

She believes some admissions tutors tend to stick with what is familiar to them. "Because the top universities are oversubscribed, some groups will inevitably lose out. This is partly because of the demanding grades they ask for, but it is also to do with universities trying to maintain their elite status. Working-class students may be seen as more risky than those applying from independent schools, and they may come from a culture that is less familiar."

Danny Dorling, professor of geography at Sheffield University, who has researched social inequality, agrees. "It's hard to believe just how many working-class children live within the shadow of our top universities," he says. "Oxford doesn't have a university as far as the working-class children of that town are concerned. The situation has been improving since the 1930s, but there is a real threat that things will go backwards under the new coalition."

A poll last week by OpinionPanel and the University of Leicester found that 14% of students from low-income homes would be deterred from applying to university if fees rose from the current level of £3,290 to £7,000, compared with 9% of those from better-off homes. A rise in fees is one of the possible outcomes of the Browne review of fees and finance, due to be published next month.

A report last week from the Office of Fair Access (Ofa), the government's watchdog, said that efforts by the top universities to attract a higher number of deprived teenagers by offering generous bursaries had proved fruitless.

The Russell Group and Universities UK (UUK) deny that universities aren't doing

enough, saying that admissions tutors do take into account the "wider context" of applicants' backgrounds. They point to another report from Offa, in May, which found that if it weren't for universities' efforts to widen participation, it is likely that the proportion of disadvantaged groups in the most highly selective universities would have declined.

A recent report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) found that the proportion of young people going to university from the most disadvantaged areas has indeed increased by 30% over the last five years.

The best-performing universities on social access are among the institutions usually regarded as less prestigious. London Metropolitan, which came bottom of the Guardian's latest University Guide rankings, comes top of the league for social representation, with 57.2% of students coming from working-class families. Greenwich comes second, with 55.5%. Bradford, an older institution, is fifth, and Ulster 10th. No university from Scotland makes it into the top 10.

Education Guardian's research also reveals which subjects attract the highest proportion of working-class students. Education-related degrees are the most popular, with 41.4% of all students coming from such backgrounds. Agriculture has 39.5% of students in this group, while computer sciences has 38.9%. Such subjects are less likely to be available in Russell Group universities.

Presented with the figures, Piatt raises concerns that working-class students aren't getting the support they need to make fully informed subject choices. "Too few students from state schools are opting for Stem subjects [science, technology, engineering and maths] at GCSE, A-level and university and some schools don't even offer single science subjects."

Instead, working-class students are more likely to go to institutions such as Bolton, which attracts a high number of working-class boys on to its engineering and ICT courses. Over 50% of the university's 13,000 students come from working-class backgrounds, and 99.7% come from state schools. According to the deputy vice-chancellor, Professor Peter Marsh, this diversity is the result of targeted policy as well as the subjects on offer.

"Inclusion is built into our culture and strategy," he says. "For us it's not about talent spotting and creaming off the most talented students, it's about wider issues. We have students here who start on the access programme and go on to do a PhD. We're proud of our diversity."

Bolton runs foundation and access courses, and works closely with 26 partner schools and colleges in the Greater Manchester area, offering them visits, taster sessions and bursaries. Without the specific support and encouragement Bolton offers, Marsh believes many of his students would not have applied.

Fourteen-year-old Charlin Deugoue is one young man who is thinking about applying to Bolton. Just starting his GCSEs at Philips high school in Whitefield, Deugoue went to look around the university earlier this month as part of a trip organised by AimHigher, the national programme that encourages students from more diverse backgrounds to apply for university. Both his parents came from Cameroon, where his dad was a construction worker, but they're now unemployed.

"I told my parents I wanted to go to university and they said they wouldn't mind, but they asked about the money," says Deugoue. "I said it was OK because you didn't have to pay the money back until after. I always wanted to go to college and to uni. I've got four brothers and sisters, but none of them are thinking about going to university yet. My friends don't really want to go either, and I don't know that many people who have gone."

The last government's target to get 50% of young people into higher education fell by the wayside, and the coalition has gone quiet on the future of AimHigher, the scheme that has been supporting Deugoue and others like him. With 150,000 applicants failing to get a place this year, there are fears that it is poorer students who will bear the brunt

of the competition for places.

The government declined to comment prior to Lord Browne's report. Students and families will have to wait and see if Browne can square the circle of promoting more equal access without providing extra places.

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readyfreddie

28 September 2010 8:10AM

In my experience, the Russell Group unis do a HUGE amount to try and admit poorer students; Oxbridge does too, to a lesser extent. But one simply cannot ignore the fact of the matter: that poorer kids who go to worse schools get a worse education; comprehensives often hold the brightest back too.

Solution: it has to be a selective school system, which they have in Germany, Holland, Russia - everywhere in Europe, almost. The less academic can get quality vocational education at other schools. Those in the middle can go to middle schools. It WORKS!

The evidence: just look at mainland Europe. I realised how wrongheaded our system was after spending time teaching in a selective school in Europe shortly after communism crumbled. Life is selective - in academic stuff as well as sport. Get over it! The comprehensive system is inherently unfair to bright poor kids who don't live in nice areas - if these kids went to grammar schools, they COULD go to a top university! If they are academically able, that is.

Perhaps those on the left want to keep them poor and working class eh?

Recommend? (122)

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zainabadi

28 September 2010 8:29AM

Well, if admissions tutors at the poshest universities really did discriminate in favour of their own, then my Oxbridge college would have been full to the brim with comprehensive school students. Both admissions and senior tutors were products of comprehensive schools, and we bent over backwards to make allowances and special offers to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, and did weeks of outreach to non-traditional applicants per year.

You simply can't give offers to people who don't apply. It is FAR more the fault of schools than it is of the universities that this situation is perpetuated.

Recommend? (87)

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[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**AdamTut**

28 September 2010 8:39AM

You simply can't give offers to people who don't apply

You also can't give offers to students who aren't studying the right subjects. We get endless enquiries from students about admissions to our science courses with particular combinations of A levels that are not suitable, when all our requirements are posted clearly on our web site for everyone, including teachers, to see. We've tried the experiment of taking students with non-traditional subjects or lower A level grades and it was, for the most part, a dismal failure: they simply couldn't cope with the material that we were teaching, even with endless remedial classes and tutorial support.

Recommend? (66)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**andyjack**

28 September 2010 8:48AM

Wendy Piatt is right.

A student who offers (at least two) A levels in subjects such as Biology, Chemistry, English, Geography, History, Languages, Mathematics and Physics (with Economics, Politics, Psychology and Sociology not far behind), will find a wealth of opportunities open to them. However, to study these sciences subjects at A level will require them to have been studied as a single subject at GCSE.

If students don't study the "right" subjects at school, including at GCSE (which opens the way for A levels), then they will not be considered for certain subjects by the most selective institutions. It's also not surprising that languages are becoming the preserve of the better off, a trend that we will see increasing as the effects of the previous government's decision not to require a modern foreign language to be studied at GCSE start to come through.

The statement that computer science is "less likely" to be available at a Russell Group institution is bizarre. To my knowledge, all the RG universities offer computer science. However, they usually require mathematics A level, so perhaps that is putting would be applicants off.

Russell Group and 1994 Group universities put a huge effort into widening participation activities, but all too often the standard of advice and guidance at schools is very, very poor.

As has been said, if you don't apply you can't get an offer.

Recommend? (34)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**oooh**

28 September 2010 9:15AM

If you look at the table then it's St. Andrews that has the lowest working class entry [0%] not Oxford.

Recommend? (13)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**Rachelthedigger**

28 September 2010 9:34AM

It's a perpetual-motion vicious circle. Back in the mid-1980s, my sixth-form college hosted an evening where previous students, then at university, came back to answer questions from current students about the universities they were attending. I spoke to a woman who was studying at Reading, which I was thinking of applying to at the time: she told me that she hated it, because it was full of posh people who all went off to London for the weekends, leaving the place deserted, and who laughed at her when she said "Pass the butter, please" (you'll have to imagine the short a and long u of the accent) at the Hall dinner table. I didn't apply, and presumably a lot of other northern working-class people didn't either, and Reading has no doubt continued to be full of posh people who etc. etc.

Recommend? (18)

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[Packalacky](#)

28 September 2010 9:37AM

Admissions should be 100% based on results. Doesn't matter if a student's parent is rich or poor, as long as they are clever enough then they should get in. Of course, this means that parent's able to send their kids to better schools have a better chance of seeing them enter these Universities, but at the end of the day, it's better than the alternative of dumbing down education to meet the needs of less intelligent pupils.

Recommend? (18)

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[convexconcave](#)

28 September 2010 9:42AM

[readyfreddie](#)

I do agree that selective schools are a good idea. Having been to a grammar school myself, I am well aware that I wouldn't be where I am now if I had gone to a comprehensive school.

But on the other hand, the idea of selective schools raises the question: at what age would we select?

A child that is not performing particularly well at school at 11 years old might actually have great potential, but if they end up in a school with a focus on vocational qualifications they will never have a chance to succeed academically.

Also, pupils that come from disadvantaged backgrounds will still be disadvantaged. The proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is probably going to be higher in the vocational schools- mirroring the situation people are complaining about now at Russel Group universities.

In theory, it's a great idea. But in practice?

Recommend? (22)

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[temple4jerusalemcouk](#)

28 September 2010 9:43AM

Where exactly does the Working Class end and the Middle Class begin?

Don't we just love these "it's not fair" stories and are they not splashed with a good dose of jealousy?

Exactly how many students are from deprived African communities, or was the "depth of field" not set that wide?

Recommend? (9)

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[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**tomedinburgh**

28 September 2010 9:48AM

I bet the Russell group uni's are around for a lot longer than the Office of Fair Access. In fact it is pretty much irrelevant what the Office of Fair Access thinks they are just biding time until they get their P45s.

Recommend? (14)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**shonagon**

28 September 2010 10:00AM

B.Sc. in Chemical Physics at Edinburgh; Ph.D. in Theoretical Chemistry at Sussex.

Working-class background. That was a long time ago.

I wouldn't have got into Oxbridge even if I'd known it were possible because I was shy and unsure of myself - I'd never have got past the interview. Not that I was bright enough anyway, of course.

It's hard competing when you don't have any language skills...

Recommend? (9)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**viper217**

28 September 2010 10:06AM

The bit that concerns me most is the level of funding that the Russell Group Universities cream off to ensure that a very narrow social class is over-represented in research based studies.

Doesn't bode well for any working class inventors - or perhaps our country thinks that only the socially privileged scientists of the future will make new discoveries?

Recommend? (12)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**Shamboz**

28 September 2010 10:09AM

readyfreddie

All comprehensives hold bright children back? What a sweeping generalisation. I work in a comp and in my school there is no evidence of the brightest being held back. Are you aware that state funded schools are required to keep a register of gifted and talented students and keep a detailed account of the extension activities these children are provided with? My daughter was a gifted mathematician in her state school and she was not held back in any way, she read Maths at uni and graduated with a 2.1. What you say may be true of some comps, but it certainly is not my experience. Most people that slag off state schools conduct their research not from primary sources, but secondary sources like the telegraph, mail and express.

There is always room for improvement, but state schools get a very raw deal from the right wing press and people like you.

Recommend? (36)

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**1friday**

28 September 2010 10:11AM

All elite universities are going to have a disproportionate number of students who've been taught in the independent sector. These schools know what subjects you should take, they are strong on discipline so far less teaching time is ever lost to disruptive behaviour, and the idea of 'you need good grades to get into a good university' is drummed into everyone. Of course this is completely unfair.

To a lesser extent the same thing happens with state schools, and it also has a lot to do with the parents of the surrounding area. I was very lucky to grow up in a town with really good comprehensive schools, it was middle class, parents with professional type jobs, parents who bought books for the children. Students from deprived areas don't get the same support at home, the school is concerned with churning out these kids with the bare minimum grades, high achievers are overlooked. We still have a long way to go.

Recommend? (15)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**ammypam**

28 September 2010 10:16AM

It's hardly surprising, is it? Obviously, the ruling classes ensure the continuation of their hegemony by reserving the best education for themselves. Academy schools are another example. You want more fairness in education?: You need to start by eliminating places like Eton. That ain't gonna happen because that's where the ones in control come from.

Recommend? (27)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**Bryced**

28 September 2010 10:28AM

Class: the British disease. In the UK wealth and social connections, with a few notable academic, sporting or artistic exceptions, are paramount and can easily out weigh any notions of fairness or competence. Those that run the system favour their own and perpetuate the above- Labour or Libory.

The only real option is to close down the public schools and break the connections between private education and elite universities. Alongside that there needs to be an Investment of billions in all schools and the desire to make education an imaginative and inviting process not a commercially orientated 'gradgrind'. The poets, judges and engineers will then emerge from all parts of society. It's a long haul but worth it.

Mind you those in the musty corridors of power and influence and who run that very special trade union with the slogan, 'posh jobs for posh people', do not like to concede one scrap of privilege. Meanwhile huge swathes of the population of this country continue to lead frustrated and severely circumscribed lives. So many lost poets, actors, engineers, doctors, carpenters, farmers, pilots, plumbers, singers, nurses, etc etc

Recommend? (33)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**FreshTedium**

28 September 2010 10:42AM

Oxbridge is massively oversubscribed and it is a bit of a lottery. Its loaded in the favour of kids from Independent schools because they themselves play the game, upping the odds in their favour by submitting more applications, even where the candidates really

aren't that good, and giving optimistic grade predictions.

Some Comprehensives on the other hand discourage their kids to apply to Oxbridge because they don't like its elitism. Add to that the fact that some kids from working class backgrounds come up through the Independent school system anyway because of scholarships etc.

If you wanted to change this system to make it fairer, make the first term start in January and run the admissions process over the summer and autumn once the exam results are in, rather than using predictions to give offers. Take the nonsense out of the system, in my day you had to apply to 8 universities, who can assess 8 universities? If you really wanted to, you could give every A level candidate a number and make their marked exam and coursework public to admissions tutors, and then allow tutors to make contact with students via their schools (using the number, not knowing the names etc) so Oxbridge would be able to contact a student in x and y comprehensive and ask them to consider applying.

At the moment we hamper kids who will get good grades where their schools don't have confidence in them, or if their schools dislike Oxbridge. These kids often only get into Oxbridge if they take their exams and then are prepared to skip a year to apply on the basis of grades. Everyone should apply on grades, not predictions

Recommend? (12)

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ManchePaul

28 September 2010 10:43AM

Yet again this self pitying talk about 'posh' people, and at Reading this time. How is it that the ambitious, determined, intelligent working class people of the twenties and thirties, the ones who made the welfare state and ended the last aspects of feudalism, have now been replaced by pathetic moaners who think that anyone with more than them is by definition posh and they cannot ever compete with them. Why is the poverty of ambition and the inability to contemplate change and to work to make it happen considered acceptable? Why is anything requiring the slightest bit of effort to understand or do now written off as elitist?

Without wishing to get moderated, can anyone explain if in general the apparent factors that universities with the highest working class (not that I accept that as a modern term) intake seem to be the ones with the lowest educational success are in any way related? Should our concern be with the continuing lack of confidence and application that makes some people believe they cannot achieve better things because of their background? And why the hell should anyone still be so sensitive as to have a problem with other people lightly mocking their accent be enough to dissuade someone from the opportunity of higher education?

Recommend? (41)

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Yazoo

28 September 2010 10:48AM

The wider problem is the differences in attitude instilled by class. The upper classes have a disproportionate amount of confidence and expectancy heaped upon them from a young age, coming from a background where success and privilege is the norm. You can't blame young people from this background for prospering, they are simply living their lives as prepared for them by generations.

The working, and even the lower middle, classes have a crippling lack of confidence, bred by family and peer expectations (in some cases) and a school system that may try its best but can never replicate the independent sector in giving the brightest what it needs to develop the social and oratory skills to compete at the highest level. When you

are at interview for one of these leading universities, it is more about how you express your ideas than whether these ideas are in fact valid. The tutors are looking for the confidence to express and enquire... This comes more naturally to those who have grown up with heavy investment in discussion and persuasion.

Comprehensive schools have to battle bravely just to get basic tenets of education across to a cross-section of abilities and dedication, let alone train people in how to be confident discussing them.

Recommend? (35)

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Yazoo

28 September 2010 10:49AM

I say this, by the way, as a working class person who had to battle all sorts of crises of confidence while trying to get to the upper levels of the education system.

Recommend? (5)

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Shamboz

28 September 2010 10:49AM

ManchePaul

And why the hell should anyone still be so sensitive as to have a problem with other people lightly mocking their accent be enough to dissuade someone from the opportunity of higher education?

Are you serious? Why should anyone have to put up with being mocked or humiliated by people with an overinflated view of themselves? Especially where their supposed educated status would indicate that they should know better.

What a callous individual you are and a bit of a bully as well.

Recommend? (39)

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C



Silverwhistle

28 September 2010 10:54AM

"The only definition of posh where we grew up was being clever."

This is the problem. It's the attitude of the peer group: inverted social snobbery; inverted intellectual snobbery; the poverty of aspiration; the dominance of a tacky 'celebrity' pop culture that values being on *Big Brother* above academic success or high culture; fear of mixing with people from different backgrounds.

If you excel academically in a school in a working-class community, you will be bullied relentlessly or ostracised as "posh", "snobby", & c. I was lucky: I had supportive parents who made up for the lack of peer-group. St Andrews was a wonderful experience: I took to it like a duck to water. I made more friends than I had at any previous time in my life, with people from all kinds of backgrounds, and those friendships have endured for over 25 years.

Recommend? (50)

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C

**Silverwhistle**

28 September 2010 10:56AM

Damn sticking keyboard and lack of edit button:

"with people from all kinds of backgrounds"

Recommend? (1)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**wolfmanjack**

28 September 2010 10:57AM

Private education and the universities are the most potent example in the UK today of class warfare - perpetuated by the elite against those they perceive as beneath them.

We know that it is good education that allows people to succeed - but somehow the universities seem to think it is OK to reject the able and gifted economically-poor due to the perception that they don't belong and won't have the required social skills. Approx 7% of the population (possibly the richest 7%) hoovers up about 70% of all university places - how is that a good inspirational model?

University is a place to learn and gain knowledge ffs, not a country club.

Recommend? (16)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**theparson**

28 September 2010 11:01AM

As the rich pull further away into the stratosphere, they're taking everything away with them, even your kids' opportunities in life, and you just sit there and let them. Your role is to accept your lowly position in this new feudalism, and just work until you drop (they're taking your pensions too) and pay all the tax (they keep their loot in Switzerland).

65 years ago this nation defeated fascism --- I sometimes wonder why they bothered.

Recommend? (17)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**Ortho**

28 September 2010 11:08AM

'lightly' mocking someone's accent? This sort of thing isn't done 'lightly' it is done maliciously- and who in their right minds wants to be around malicious people?

Funnily enough, I was warned off Reading nearly 30 years ago on two counts- their course in my subject had a poor reputation, and my tutor told me it was a miserable dump with a high suicide rate compared to other colleges- I don't know if that's still the case. If baiting minorities is a standard sport there, it probably is.

When I advised students applying to colleges I used to point out to them that interviews were a two-way process, and as a student you are deciding if you want to go there just as much as they are deciding whether they think you will fit into their 'ethos'. My OH went to Oxford and loved it, I didn't even apply there as I was bright enough even then to know I'd hate the place, quite apart from my subject being better taught elsewhere. I'm just not suited to or sympathetic towards a collegiate lifestyle.

You have to go somewhere where you will both get the best teaching and where you can be happy working in the environment. The problems really arise later on when only people from certain institutions get into the best jobs, or high office in politics etc.

Recommend? (13)

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quelter

28 September 2010 11:09AM

Here's a link to Boris Johnson and his pals in the Bullingdon Dining Club.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/02/14/noxford14.xml>

Your task is to try to imagine the experience of a northern grammar school boy in the 1980s travelling to Oxford in the early 80s full of optimism and then running into this lot (and plenty more almost as bad) who basically only want to be friends with their old public school chums.

I would thoroughly discourage clever northerners from going to universities full of public schoolboys. I wish someone had given me the same advice.

Recommend? (14)

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EGriff

28 September 2010 11:12AM

There are still many schools where there is a culture of anti-achievement amongst the pupils - anyone overtly displaying signs of academic ability will be labelled 'posh' and bullied... added to the widespread classroom disruption, a bright kid in a comprehensive without a large middle class element has got little chance of success.

Recommend? (16)

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hakarl

28 September 2010 11:22AM

Over 50% of the university's 13,000 students come from working-class backgrounds, **and 99.7% come from state schools**. According to the deputy vice-chancellor, Professor Peter Marsh, this diversity is the result of targeted policy as well as the subjects on offer.

Is this some new right-on definition of 'diversity' unrelated to the traditional meaning? Because this place sounds even more homogeneous than the wildest fantasies of Oxbridge.

Recommend? (17)

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divesandlazarus

28 September 2010 11:23AM

Utter rubbish.

There are fewer working class kids at good universities these days because - thanks to Labour - not enough of them get a grammar school education, and have to lump it in dog-shit comprehensives.

In 1954 my father - son of a shop proprietor - went to Cambridge having done his National Service as a private.

In 1956 my mother - daughter of a railway worker went to Swansea

Both were lucky enough to go to grammar schools

A number of 20C PMs were of working class origins and educated at grammar school

and Oxbridge (Thatcher, Wilson, Heath and many other prominent people at Westminster).

This article is a ridiculous attempt to rewrite history and to bleat about inequalityit is the only narrative that Labour can cling to - because on Labour's conscience should be millions of lives blighted by the inability to get an education to match individual intellect.

A national disgrace - there should be a judicial enquiry, and then an apology to those denied a proper education.

Recommend? (44)

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serapion

28 September 2010 11:24AM

I remember from before I entered my teens a worse than anodyne TV drama whose message was that a child who after the eleven-plus advanced only to a secondary modern school had no need to feel heartbroken, nor had the child's parents.

I was entirely unaware of the meaning of the phrase SECONDARY MODERN, because that subsequent pretext for the Wilson government's COMPREHENSIVE schools (comprehensive had at the time to be explained) did not exist in Scotland. Here there were potentially and in many places three levels of school, and pupils who at the age TWELVE seemed unlikely to have academic prospects went to one, those with more academic prospects to the second level, and those with academic prospects went to the third. One question this dealt with was avoiding schools of an impersonally large size. And also moderating the demands made on teachers by the diversity of ability within one classroom. I have known individuals with a lifelong ambition to be teachers simply giving up.

Where the population was low, everything was vested in pretty well a rural comprehensive. Nowadays and since school leaving age has been increased to sixteen there might have been two rather than three schools but not entirely different. Pupils could and did transfer from three as well as four-year schools to schools with more academic orientation. The curriculum was not discontinuous between these schools and even a potential future Oxford professor would spend part of the first two years at the academic school on non-academic subjects. A large number of those who acquired the certificates which granted admission to for instance Oxford could certainly have studied either Arts or Science subjects (and indeed some did both, for the older general MA degree included science subjects as options outwith the group subsequently studied to attain an Honours degree.

The ideal was to avoid closing off options, as well as providing a broad education. This sort of option seems not to be considered when the system condemned by such unThatcherites as Tony Judt and Eric Hobsbawm is challenged.

I see in this Morning's online *Scottish Review* one writer suggesting a possible correlation between the supposed advantages of the Comprehensive system, which was visited on Scotland by the Labour faithful, and the market for the tabloid press and the level of public debate.

One might ask what is keeping published debate about education at such a low level.

Recommend? (2)

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ALADDIN1978

28 September 2010 11:25AM

I attended an independent school in Surrey in the 1990s. The 6th form was geared towards

Oxbridge or people good at sport. I feel let down by the school. The careers advice was

terrible. The university careers advice was terrible.

Putting a child in an expensive private school is expensive, the school will not care about special educational needs and it might not help in the long term because the child will feel out of place in the system.

I was undiagnosed with dyspraxia and aspergers traits. There were not many non-white people. I was one of the few people who did not drink at the age of 15. As a teenager the school was difficult socially.

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bananachips

28 September 2010 11:27AM

The cold fact is that based only on results there should be far more state educated people at Oxbridge than there is. There are not because it is not based only on results, the interview process weights it heavily in favour of private school which can coach for these, indeed these schools openly boast about this.

In addition the old school tie game has gone nowhere, and Oxbridge collages have very old links with certain private schools, and they there is the initialled few whose family links makes Oxbridge almost a rite of passage, such as the Westminster's or those with a HRH.

In one way this would no matter, but the trouble comes, in part, with the addiction seen in some working areas to the product of these universities, the media for instance is chock full of the Oxbridge product your much more likely to come across a PPE form Oxbridge then anyone who has done an actual media degree, and that very much includes the 'liberal' Guardian as 'the list' shows.

So those that have not gone to these 'select' universities can find themselves shut out of the some areas and quite often their application will automatically be rejected in areas which are popular. So the inability to get with these universities can have affects which last long after their university days are finished.

Recommend? (7)

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meph

28 September 2010 11:28AM

We already have selection on the basis of faith, postcode and wealth built in to our education system. Why not academic ability? Why not bring back grammar schools?

Recommend? (17)

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Mitzcici

28 September 2010 11:31AM

theparson

28 September 2010 11:01AM

As the rich pull further away into the stratosphere, they're taking everything away with them, even your kids' opportunities in life, and you just sit there and let them.

The non-rich need representation. What we've got now are three parties led and peopled by the same upperclasses who run the papers and the rest of the media. I'm not a history buff but I imagine this situation is something like it was when the whigs and the Tories ruled in the last century, carving up the spoils of capitalism for themselves and the working classes were left to rot.

We need a new, credible labour party for 'ordinary working people'.

Recommend? (14)

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zavaell

28 September 2010 11:32AM

Some much more intelligent and insightful comments than normal.

Right at the top is *readyfreddie* - life's competitive. Yes, but vested interests, inertia, prejudice and cultural background can be stacked against competition. If the Labour party should be about anything it would be the levelling of the playing field. It is more than just soft liberalism, it is vital to the future of this country. The problem with too many people from one type of background to the exclusion of those from other backgrounds is the growth of group think, which is what leads us into wars, the replacing of expensive weapon systems that are out of date and financial crises. It balks at replacing oil with renewables: the list goes on.

It is one of the most important beliefs of a political party to ensure good education, but the subject encompasses so much from family to neighbourhood to intelligence and psychological makeup that it can be seen that Labour, while trying hard to win the battle, has barely made headway against those vested interests at every level.

The article lays bare some of the problems and issues. It means more than just the question of tuition fees, important though they are, and I just don't see the Tories doing anything to address the issues I have raised above: indeed, they are one of the vested interests.

Recommend? (7)

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mixey

28 September 2010 11:32AM

Class barriers are more entrenched now than they were 30 years ago. I'd go so far as to say it's deeper than class in this country, it's bordering on a caste system When you rise above your station and don't attempt to adopt middle class manners, accents etc, it genuinely offends them, and then the sly subtle digs start, about the way you speak, about the north of England (by which they mean white working culture by the way) and on it goes. They feel very threatened because they've brought uo with a sense of entitlement that you haven't.

It's interesting if you look at the posters above here how bitterly they resent any discussion on this topic. Why? Because it threatens their hegemony of the best universities and thus the best jobs. Middle class parents know how to work the system to their children's benefit in a way less working class ones who didn't go to university and therefore don't fully comprehend how it all works don't.

If the class war's over then we lost hands down.

Recommend? (14)

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mixey

28 September 2010 11:34AM

Apologies for the last sentence on the first paragraph above, it should read " they've been brought up with a sense of entitlement... "

Bloody comprehensive school education eh.

Recommend? (0)

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[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**bestboomer**

28 September 2010 11:35AM

This issue is a very complex one. I am aware of poor levels of literacy in many students from state schools, whereas privately educated students obviously have these basic skills at a higher level. Much first year degree teaching with state educated students is of a remedial nature. Over large comprehensives are failing to provide a proper foundation for further learning. This does not reflect on the teachers, who are doing their best in difficult circumstances, but on the inevitable consequences of placing 11 year olds in massive institutions in which they can so easily drift and fail..

One solution, if we are to maintain the comprehensive system, would be smaller neighbourhood schools to 16 and shared 6th form facilities thereafter. I do see problems of scale as a critical factor. Successive governments have failed to have a joined up education policy which examines the system as a whole. The issue of class and university entrance is a small part of the failure of the education system to provide opportunity across class.. We need radical and imaginative new thinking if we are to change the status quo. Academies are not the answer but merely a smokescreen.

Recommend? (10)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**andyjack**

28 September 2010 11:37AM

wolfmanjack

Do you have any evidence for your comment that some universities "reject the able and gifted economically-poor"? Admissions staff do not know the financial circumstances of applicants (or their parents). As has been said, if they don't apply, they can't get an offer.

1friday

Why is it unfair if the staff at some schools "know what subjects you should take" to get into the "elite" universities. This information is available to any teacher who bothers to take the time to ask a few questions of university admissions staff. You spoil what is otherwise a good point with this pettiness.

Freshtedium

Oxford and Cambridge are not "massively oversubscribed". There are about 4 applicants for every place. If you want oversubscribed try places such as LSE, UCL, KCL, Edinburgh, Nottingham, Birmingham.

Recommend? (16)

[Report abuse](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)**fishworld**

28 September 2010 11:38AM

Approx 7% of the population (possibly the richest 7%) hoovers up about 70% of all university places -

I don't know where you get your figures, but they're either wrong or misleading. The UK has >40% of young people who go to university (I can't find the exact current figure - the BBC gives 44% for 2004). So it's not possible for 7% to occupy 70% of the places. Alternatively, currently 3% of the UK population *in total* are in higher education (1.8 million people - data from WolframAlpha). So yes, a specific social group of 7% could supply 70% of these places - but now this is a misleading comment, because it is

comparing across the whole population (e.g. including all those who have already been to university).

Finally - what 7%??

Recommend? (4)

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hdan

28 September 2010 11:40AM

@readyfreddie

In my experience, the Russell Group unis do a HUGE amount to try and admit poorer students; Oxbridge does too, to a lesser extent. But one simply cannot ignore the fact of the matter: that poorer kids who go to worse schools get a worse education; comprehensives often hold the brightest back too.

Solution: it has to be a selective school system

I agree, but *only* if someone puts in the effort (i.e. the money) to design an eleven-plus exam that's much harder to rig by hiring private coaches. Otherwise, we just shift the social class bias from age 18 to age 11.

It also might be a nice idea if we think of less pejorative names for the results than "pass" and "fail" - perhaps "scholarly" and "technical". And give the latter type of secondary schools the respect and resources to match.

Recommend? (4)

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taylorharrison

28 September 2010 11:41AM

Yawn. Another week another story discouraging poorer students from applying. Poverty of aspiration (on behalf of teachers, pupils & parents) is as much to blame as anything else.

That the JCR and the union were mostly full of people who seemed to have experience in leadership – and therefore not normally working-class people

Um, Claire, when you were in the JCR the President was a boxing champion who had been done for stealing cars aged 14, turned his life around and then come to Oxford. I think he'd be pretty pissed off if you told him he wasn't working class and had no leadership skills.

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colgan

28 September 2010 11:42AM

ManchePaul - I wasn't aware that the 20's and 30's were characterised by a great deal of social mobility - General Strike, Jarrow March and Depression anyone?

Social mobility increased post 1945 due to educational reforms which facilitated clever working-class students' entry into the best universities and the professions. This gives the lie to your insinuation that there is less talent in the largest demographic as plenty of people did break through. But then the 11+ subsequently became the most terribly divisive exam...so said middle class lefties whose kids went to places like Holland Park and DavEd's old school. Those who failed it weren't too keen either.

Poverty of aspiration is fostered by poverty of expectation, both parental and educational. I don't think anyone serious is put off by what you describe as light mockery, although it is striking that mockery of working class signifiers is acceptable

where racism, rightfully, is not.

Recommend? (5)

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Mitzcici

28 September 2010 11:44AM

andyjack

28 September 2010 11:37AM

wolfmanjack Do you have any evidence for your comment that some universities "reject the able and gifted economically-poor"? Admissions staff do not know the financial circumstances of applicants (or their parents). As has been said, if they don't apply, they can't get an offer.

Anecdotal - my friend's child, incredibly good at passing exams (7A's at A Level) was rejected by Oxford. She had never been in an interview situation in her life, she stuttered and mumbled when she talked to me so god knows what she was like in an unfamiliar environment. No one prepared her, If she'd been at a private school they would have practised all of this. She was clever enough but couldn't bullshit like the privately educated.

I suspect this happens a lot.

Recommend? (15)

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SaltySnacks

28 September 2010 11:49AM

As a 16-year old A-level student from a working class background, studying at my local comprehensive, I (along with 3 others from my year) was approached by teachers who wondered if I would perhaps like to apply to study English at Oxford (I was predicted 4 As). I'd never really thought about which university - if any - I would study at, but I was completely open to the idea.

You see, unlike middle class people often claim, the reason most children from working class backgrounds don't apply to Oxbridge is NOT because they have a chip on their shoulder and consider such an education 'not for the likes of us', it's that people TELL them it isn't.

Perhaps rather foolishly, I genuinely had no grasp of the educational class divide at this point in my life as the entirety of south yorkshire is only home to one fee paying school for girls, and one for boys. It was an issue that did not touch my life. However, it soon became one when the 'Oxford Outreach' man came to our school, and proceeded to tell us how, in his cut glass accent, Oxford wasn't just for the educational elite, but that "people like you are quite welcome now." People like me? He also said that they'd "take into account our disadvantages and it might be easier for us to get a place than 'normal applicants'."

I decided then and there not to take my application any further and instead went to The University of Leeds.

This was 10 years ago - I hope to God the 'Outreach programme' has developed somewhat since then.

Recommend? (29)

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gilf

28 September 2010 11:52AM

Whilst we continue to use predictions of performance to be the arbiter of who gets

offered which places, we are always going to have the situation of the independent schools disproportionately dominating the elite University places. it's a core aspect of their existence, it's how they benchmark against each other and how they market themselves. It's how they play the game!

IF (and it's a huge "if") we were to offer places on potential (@ 21 - or current age +3) rather than performance at the age of 18, there may have to be a greater effort from Universities to determine who would be the most appropriate bet.

All of that is worth nothing unless we can ensure that (following Browne's inevitable hike in fees) these same Universities can offer places, blind to the resources of those applying through a similar bursary system enjoyed by many of the elite U.S. universities

Recommend? (0)

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hdan

28 September 2010 11:58AM

@taylorharrison

Um, Claire, when you were in the JCR the President was a boxing champion who had been done for stealing cars aged 14, turned his life around and then come to Oxford I don't know about the specifics of this case, but you have a good point. I remember a few years back, Naomie Harris gave an interview in which she explained that, during her time at Cambridge, all anyone talked about was Eton and skiing. I was in the same year as Naomie at Cambridge (albeit a different college and a different subject). I've never met an Etonian (or at least, if I have, they didn't identify themselves as such), and I've certainly never been skiing. I'm not quite sure what to conclude from this.

Recommend? (11)

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janacar

28 September 2010 12:02PM

I come from a very working class family but was lucky enough to receive an excellent free education at a Grammar school. I am absolutely convinced that this is the only way for bright working class children to have a chance of going to the top universities. What a pity the Labour party can't see this - but then that's par for course - selling out the working class as usual.

Recommend? (19)

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edwardlongshanks

28 September 2010 12:05PM

I went to a state technical school in the seventies; admission was based on the 11+, and the socio-economic mix was considerable, although I don't recall any Dukes being there. I've gone on to get two degrees in sciences, and have been moderately successful, despite both of my parents being working class. My point is that selection on academic merit does allow some people to achieve social mobility, whereas egalitarian 'one size fits all' education policies seem only to deny it to everyone.

Recommend? (15)

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