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Opening up elite education

The advantages of a private education in Britain are increasing. But there is a way of opening the top careers and elite universities to all. It requires the best private schools to select according to ability, not income

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When I was at Oxford, in the late 1960s, the university was changing from something akin to a finishing school for academically-inclined public school pupils to a university for the most talented, irrespective of background. There was a rich variety of regional accents from schools such as Manchester Grammar, Bradford Grammar, King Edward's Birmingham, Rhondda County Grammar, and a feeling that we were in the early stages of establishing a genuine meritocracy.

I visited Oxford again in the late 1980s, after many years working abroad, and was surprised to find that it had not opened up as we had expected. The schools from which the students had come had either disappeared or were now private. Even the grammar school I had attended had gone private, now charging £6,000 per year. It had been transformed- from a school drawn from all social classes to the preserve of children of the well-off.

The comprehensive revolution, which happened while I had been abroad, swept away almost all the grammar schools and forced the direct grant schools out of the state sector. The result was that entry to Oxbridge for students from state-funded schools fell from 64 per cent in 1978 to 42 per cent by 1985. It is only a little higher today. To put it another way, by 1985 state-funded students were in a significant minority, whereas just seven years earlier they had outnumbered private school students by almost 2:1. Oxbridge had again become something of a finishing school for the rich.

Shocking as these statistics are, the actual situation is far worse. For a start, many entrants to Oxbridge from state schools are from selective state schools such as the remaining grammar and church schools, which tend to be more middle class. House

prices in the catchment area of these schools are higher than in the surrounding areas and selection is by mortgage-parents pay higher mortgages instead of school fees. (Buckinghamshire, which retains excellent grammar schools, but where house prices are steep, is an example). Estimates of entrants from unselective comprehensives, which account for over 85 per cent of schools, are as low as 20 per cent of the total. This contrasts sharply with the 7 per cent of children at private schools who account for 47 per cent of Oxbridge places. Moreover, this is not just an Oxbridge problem, but a problem with leading universities in general.

Equality of opportunity denied

It really does matter if you go to a leading university. A Class Act by Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard documents the huge over-representation of those educated at private schools and leading universities in the legal profession, the judiciary, the City, the armed forces and medicine. That this is the result of money, not innate ability, is shown by a University of London Institute of Education study which tracked a group of 350 students who were equally able academically, half of whom went to private schools and half to state schools. Those who went to private schools did much better in their A-levels and were more than twice as likely to go to an elite university than those who went to a state school. By their mid- to late-20s, about 50 per cent of those who went to elite universities were in Social Class 1 occupations, compared to 5 per cent of those who went to new universities or colleges of higher education. The career advantages offered by private education are increasing.

The contrast with the US is huge. I recently visited most of the Ivy League universities, and discovered the efforts which have been made to widen access. Unashamed positive discrimination is applied in favour of those from non-privileged backgrounds-but it is not done by inverted prejudice, with the risk of lowering standards by recruiting students who have little aptitude for higher studies. It is done by an extensive recruitment effort and an admissions policy which looks at where the student has come from in relation to his or her level of academic achievement. The aim is to identify talented people who will make a real difference to society; there is less emphasis than in Britain on creating future academics.

In Britain, lack of access to the best schools is not restricted to an "underclass" minority. It is a problem affecting most children, who are at unselective comprehensives (over 85 per cent). Large numbers of very able children continue to be lost in the state system. This situation makes a mockery of equality of opportunity and requires urgent action.

Most of those who can afford it send their children to private schools (over 50 per cent of parents of children at private schools did not themselves attend private schools). Who can blame them? Although private schools account for only 7 per cent of pupils, 92 of the top 100 schools in The Times ranking by A-level results are private, as are most of the top 500. Far greater resources-over twice as much per pupil-are spent in private schools. The chance of getting into Oxbridge from a private school is 30 times greater than from a comprehensive. In Britain in the 1960s you could get as good an education in the state sector as you could privately-as is still the case in other advanced countries. The advantage for those who can afford private education, and the disadvantage for those who cannot, has no parallel in any other advanced country.

The recent decision to allow abolition of grammar schools by parental ballot could make matters even worse. Although accounting for only 3 per cent of children at state schools, they account for 22 per cent of top state performers at A-level and around 30 per cent of state school entry to Oxbridge (and a high percentage to other leading universities). Grammar schools are successful and their abolition would destroy something of quality.

What is to be done?

Having had the good fortune to become a successful entrepreneur, I set up the Sutton Trust three years ago to address the needs of bright children from non-privileged backgrounds. In order to combat the tendency to form judgements based on personal experience and anecdotal evidence, we have, with the help of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Boston Consulting Group, researched and analysed this issue. We have looked at the reasons for the failure of students from unselective state schools to gain access to leading universities. We have concluded that it is both a function of their overall academic under-performance and low aspirations.

Oxbridge and other leading universities are most interested in attracting high A-level achievers, but they are failing to attract a significant group of such high achievers from state schools. We analysed the composition of those gaining 29 points and above at A-level (the top 30,000 performers). We found that if Oxbridge reflected A-level performance, the ratio of entrants from British schools would be 31 per cent private and 69 per cent state, which compares to an actual ratio of 51 per cent private and 49 per cent state.

The reason that entry to Oxbridge does not reflect performance at A-level is not that Oxbridge is biased against state school students. On the contrary: Oxbridge colleges

are deeply concerned at the low number of students admitted from state schools. The problem is that they do not get enough applications from bright students in the state sector. The entry statistics highlight the importance of raising aspirations and "demystifying" Oxbridge for state school students. This is the rationale for the Sutton Trust's Oxbridge summer schools, Oxbridge classes and Oxbridge conferences.

Living in the US, I became familiar with the summer schools offered by Ivy League universities. Two years ago we approached Oxford University with the offer to fund a pilot summer school for comprehensive school students. The offer was taken up enthusiastically. Of the 64 students who attended the first summer school, 25 per cent are now undergraduates at Oxford. Of course, some might have got in anyway, although it should be noted that Oxford selected pupils from schools with little or no previous record of putting pupils forward. Encouraged by this success, the number of summer schools for students at Oxford was doubled this year and schools were set up at Cambridge, Bristol and Nottingham, as well as a summer school at Oxford for comprehensive teachers, aiming to encourage them to put forward their brightest children. These summer schools have the exciting potential to change the composition of leading universities. They could generate 250 extra acceptances each year (almost 10 per cent of British schools intake at Oxford).

The summer schools help to raise the aspirations of students from comprehensive schools, but the under-representation of the state sector at leading universities is not just a question of lack of ambition: there is also a serious under-performance by students in the state sector. In order to address this issue, the Sutton Trust (independently and in conjunction with the government) has funded longer-term projects which involve partnerships between private and state schools, in which students at state schools can benefit from the resources and special expertise of some of the top private schools. Some 70 projects involving approximately 15,000 pupils have so far been funded.

But even these latter initiatives do not address the fundamental issue: pupils from non-privileged backgrounds do not have access to the top academic schools which, as we have seen, are almost exclusively private.

However, many of the former state grammar schools and direct grant schools have retained their old ethos and are predisposed to teaching children selected on the basis of their ability rather than their parents' income. Some of the other private schools, particularly those which are predominantly day schools, are also candidates for open access.

Open access to the best schools

To illustrate the potential for providing open access to private schools, the Sutton Trust analysed the top 100 private day schools-most of which are former direct grant schools and grammar schools. Of the top 133 schools in The Times list for 1997 of top schools by A-level results, 100 are private day schools; 21 are private boarding schools and 12 are state schools. These schools supply almost a quarter of entrants to Oxbridge and a high percentage of entrants to other leading universities and medical schools.

The Trust proposes that the above schools should be allowed to take anyone based on merit, irrespective of the ability to pay-so-called "needs blind" admission. If accepted, it would be the right of that child to go to the school, which would avoid the charity aspect of the Assisted Places Scheme (APS). Making these schools more open would change their character and they would become recognised as centres of excellence for the talented of all backgrounds. Not only would the pupils who were selected by the schools benefit, but the schools would also be a resource to be used by all pupils in their areas. Experience which the Trust and the government are now gaining in successful independent/state school partnerships will be useful in devising appropriate national schemes.

Of course there could be no question of allowing well-to-do parents of bright pupils to offload the cost of educating their children on to the state. Each student would be means-tested on the basis of parental income, net assets and "significant other" income, if appropriate (unlike the APS, which took account of income only). This is a practical solution which could be implemented quickly; it would make the better private day schools available to all the most able children rather than the most able children of the wealthiest 7 per cent .

If open access to these schools were provided, the gross cost would be £170m to £220m (depending on how many children would ultimately require funding). The cost of a state education is approximately £2,300 per year, so the saving to the state of not having to educate children who transfer to open access schools would be £100-£120m-so the net cost would be approximately £100m per year. Compare this against an education budget of £40 billion.

The top 100 private day schools illustrate the potential for providing open access. The scheme would be voluntary, but many independent schools have shown interest. In practice, not all the top 100 schools would enter the new arrangements, and consideration should be given to providing open access to more than just the top 100 schools. The next 100 private day schools account for approximately 9 per cent of Oxbridge entrants and represent excellent value. Geographic distribution and

accessibility would clearly be important factors. Consideration should also be given to providing open access to private primary schools, in order to avoid, so far as possible, the domination of middle class pupils by other means.

This proposal has been misread as a variant of the APS. In fact it is the opposite. Instead of scholarships being dispensed from within a closed system, as in the APS, the schools would be open to all. Numerically it would be quite different from the APS, too. Where, typically, 10-20 per cent of pupils in private schools were funded under the APS (much of the money finding its way into the hands of the middle classes), the ultimate objective would be for as many as 80 per cent of the pupils in open access schools to be either wholly or partially funded, dependent on the income patterns of the catchment area of the school. Instead of merely co-opting a small number of "underprivileged children" into the upper middle classes by sending them to posh schools, "needs blind" admission would change forever the class basis of these schools. The effect would be to smash the old British formula where wealth equals opportunity.

I am not a dreamer; I recognise political realities. Providing open access to leading private day schools, funded by the government, is not a realistic option at this time. The Labour government recently abolished the APS, and although our proposal turns the APS on its head, it does involve subsidising students at private schools. Also, the government is officially opposed to selection, although selection takes place at the remaining grammar schools, at specialist schools and, in a disguised form, within the comprehensive system at schools such as the London Oratory. Selection is a controversial topic in Britain because of past experience with insensitive selection methods and the feeling that those not selected were failures. But it need not be so. In Germany, it is accepted that students have different aptitudes which require different types of schools. Selection methods are humane; those who are not selected for the most academic schools do not feel like failures; there is flexibility at all times, after selection, to move between schools.

If and when opening up private schools becomes politically feasible, it would be helpful if one or more pilot projects were in place to draw upon. That is why the Sutton Trust is now looking at how to provide open access to one or more top private day schools. A number of issues, such as recruitment, methods of selection, means testing, and so on, are being addressed and resolved.

Objections to the scheme include the complaint that certain children would have more money spent on them than others, and that the state system would lose some of its ablest pupils, thus dragging the average down even lower. But state schools are already losing able students from well-off backgrounds, and it is unfair to penalise those who cannot afford to switch. Also, the pupils who would benefit from the

scheme are currently widely dispersed, less than one per class, so the uplifting effect they can have is limited. And there is some evidence that very able pupils in mixed ability schools often become disaffected. Furthermore, able children already have more money spent on them, by virtue of staying on at school and being funded at universities. The overall answer to such objections, however, is that the open access schools would cease to form enclaves and become part of an open system used by all schools in their areas. In this respect, their status would be broadly analogous to our universities. They too are independently run while in receipt of state funds.

Methods of selection would have to be much more sensitive than the old 11-plus, and of course nothing can be done without the agreement of the schools, most of which are private trusts. So far there has been an enthusiastic response from many leading private schools. Their main concern is independence, but in this era of public/private partnerships, ways can surely be found to safeguard this. Although there would be opposition to the proposal from the right (because of self-interest) and from the left (because it exposes the failings of comprehensives and involves selection), it would be highly popular with the electorate. In other words, opposition would be more likely to come from entrenched political interests than from the public. Mori polls show that a significant majority of the electorate, including a majority of Labour voters, would send their children to private schools if they could afford it; and voters support the use of government funds to enable children to attend private schools-by a majority of 3:1.

Providing open access to the best private schools deals with the most able. The wider issue is improving the average quality of state education to the point where it is again competitive with private schools, so that the well-off will once again consider sending their children to state schools. Whether this can be done without selection is questionable. While non-selective schools are allegedly egalitarian, that is not how things are seen abroad, and the harsh realities are that after 25 years experience we continue to lag, both in social mobility and in absolute levels of attainment in many fields. International comparison shows that the problem with our state schools is not just at the top, but even more at the bottom, where we have a long tail of under-achievement. Resolving the problems of the state system will take a lot of cash and several years; in the meantime, able children will continue to be lost. But action at the top does not preclude action at the bottom-the very fact of providing open access to the top schools could inspire a feeling that anything is possible, regardless of background.

The press has reported that the Sutton Trust is spending £40m on providing open access to private schools. In fact, the Trust is still in the discussion stage with schools and has not yet established the precise cost of our pilot schemes. Meanwhile we are spending significant sums on university summer schools and private/public partnership schemes. But there are limits to what any individual can do. My hope is that other

foundations, entrepreneurs and businesses will join us in showing what can be achieved.

Change will only be accomplished by private/public partnership. This means casting off prejudice, whether against private schools or the notion of an educational elite. Elites exist, whether we like it or not. The question is whether they should be constituted on the basis of cash and social position-or merit.