

## The playing field must be levelled before university



By [Gary Holland](#), Chief Sub-Editor (2013/14)

Tuesday 17 June 2014

A [recent study](#) commissioned by the Department of Education found that students from non-selective state schools or “less effective schools” are more likely to do well at university than students who achieved similar grades in private or “more effective” schools and sixth forms. In fact, a privately educated student is 10 per cent less likely to get a 2:1 or higher than a state-educated student with the same grades, studying the same course at similar universities. This is all fascinating, but the really interesting thing is the suggestion that this is a reason to lower university entry requirements for comprehensive students.

Claire Crawford, the author of the study, was actually very careful about this. She specifically didn't say that universities should do it, rather she suggested that it's just something they might want to think about. So let's say university bosses do think about it. What conclusion should they reach? Well, they're actually more likely to get a full three years' worth of fees from a comprehensive student, as the study also found that privately educated students are more likely to drop out. But let's imagine for a moment that there are other things than money on uni bosses' minds.

What speaks in favour of lowering entry requirements for state-educated students? Well, the real question is why admissions work as they currently do. High-performing students are favoured not as a reward for knuckling down and ignoring their friends for a couple of months leading up to their A-Levels, but because good A-Level grades are typically thought to be a reasonable indicator that somebody is capable of doing well at university. But if getting two As and a B at A-Level from a comprehensive sixth-form is as good an indicator of that as getting three As at Eton, then it certainly seems like they should be treated equally in the admissions process.

And this is great news for students from state schools that didn't do as well as they might have in terms of helping pupils reach their full potential. I actually went to a wonderful state sixth form, but I would imagine that if I felt I'd been let down by my teachers then I'd be very happy to hear that the playing field was being levelled.

But then you have to ask: what if I were so bright and hard-working that I'd leave sixth-form with a slew of A\*s no matter whether it was the worst state institution in the country or Eton? And suppose my parents are so fantastically wealthy that they can afford to send me wherever I want to go. Doesn't it seem a bit unfair that I'd actually be less likely to get into university afterwards if I opt for the college that's actually likely to give me the 'better' education?

Of course, this is basically the problem that state students face right now. Anyone who would achieve better grades with the one-to-one tutoring and other benefits of the posher fee-paying schools but can't afford to go to one has the likelihood of them getting into university dictated not even by a choice they make, but by what they (or rather their parents) can afford. This doesn't seem quite right either, does it?

Some will disagree, but I don't believe that we can reasonably decide that either one of those situations is more justifiable than the other. And this problem will persist as long as there's such a significant

difference in the performance of private and state schools. In fact, it will persist as long as there's such a difference between the best and worst state schools but hopefully that's the (relatively) easier of the two problems to solve.

Now, I'm ideologically committed to the idea that private schools are basically fine. I believe that people should be able to choose better goods, services and even education, if they have the means. Pragmatically, however, it's just untenable. As long as these differences exist, somebody is going to be getting shafted by the education system.

And this actually illuminates the problem with the argument for lowering entry requirements: while universities should be able to pick students who are going to perform well, educational institutions should first and foremost be about offering everybody an equal opportunity to better themselves and improve their future prospects.

If the DoE's study is seen as a reason to level the playing field at the university admissions level, students will still suffer. It will just be different students to those that currently suffer. The only solution is a complete overhauling of our education system, and I don't see any way to go about it without scrapping private schools.



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Winner

28 Jan '15 at 5:21 pm

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