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# Primed for Success?

**The characteristics and practices  
of state schools with good track records  
of entry into prestigious UK universities**

**A report on research carried out for the Sutton Trust**

Andrew Curtis, Institute of Education, University of London

Sally Power, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Geoff Whitty, Institute of Education, University of London

Sonia Exley, Institute of Education, University of London

Amanda Sasia, Institute of Education, University of London

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Over recent decades, there has been an increase in participation in higher education in the UK. There has also been a growing concern that this participation is unequally distributed. It seems that middle-class children are not only disproportionately likely to go to university, they are also disproportionately likely to attend the most 'prestigious' universities.

The relationship between social class, schooling and university is complicated, but one of the ways in which educational privilege can be perpetuated is through the close connection between private and selective schooling and students' access to the most prestigious universities. The challenge for policy makers will be to decide how participation in higher education can be widened, *not just increased*, especially in the context of such under-representation at these universities of pupils from state-maintained comprehensive schools. Previous research by the Sutton Trust (2007) indicated that relatively few of these schools send significant numbers of pupils to prestigious universities.

It was against this background that the Sutton Trust commissioned this project. The research aims to explore the characteristics and practices of non-academically selective state schools which have a successful track record in sending students to the more prestigious universities.

## Research Objectives

The research set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of state-maintained comprehensive schools that are successful in sending students to the most prestigious universities?
2. What institutional processes are put in place to support students in their progression?
3. What lessons can be learnt from these schools which will inform policy and practice elsewhere?

To explore these questions, Sutton Trust data on top non-selective, state-maintained schools (Sutton Trust 2007) was examined. Five schools from across England were identified for further research on the basis of their success in sending students to the most prestigious universities (defined here as the Sutton Trust 13 and the Russell Group), despite having above average levels of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). Within these schools, interviews were undertaken with a range of key personnel to collect information on their strategies and procedures for promoting HE transitions. A questionnaire survey of Year 13 students was also undertaken and, on the basis of this survey, a sample of students was interviewed to explore their experiences and aspirations in more depth.

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## Principal Findings

### *1. School characteristics*

- **Within the state-maintained sector, there are relatively few comprehensive schools which appear to send significant numbers of students to the most prestigious universities, and those which do so tend to have relatively advantaged students.** In fact, it proved difficult to find schools for this study which both sent students to the most prestigious universities and had higher than the average number of students eligible for FSM.
- **The overall profile of students entering the case study sixth-forms is more advantaged than that of Year 7 to 11 students.** Three of the five schools recruited large numbers of students from elsewhere into their sixth-form. It is possible that, even within the case study schools, high rates of progression to prestigious universities might be attributed to the background of the students as much as to within-school processes.
- **All of the schools expressed a strong commitment to encouraging their students to progress on to university.**
- **Schools showed varying levels of outreach activities, often through Aimhigher and the National Academy for Gifted and Talent Youth (NAGTY).**
- **Having disproportionately large sixth-forms may benefit the performance of students in these particular schools.** Research evidence shows that a larger sixth-form is associated with better results while a small sixth-form appears to have a negative effect. All the case study schools had a sixth-form within or above the optimum size range highlighted by this particular research (three of the schools were particularly 'top heavy' due to a considerable influx into the sixth-form of students from other schools).

### *2. School practices*

- **Links with universities were often based on personal contacts rather than a more strategic approach.** While these links had a significant impact on a few individuals, their overall influence appears patchy.
- **All the schools explicitly encourage students to progress to higher education, and also emphasise the importance of sixth-form students as role models for younger students.**
- **The earliest that most of the schools begin to systematically address the route to university is in Year 9, around the time of deciding GCSE options.** Students from graduate families often plan to progress to higher education from a young age.

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- **On entry to the sixth-form, potential Oxbridge applicants are identified, and all the schools take advantage of outreach activities from Oxford and Cambridge.**
  - **Oxbridge applicants are given extra assistance with their application and preparation for their interview.** Having staff members and/or parents who have graduated from these institutions is also viewed as a valuable resource upon which to draw during the application process.
  - **Within all the schools, students receive strong direction and help with the UCAS process.** This involves starting the application process early, with tight monitoring from senior teachers. Students receive intensive support with writing their personal statement, and this takes up a considerable amount of senior staff time.
  - **In briefings on higher education, teachers are generally reluctant to draw attention to status differences between universities, and many students appear to have only a vague notion of status. Proximity of the university appeared to be one of the most important factors affecting a student's decision.** This calls into question the extent to which students who have no familiarity with higher education are making the most informed choices.
  - **The predicted grades of 'first generation' HE aspirants were generally lower than those of their fellow students.** These students were also likely to apply to the more prestigious universities only if they were predicted very high grades. **Students whose parents had attended university were more likely to apply with lower predicted grades to prestigious universities.** These different levels of expectation and aspiration, on the part of students and staff, may be one of the factors which contribute to the under-representation of disadvantaged students at prestigious universities.
  - **A number of teachers felt that the main issue with regard to guiding student choice was students' over-aspiration.** They felt that some students held 'unrealistic' expectations in wanting to apply to more prestigious universities than could be justified by their predicted grades. However, teachers can have too low expectations of some students.
  - **The curriculum in all the schools focussed predominately on A-levels with few, if any, vocational alternatives.** However, all the schools offered a range of extra-curricular activities, which may be important in developing the 'soft' skills also sought by prestigious universities and employers.

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## Policy Implications

### *Encouragement of students*

- Explicit encouragement to consider university entry should be given by schools much earlier than appears to be common practice. This is especially relevant for first generation higher education applicants. It is also particularly important in 11-16 schools, where the visible role model of high aspiring sixth-form students is missing.
- Greater efforts should be made to encourage appropriate students from schools without sixth-forms to enter 11-18 schools with academically successful sixth-forms in Year 12, as well as sixth-form colleges.

### *University Links*

- University outreach work needs to be maintained and developed, especially in schools with few university links. Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of outreach services, and state schools should be encouraged to make more use of these.
- More generally, links between schools and universities should be encouraged, and greater attention given, within schools, to developing links with a broader spectrum of universities, especially where there are few prestigious universities in the immediate vicinity.

### *Applications Process*

- Schools should provide information about the relative status of universities in order that students not already 'in the know' are not disadvantaged.
- League tables are often used by students to help them 'sift' through the multitude of UK HEIs. Greater discussion is needed about their methodology and use. A recent HEFCE Report (2008) questioned various aspects of league tables. It recommended promoting greater public understanding of both league tables and alternative information about universities.
- In line with the recent announcement by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) about having to publish their admissions policies, universities should be more transparent about their admissions practices so that schools can concentrate on what matters most. For example, universities could be clearer about the importance of the personal statement and extra-curricular activities.
- It would be helpful to establish, and evaluate, some pilot programmes of extra support for the application process in schools less experienced in gaining access to prestigious universities.

### ***Post-Qualification Application***

- First generation higher education students tend to take decisions on higher education later than others, and also often have lower predicted grades. The current proposal whereby students can revise their choice of university after receiving their results could enable more such students to enter prestigious universities. This may be more helpful to these students than a full-blown system of post-qualification applications.

### ***Size of sixth-form***

- In relation to the particular issues with which this report is concerned, a further proliferation of small sixth-forms would seem undesirable.

### ***New Universities***

- Decisions about the establishment of new higher education institutions and their potential university partners should take account of geographical inequalities in the current distribution of prestigious universities.



The mass expansion of higher education and the end of the binary divide has seen the percentage of 18-30 year olds participating in higher education rise to over 40%. The Labour government has set a target of 50% by 2010, although it is unlikely that this will be met. Yet efforts at 'widening participation' in the UK have yet to facilitate significant levels of participation for people from less advantaged backgrounds. The rise in participation can mainly be accounted for in terms of students from middle-class backgrounds. In 2005, the Higher Education Minister, Bill Rammell, admitted:

The most challenging statistic is that if you come from the top two socio-economic groups, you've got an 80% chance of going to university. If you come from the bottom two socio-economic groups, it's only 20%. In the fourth richest economy in the world in the 21st century this is unacceptable (quoted in Curtis, 2005: 1).

There are not only concerns about inequalities in access to higher education in general but also about inequalities in access to the most prestigious universities in particular. Data collected from 1999-2003 by HEFCE (and since 2004 by HESA) on the social composition of each higher education institution (HEI) show that the most prestigious universities take disproportionately high numbers of students from the independent sector and, more generally, from social classes 1-3<sup>1</sup>. While this in part reflects greater achievement in A-levels in the independent schools, this alone does not account for the scale of the phenomenon. Even when taking into account the level of attainment at A-level, the independent sector still sends a greater proportion of its students to these universities. Research by the Sutton Trust indicates that there are a great number of state school students, 'the missing 3000', who are qualified for entry into 'prestigious' universities in terms of A-level grades but who end up elsewhere (Sutton Trust 2004, 2005, 2007).

In attempting to explain why suitably qualified students from state schools do not attend the most prestigious universities, some research suggests that it is the universities that are excluding students. Other research suggests that the students do not apply.

Boliver (2006) found that there are disproportionately high numbers of entrants into Russell Group universities from professional and, to a slightly lesser extent, managerial class backgrounds. These groups were also disproportionately represented in other old universities but under represented in new universities. The inverse was true for entrants from skilled non-manual, skilled manual and semi/unskilled backgrounds, who are over represented in new universities but under represented in Russell Group and other old universities (2006: 3).

In contrast, in a study of the characteristics of applicants to Oxford, Heath and Zimdars conclude that there appears to be a bias against students from independent schools, and to a lesser extent female and South Asian students, *once GCSE results are taken into account as well as A-level results* (2005: 22-3). They draw on the Oxford Admissions Survey which had a sample of 1,929 applicants and unusually features GCSEs results. The importance of positional advantage is emphasised here, as attainment at GCSE and A-level is tied to social background.

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<sup>1</sup> Data taken from the HESA website: [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=586&Itemid=11](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=586&Itemid=11)

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Whitehead *et al.* (2006) examine the higher education decisions of academically successful students (predicted at least 3 As at A-Level). They found that class had an effect on whether the students applied to Cambridge: '[t]hose from lower social class backgrounds, defined by both father's and mother's occupation, were more likely to be put off by the application process, by the fear of not getting a place, by believing they would have to work too hard when they got to Cambridge and that they would not fit in' (2006: 17).

It is likely that the under-representation of state-schooled and disadvantaged students reflects a complex interplay between student aspiration, school processes and university admission arrangements.

In view of this complex interplay, there have been various policy initiatives to combat inequality in access to higher education. In England, *Aimhigher*, launched in 2001 as *Excellence Challenge*, seeks to raise student aspirations about going into higher education. Also the *National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth* (NAGTY) includes collaboration with universities.

However, despite these initiatives, and the media attention around the 'Laura Spence affair'<sup>2</sup>, there has not been a dramatic change in social composition. Much more clearly remains to be done, as even Geoff Parks, Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges, comments:

We are not doing well enough – if you look at the proportion of students from the maintained sector across the Russell Group [of 20 leading universities], the numbers haven't really changed [...] Any increase in one university has been matched by a decrease in another. Our own figures show that the proportion of state school students has dropped (Quoted in Asthana, 2008).

There is also increasing pressure from the government for more prestigious universities to improve access by helping to increase the numbers of qualified applicants coming out of secondary schools. Involvement in schemes like *Teach First* or sponsoring Academies or partnering Trust schools can be seen as social contributions of this sort. Yet some of these policies, particularly the Academies programme, are politically contentious and both Oxford and Cambridge have so far declined to sponsor Academies.

## Research objectives and methods

It is against this research and policy background that this project follows up research by the Sutton Trust (2007) on admissions to prestigious universities from individual schools. The research showed how few state schools send significant numbers of students to the most prestigious universities. The current research looks at entry into the Sutton Trust 13 from non-selective state schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Spence was a state school student who was predicted 5 As at A-level and had obtained 10 A\*s at GCSE, but was not offered a place at Oxford.

This research set out to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of state-maintained comprehensive schools that are successful in sending students to the most prestigious universities?
- What institutional processes are put in place to support students in their progression?
- What lessons can be learned from these schools which could inform policy and practice elsewhere?

The definition and number of ‘prestigious’ universities is, not surprisingly, a contentious issue. In this report we base our analysis mainly on those groups of universities that are sometimes referred to as the Sutton Trust 13<sup>3</sup>. However, consideration is also given to another, overlapping, measure of status, membership of the Russell Group<sup>4</sup>.

These universities are variously described as ‘elite universities’, ‘top universities’, ‘leading universities’ and so on. In this report we use the term ‘prestigious’ to characterise them, except where we are referring to other people’s terminology. We recognise that even using the term ‘prestigious’ to describe these universities is contentious. Although they all have strong research records across a range of disciplines and generally attract students with high academic qualifications, other universities also display these characteristics and can even lead the field in particular subjects. Furthermore, not all universities pursue the same mission and there are other universities that might be considered ‘top’ in other respects, including widening participation. However, there is not ‘parity of esteem’ in the English higher education system and there is also a tendency to rank institutions on a linear scale. Even at the risk of reinforcing this, we feel it is justifiable in terms of their overall status and prestige to describe these universities as ‘prestigious’.

In order to explore the characteristics of state schools that are successful in getting students into such universities, Sutton Trust data on the top non-selective state-maintained schools (Sutton Trust 2007) was examined and five schools from across England were identified for further research<sup>5</sup>. Firstly they had to be non-grammar state schools that sent a *relatively* high percentage of students to the Sutton Trust 13 universities. In order for there to be a sufficient pool of potential interviewees, attention was also paid to the *numbers* of students going to these universities from these schools, a consequence of which is that the sixth-forms were all over a certain size. Secondly, they had to have a free school meal (FSM) rate higher than the national average over a five year

<sup>3</sup> The Sutton Trust 13 was derived from performance tables and consists of: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York.

<sup>4</sup> The Russell Group consists of: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College, King’s College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen’s University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London and Warwick. The Russell Group was set up in 1994 and this is how they summarise their mission:

The purpose of the Russell Group is to provide thought leadership and strategic direction for 20 major research intensive universities of the UK; we aim to ensure that policy development in a wide range of issues relating to higher education is underpinned by a robust evidence base and a commitment to civic responsibility, improving life chances, raising aspirations and contributing to economic prosperity and innovation.

(<http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/news/2008/statement-on-a-level-choices-following-sunday-times-article-of-6-january-2008.html>).

<sup>5</sup> Based on data held by the Sutton Trust.

period (14.3%). Finally, some consideration was paid to geographical spread. However, and this in itself is noteworthy, there were several regions of the country where there were no appropriate schools to choose from. Often these were areas where there was not a prestigious university in the immediate vicinity, an issue which is discussed later in the report. The five case study schools that were selected are located in the following areas: Birmingham, Doncaster, Leeds, inner London, and outer London.

At least five staff members were interviewed in each school. The overall sample included: Deputy Head Teachers, members of the sixth-form management (such as Heads of Sixth-form/Key Stage 5', Deputy Heads of Sixth-form, Year Heads); experienced sixth-form tutors/teachers; recently qualified sixth-form teachers (where available), and various support staff (for example UCAS administrators, careers staff). They were asked about the schools' practices, especially in the sixth-form. Interviews then focused on students going to university, not just the application process itself, but also the build up to this in the main school and in Year 12.

Brief questionnaires were sent to all Year 13 students in the school, mainly to select a sample for the face-to-face interviews. 488 students replied, a 50% response rate. A total of 37 students were interviewed face-to-face, between 6 and 8 in each school. The primary basis for selection of these students was them having applied to a prestigious university. The entire sample have applied to at least one Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group university. All but 2 applied to at least one of the Sutton Trust 13 universities. In the sample, 18 of the students are male and 19 are female. Eleven of the students have two graduate parents, 10 have one graduate parent, and 16 are first generation higher education applicants<sup>6</sup>. Twelve of the students also have older siblings who have either been to or are at university. Twenty-one of the sample have been students at the schools since Year 7 and 16 joined in Year 12. Twenty students are White British and 15 are from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (2 did not want their ethnicity to be recorded).

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report students coming from families where neither parent went to university will be referred to as first generation students.

One of the ways in which educational privilege is perpetuated is through the close connection between private and selective schooling and access to prestigious universities. It is evident that certain schools have very good track records of sending students to Oxford and Cambridge and other prestigious universities. Research by the Sutton Trust (2007) looking at university admissions over a five year period shows that 29% of students at the Sutton Trust 13 universities came from just 200 schools. The remaining 71% came from the England's other 3,500 secondary schools with sixth-forms. 48% of Oxbridge entrants came from 200 schools (though not in all cases the same as those mentioned above). The top 100 schools provided 17% of all Sutton Trust 13 entrants. The top 100 schools for Oxbridge entry provided 31% of their students.

Of the top 100 schools for Sutton Trust 13 entry, 82 are independent schools, 16 are grammar schools and only two are comprehensives. Of the top 100 schools for Oxbridge entry, 80 are independent schools, 18 are grammar schools and, again, only two are comprehensives.

Further analysis of those few comprehensive schools which appear on these lists indicates that many have relatively advantaged students. Indeed, it is an indicator of the very phenomenon that this research seeks to address that it proved difficult to find many schools which both sent students to prestigious universities and had higher than the average number of students eligible for FSM. More detailed descriptions of the five case study schools which were eventually identified and agreed to participate are presented below.

## **The characteristics of the five case study schools**

In some respects, the five schools are very different, as the following thumbnail sketches reveal:

### ***Midlands School (Birmingham)***

A Roman Catholic school that has traditionally served Birmingham's Irish community. It has 1,252 students on role with a sixth-form of 162. Half of the Year 11 students do not progress to sixth-form. It has, by far, the most disadvantaged intake of the five schools, with an average of 39% of pupils being eligible for FSM over a five year period. Over the last 5 years, 21% of its sixth-formers have progressed to a Sutton Trust 13 university.

### ***Inner London School (North London)***

This voluntary-aided girls' school is the smallest of the five schools and located in an ethnically diverse inner London area characterised by extremes of wealth and poverty. The school has a long-standing tradition of academic success and espouses liberal and individualist values. The majority of its students progress on to the sixth-form, but it also has a large influx of academically able students of both sexes from other (including some independent) schools at this point. Amongst our case studies, it has by far the highest rates of sending students to Sutton Trust 13 universities and Oxbridge.

### *Yorkshire School (Doncaster)*

This is a very large school, with just under 2,000 students. It recently announced that it is joining the Trust Schools programme. The school has a split site, with Years 7-9 taught in a separate building. Only a third of Year 11 students progress into the sixth-form, and the majority of the sixth-form is composed of students from other schools.

### *Northern School (Leeds)*

This school emphasises its comprehensive ethos beyond Year 11 and into the sixth-form level as some students can enter with only 4 Ds at GCSE to take Level 2 courses. Around 40% of Year 11 students progress into the sixth-form each year, and the sixth-form has very few external applicants. The school recently had a new build.

### *Greater London School (Outer London)*

This is a large and academically ambitious school which serves an area of predominantly second generation Asian families<sup>7</sup>. Although the catchment area has pockets of economic disadvantage, the school has levels of attainment well above the local authority and the national average.

Table 1 provides an outline of the main characteristics of each of the case study schools:

**Table 1: Main characteristics of the five case study schools**

School	Total no. students	No. in 6th Form	Yr 11 progression*	External entry into 6th Form	Entry requirements	FSM 02-06	EMA 07/08*
Midlands School (Birmingham)	1252	162	50%	5%	4/5 A*-Cs	39%	>50%
Inner London School (North London)	998	437	70%	50%	5 A*-Bs	21%	58%
Yorkshire School (Doncaster)	1944	540	33%	66%	6 A*-Cs	19%	33.3%
Northern School (Leeds)	1556	225	40%	Negligible	4/5 A*-Cs	20%	>50%
Greater London School (Outer London)	1402	469	80%	50%	5 A*-Cs	17%	>50%

\* = Approximate figure given by the main contact at each school.

<sup>7</sup> The generic term Asian is used here as an umbrella term for families of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other Asian countries heritage.

There are also differences between the schools in the level of parental qualification which will be significant for transitions into higher education. Table 2, which draws on the survey data, shows that the parental level of education appears much higher at the Inner London School than at any of the others. Only a minority of the students here have non-graduate parents. This contrasts strongly with the Midlands School, where the overwhelming majority have parents with no experience of higher education.

**Table 2: Parental history of higher education by school**

School	Parental history of HE		
	One graduate	Both graduates	Neither went into HE
Midlands School (n=34)	14.7%	2.9%	82.4%
Inner London School (n=109)	29.4%	40.4%	30.3%
Yorkshire School (n=129)	20.9%	13.2%	65.9%
Northern School (n=68)	16.2%	33.8%	50.0%
Greater London School (n=130)	24.6%	21.5%	53.8%
<b>Total (n=470)</b>	<b>22.8%</b>	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>53.2%</b>

As we shall see later, these differences between the schools may well have an impact on their different track records of sending students on to a Sutton Trust 13 university. Table 3 records the number and the percentage of students (out of all those going into higher education from the school) attending a Sutton Trust 13 university over a five year period (2002-06):

**Table 3: Track record of attending a Sutton Trust 13 University 2002-06**

School	Number	% of those entering HE
Midlands School	40	20.9%
Inner London School	184	27.5%
Yorkshire School	102	14.8%
Northern School	57	16.1%
Greater London School	171	20.5%



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Again, there is considerable variation between the schools. Inner London has the highest rate, with 27.5% of their higher education entrants going to Sutton Trust 13 universities.

Despite the differences in terms of ethos, intake and destinations, all of the schools can be characterised as ‘successful’ in sending significant numbers of students on to the more prestigious universities. In the next section, therefore, what we focus on is not the differences between the case studies, but their *similarities*. In particular, they all appear to have the following characteristics.

### ***Size of school and size of sixth-form***

One of the most noticeable features of the five schools is that they are all relatively large. The average enrolment of a maintained secondary school in the UK was 944 students (DCSF 2007). With the exception of the Inner London School which is only slightly larger than the average, the other four schools are much bigger. The Yorkshire School is almost twice the size of the average school.

At secondary school level, Spielhofer *et al.*'s (2002) value-added analysis of school size on student performance revealed a curvilinear relationship, where there was an optimum size of a cohort of around 180-200 students. However, the optimum varied according to certain key background variables. In general, the more disadvantaged the student intake, the larger the optimum cohort needed to be. So while smallness might be associated with high performance where schools have advantaged intakes, this is not likely to be the case with schools with disadvantaged intakes.

Additionally it is likely that school size will make a difference to a school's ability to recruit sufficient students to form a viable sixth-form. And there is research evidence to show that having a large sixth-form is associated with better than expected results and a small sixth-form – or no sixth-form at all – appears to have a negative effect (Robinson and Smithers 1999). Spielhofer *et al.*'s (2002) analysis confirms this evidence and suggests that the threshold at which students appear to benefit from a sixth-form ranged between 110-180 students. The larger the sixth-form, the larger the benefits.

All of our schools have sixth-forms within or above this range. Additionally, three of the schools (Inner London School, Greater London School and Yorkshire School) are particularly ‘top heavy’ in that they have disproportionately large sixth-forms because of a considerable influx into the sixth-form of students from other schools.

While disproportionately large sixth-forms may benefit these particular schools, the extent to which they can be seen as typical of comprehensive schools is questionable. Indeed, the higher entry requirements of the Inner London School sixth-form (5 GCSEs at A\*-B) might lead one to question whether it can be regarded as ‘comprehensive’ at this level. Speaking about extra-curricular activities, the Deputy Head expressed concern about whether new regulations to enforce open admission will change the composition of the sixth-form:



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...there are students who just want to do their academic work and not engage. But really those kinds of students wouldn't fit in here. I'm hoping that the character of the sixth-form doesn't change as the result of this new admissions system.

The influx of large numbers of students into the sixth-form also raises doubts about the pertinence of the FSM data for these schools in terms of the composition of the sixth-form. While EMA data might be seen as an indicator of economic disadvantage, it does not really have equivalence or reliability. Eligibility for EMA is set above the level of national average earnings and, while the level of allowance is means-tested, little data are available at institutional level to indicate how many students claim the most support.

Nevertheless, despite these issues, the size of sixth-form is clearly something that needs to be addressed in future policies for post-16 education.

### *A strong academic focus*

The principal focus of the schools was to encourage progression along what the Deputy Head at Greater London School called the 'main road' – GCSE, A-level, Degree. All five of the schools have predominantly 'academic' sixth-forms offering mainly A-levels. On the whole, level 3 vocational qualifications were rare or had been abandoned. Students from schools with a mainly academic sixth-form, wishing to follow pre-vocational options, will need to take advantage of the sorts of local collaborative arrangements currently developing in connection with Diplomas.

Some of the schools offer subjects that are not widely available in the state sector. Notably, Inner London School gives students the opportunity to study Latin and Ancient Greek at A-level.

There was also some evidence that the size of the sixth-form had an impact on staffing. Having a sixth-form can bring in more highly academically qualified staff and also offer more promotion routes. As a result, some of these schools had a critical mass of teachers with experience of, and connections with, prestigious universities. In most of the schools the sixth-form staff often taught in the main school (usually Key Stage 4) as well as in sixth-form, although in a few instances staff taught solely in the sixth-form because their subject area was only available at A-level.

### *A sixth-form culture*

While it was hard to identify a common approach to pedagogy right across the five schools, they did tend to adopt a distinctive approach to education in the sixth-form. Three of the schools, Midlands School, Yorkshire School and Greater London School, were reviewing the nature of pedagogy at this level.

All five schools gave their sixth-form students dedicated space, such as common rooms that are out of bounds to students from the main school. Sixth-formers are also given various privileges in most of the schools, which include: relaxed uniform policy, being able to use their mobile phones around the school, and in one instance being able to 'jump' the lunch queue.

All of the schools believe in the importance of pastoral support, although the level and type of provision varies. At Midlands School they have tutor groups that 'roll-up' from Year 11 for continuity. Students also have a Personal and Social Education (PSE) session every few weeks. They cover various issues in these sessions, such as what it means to be a student in the sixth-form, study skills, revision techniques, independent learning, and use of the library.

### ***Extra-curricular activities***

All the schools emphasise the importance of extra-curricular activities, yet the level seems to vary. Activities include *Amnesty International* groups, charity work, involvement with the local community (such as Christmas dinners for elderly people), sport and the arts. At the Inner London School the extra-curricular activities were vast. Their enrichment programme runs every Wednesday and Friday afternoon and students have around twenty activities they can choose from. It is not compulsory but is treated like a formal lesson. They have outside speakers, for example someone from the Institute of Philosophy. The school's specialism is music, and there are many activities related to this. For the Head of Sixth-form the variety of activities is important: 'it's just really having as broader range as possible from sort of physical activities to sort of intellectually stimulating activities'.

It may well be that these extra-curricular activities are significant in assisting with university recruitment in a number of ways. It could be that they bolster individual independence and confidence and therefore raise students' sense of self-efficacy. They might also be valuable assets in the application process – especially where interviews are involved.

If this is the case, it is important to ensure that these are available to all students. Research on out-of-classroom learning shows that it is usually the most disadvantaged students in the most disadvantaged schools who had the fewest opportunities to participate (Power *et al.* 2008 forthcoming). In relation to our case study schools, staff at Midlands School and Yorkshire School felt that students' part-time work curtailed the amount of free time they could spend on such activities.

## Student choices of university

In our questionnaire sample of 488 Year 13 students, 405 were applying for entry this year. Participants listed their five choices of HEIs in order of preference. In total 140 different HEIs were cited.

Table 4 indicates the *first choice institution* of all of the students who are intending to go into higher education. It notes the overall percentage that are applying to a Sutton Trust 13 institution as their first choice and also the overall percentage applying to a Russell Group institution as their first choice. There are institutions that are in the Sutton Trust 13 but not the Russell Group and vice-versa. So the third category lists all those applying to an institution that is *either in the Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group* as their first choice:

**Table 4: Proportion of students applying to Sutton Trust and Russell Group universities and average predicted grades.**

School	Mean predicted tariff scores	Sutton Trust 13	Russell Group	ST 13 or RG
Midlands School (n = 28)	240.8	8 28.6%	12 42.9%	12 42.9%
Inner London School (n = 80)	314.1	40 50.0%	55 68.8%	56 70.0%
Yorkshire School (n = 122)	311.4	22 18.0%	44 36.1%	51 41.8%
Northern School (n = 50)	302.9	13 26.0%	26 52.0%	27 54.0%
Greater London School (n = 125)	340.9	51 40.8%	71 56.8%	71 56.8%
<b>Total (n = 405)</b>	<b>315.2</b>	<b>134 33.1%</b>	<b>208 51.4%</b>	<b>217 53.6%</b>

There is a strong contrast in terms of predicted grades between the schools (see the second column above), hence the range of potential university options differ. There are considerable differences between the schools in the sample in the number of students applying to Sutton Trust 13 universities as their first choice. Two of the schools (Yorkshire School and Northern School) are in locations that are not particularly near to a Sutton Trust 13 university. At Yorkshire School and Northern School a number of students are applying to Leeds (a Russell Group University). The table above demonstrates that, when Russell Group Universities are included, the difference between the schools becomes less stark. Yet Inner London School, on all of the above measures,

still has the most applicants to prestigious universities by some distance, and these are mainly to institutions outside the city.

It is worth looking at the profile of those applying to these universities to ascertain the extent to which their aspirations simply reflect their background characteristics (parental experience of HE, ethnicity) or their earlier experience of schooling (gauged by point of entry into the case study school) rather than other influences, such as the initiatives put in place by the schools we were investigating. The three tables below present those factors where there is statistical significance:

**Table 5: Year 13 students' applications to prestigious universities by parental experience of HE**

	Sutton Trust 13 University	Russell Group University	Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University
Both parents	43 47.3%	60 65.9%	62 68.1%
One parent	36 39.6%	55 60.4%	59 64.8%
Neither parent	52 24.4%	90 42.3%	93 43.7%

**Table 6: Year 13 students' applications to prestigious universities by ethnicity**

	Sutton Trust 13 University	Russell Group University	Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University
White British	59 28.6%	91 44.2%	97 47.1%
Black & Minority Ethnic	70 38.0%	106 57.6%	109 59.2%

**Table 7: Year 13 students' applications to prestigious universities by point of entry to school**

	Sutton Trust 13 University	Russell Group University	Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University
Before sixth-form	58 29.1%	88 44.2%	94 47.2%
At sixth-form	74 36.5%	118 58.1%	121 59.6%

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These tables show that family history of higher education, ethnicity, and the point of entry into the school is correlated with applying to prestigious universities in the sample. Those students from families where neither parent went to university were over 20% less likely to apply to prestigious universities than those with two graduate parents. The White British students in the sample were less likely to apply to such universities than students from Black and Minority Ethnic groups<sup>8</sup>. In addition, students joining the schools in the sixth-form were more likely to apply to prestigious universities than those who came from the main school, although this difference was not statistically significant for applying to Sutton Trust 13 Universities. However, despite these patterns, it should be noted that over 40% of those applying to either Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group universities came from families where neither parent had experience of higher education.

### **Local or distant choices?**

As mentioned earlier, there were areas of the country where it was difficult to identify individual comprehensive schools with strong track records of sending their students on to the most prestigious universities. It is therefore important to consider the geographical dimension of the choices made by students at our schools with stronger track records.

Table 8 (overleaf) shows the 'first choice' universities selected most often by our sample and listed in rank order for each of the schools:

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that students from Black and Minority Ethnic groups were predominantly from Asian backgrounds.

**Table 8: Year 13 students' first choice of university**

School	Institution	No and % selecting it as their first choice
Midlands School (Birmingham)	Birmingham	7 25.0%
	Newman University College, Birmingham	5 17.9%
	Birmingham City	3 10.7%
	Coventry	3 10.7%
Inner London School (North London)	Cambridge	11 13.8%
	Edinburgh	11 13.8%
	Bristol	5 6.3%
	Manchester	5 6.3%
	Sussex	5 6.3%
Yorkshire School (Doncaster)	Sheffield Hallam	13 10.7%
	Leeds Metropolitan	10 8.2%
	Leeds	8 6.6%
	Hull	8 6.6%
Northern School (Leeds)	Leeds	10 20.0%
	Leeds Metropolitan	8 16.0%
	Edinburgh	5 10.0%
Greater London School (Outer London)	King's College London	18 14.4%
	LSE	13 10.4%
	UCL	12 9.6%

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There is a clear relationship between the location of the school and the selected university. In Midlands School, three of the top four choices are in the city (Birmingham) and the other is relatively near (Coventry). The top three first choice institutions for Greater London School are all for institutions in London. At Northern School the top two choices were for universities in the city (Leeds). Yorkshire School is based in Doncaster, which does not have a university itself, but all of the top choices of universities are in cities that are relatively nearby (Sheffield, Leeds and Hull). The notable exception is Inner London School where the choices were far more wide-ranging. This may reflect the high predicted A-level scores of these students or their higher levels of educational inheritance.

The increasing phenomenon of 'staying local' and the interconnected situation of more students staying in the parental home while at university has been the cause of some debate (Holdsworth, 2006; Davies, *et al.*, 2008).

Certain students from outside of London were put off applying to universities in the capital because of the cost, as were some of those already based there. The cost of living in London also meant that some of those from there feel compelled to stay in the parental home if they go to a university in the city.

The percentage of students staying in the parental home nationally appears to have increased over the last decade, with Davies *et al.* citing a variety of studies indicating that it is now between 20-25% (2008: 6-7). In our questionnaire the Year 13 students were asked whether they planned to stay in the parental home or not. Twenty of those planning to go to university annotated their questionnaire indicating either that they did not know at the present time or that it will depend upon the institution that they attend. The questionnaire response by school and background characteristics are shown in the tables overleaf:

**Table 9: Year 13 students intending to stay at home by school**

School	Plan to stay in the parental home				Total
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Depends on university	
Midlands School	10 38.5%	13 50.0%	0 0%	3 11.5%	26 100%
Inner London School	8 10.1%	70 88.6%	1 1.3%	0 0%	79 100%
Yorkshire School	17 14.8%	97 84.3%	1 0.9%	0 0%	115 100%
Northern School	7 13.2%	40 75.5%	3 5.7%	3 5.7%	53 100%
Greater London School	61 50.0%	51 41.8%	3 2.5%	7 5.7%	122 100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b> <b>26.1%</b>	<b>271</b> <b>68.6%</b>	<b>8</b> <b>2.0%</b>	<b>13</b> <b>3.3%</b>	<b>395</b> <b>100%</b>

**Table 10: Year 13 students intending to stay at home by background characteristics**

Category		Plan to stay in the parental home			
		Yes	No	Don't Know	Depends on university
Higher education experience	Both parents	10 11.5%	74 85.1%	2 2.3%	1 1.1%
	One parent	23 25.8%	59 66.3%	1 1.1%	6 6.7%
	Neither parent	69 32.7%	131 62.1%	5 2.4%	6 2.8%
Ethnicity	White British	28 14.0%	167 83.5%	3 1.5%	2 1.0%
	Minority Ethnic Group	71 39.4%	94 52.2%	5 2.8%	10 5.6%
Gender	Male	22 15.7%	110 78.6%	2 1.4%	6 4.3%
	Female	80 31.7%	160 63.5%	5 2.0%	7 2.8%



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There were significant differences in terms of family higher education history, ethnicity and gender. Those with two graduate parents, and to a lesser extent those with one graduate parent, were more likely to be planning to move out than first generation students. White British and male students were also more likely to move away. For some of these students, living away was not a conscious decision, just something that seemed 'natural':

It's always been, whenever I've thought of uni, it's been away definitely. You've got to get out and experience life a bit more rather than living at home.

However, expense and family expectations (particularly for girls from certain cultural backgrounds) prevented other students from leaving home:

My dad would prefer it if I was home. Because then he could keep an eye on me, because he probably thinks I would get up to mischief or something. So yeah. Well considering the cost as well, staying out of uni is probably better that way. Because we've got all the train stations nearby and it's only like a couple of stops away. It's okay.

Anxieties about leaving home (either for financial or other reasons) will have a considerable effect on the range of universities which a student can choose. Given the heavy concentration of prestigious universities in the South East, there are considerable geographical inequities. One implication of this might be that prestigious universities need to focus some outreach activities on areas where there is not a prestigious university in the immediate vicinity.

Decisions about the establishment of new higher education institutions and their potential university partners should take account of geographical inequalities in the current distribution of prestigious universities. There are areas of the country where students restricted to 'local' choices may have only one prestigious university to choose from. It might be attractive to such students to begin their courses locally and then proceed to another university. The judicious choice of partners in the establishment of new higher education institutions could facilitate such arrangements. The American community college model, where some students proceed from two-year to four-year institutions, is often claimed to assist the eventual access to prestigious universities of less advantaged students.

Earlier we examined whether there were any common characteristics that appeared to be associated with our 'successful' schools. While acknowledging both the atypicality of three of the schools and the dangers of drawing generalisations from so small a sample, it would appear that all of the schools were fairly large and had viable sixth-forms. All had a dominant focus on A-levels at the sixth-form stage and gave sixth-formers additional freedoms. All placed great emphasis on the importance of maintaining extra-curricular activities alongside their A-level studies.

However, we were also interested to know whether there are any particular institutional processes in this schools which appear to foster high rates of application to prestigious universities. In this section, therefore, we look at the processes of a) encouraging students to think about university; b) helping students decide which university to apply to; and c) assisting them with the application process.

## Encouraging students to think about university

Students' plans about whether to go to university are often highly dependent on whether their parents did. As already noted, there is considerable variation between and within the schools in terms of the students' educational inheritance. Over half were 'first generation' students, with a quarter having two graduate parents and another quarter having one graduate parent. Of the sample of 37 student interviewees, eleven are from families where both parents went to university, ten have one graduate parent and 16 are first generation. However, among these 16, four have older brothers and sisters who have gone to university, so at least have experience of higher education in their immediate family.

Other research (Ball 2003, Power *et al.* 2003) has shown that many students from professional and managerial backgrounds see going into higher education as very much a natural progression. This is the case with our interviewees too. When asked when they first thought that they might attend university, almost two thirds (22/37) said that they had always thought they would do so. This was much weaker for the first generation students (5/16). For students from families with at least one graduate parent, the sense of higher education as a natural progression was quite strong, e.g.:

I never really thought about not going, you know I think it would be weird if I hadn't have gone to uni.

I don't think I ever thought about it. I knew I'd be going to university anyway so- My sort of family background, they weren't going to let me drop out and go to college, or become a beautician. So I knew I'd go to university to do something. And medicine is what I wanted to do. So I knew I had to go to sixth-form to then go to university.

The schools engaged with various outreach programmes, such as *Aimhigher* (which will be returned to shortly). In the sixth-form, Personal and Social Education (PSE) lessons are used to raise awareness about higher education. These include sessions about budgeting and managing

workload. Yet school strategies to promote university are less important for the students from graduate families than for those with lower levels of educational inheritance. One third of our interviewees, mainly those who were first generation students, traced the idea of attending university back only to when they were in secondary school and, in most cases, only to around the time of GCSEs. Two of the students only thought that they would go into higher education once they reached sixth-form.

### ***Understanding the landscape of higher education***

While students may have aspirations to carry on studying, in order for them to make the best choices it is important that they understand the landscape of higher education. With the end of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics it is more difficult to differentiate different types of university. As the following student comments, the range of options can be daunting:

It's quite a difficult choice because there is so many. And when you're first faced with that massive big book, you know, the big book of all the different university places, it's quite overwhelming.

Children with parents who have gone to university may be able to draw on their knowledge. Nearly all of our interviewees (10 of the 11) with two graduate parents had been advised by them about university. This was also the case for around half of our students with one graduate parent (5/10) and for our first generation students (9/16). First generation students in particular are likely to rely on information and contacts from the school in order to help them make informed decisions about which subjects to study and which institutions to apply to. This information is likely to come in at least two forms: the explicit guidance and contacts made available through formal links and careers guidance; and the informal guidance which comes from staff experience of their own education, their knowledge of the higher education system as a whole and their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their students.

### ***Formal links and careers guidance***

All of our schools had developed links with universities. Various speakers came into the schools to explain different aspects of higher education. Sometimes this was through initiatives such as *Aimhigher*. In general though the schools had developed links which had grown over the years. For example, for some time, Greater London School took sixth-form students on a trip to Reading University in order to see what a campus university is like. Midlands School had a representative from the University of Birmingham, one of the Sutton Trust 13, address the sixth-form each year. The decision about which universities to develop links with appear to depend on historic precedent locally and the qualities of the speaker, e.g.:

Their liaison person at Birmingham, he's very good at coming in, and I also know the quality of the sort of presentations he's going to give so if I want him to do something I'll just sort of give him a ring and he's quite happy to come in and do stuff with them.

At Northern School a number of student ambassadors from Newcastle University visit the school each year and speak about various aspects of university life. This first generation student found it helpful as she had a deficit of information on the subject:

That was quite useful because it just sort of like, it not only told us about Newcastle, it taught me a little bit more about university. But it's only like recently that I've understood the whole process of university, mostly due to the application process and leaflets that have been sent from every university really, because in lower school you don't really find out much about it and then in sixth-form it's quite brief. It's difficult, you feel silly asking questions like 'How will I like get accommodation?' You know, things like that.

Some links with universities are not directly tied to higher education awareness or recruitment. For example, there is a discussion programme that brings people from prestigious universities into assemblies at Inner London School:

...we have some challenging speakers in, often from local universities like UCL, King's, LSE, coming in to talk in that assembly programme. So we're drawing all the time on sort of, in getting our students to be, you know, citizens of the local community.

The reach of these formal links varies. Of the 37 students interviewed, 21 had experienced some form of outreach scheme through organisations such as *Aimhigher* or NAGTY, although some students found it difficult to remember events that occurred when they were a lot younger.

The events included general university taster days and subject specific master classes. Perceptions of these events were mixed. For example, one student at Northern School had found a Year 10 *Aimhigher* event at a university slightly patronising because she already had knowledge of higher education through siblings and having a graduate parent:

They were like 'Ah, do you think [university] is going to be full of *geeks*?' And you know, trying to make it all 'street' and stuff. And I was like, 'Hmm, I know what it's like'. Well I know what it's like, I knew it's not just full of geeks.

Another student at Northern School has a mentor who is an undergraduate law student at Leeds University. This had been a very helpful relationship and her mentor also advised her when she was writing her personal statement for the UCAS form. She has also been to a law event with a firm of solicitors where students participated in a mock trial.

At Greater London School one prospective medicine student has been on a number of events with *Aimhigher* and NAGTY while at her previous school. This included a trip to Exeter University in Year 9 for a Chemistry event and the next year she attended a medicine themed event. These were clearly important visits for her:

In Year 10 I went to St George's to do a medical taster three day session. I think that really solidified my commitment to medicine. We had problem-based learning, so a session of that. That was really good. I really enjoyed the fact that, you know, you analysed a situation and got something else out of it.

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Another student who joined the school in the sixth-form described a summer school he went on through NAGTY as ‘one of things that really made me want to go to uni and want to move out as well.’

Prospective Oxbridge candidates attended open days at both institutions when they were in Year 12 and reported that these had usually encouraged them further in their application. For one student though, attendance at an outreach event at Cambridge confirmed his reservations about the institution and he decided not to apply there.

While these links therefore appear to have been helpful in encouraging students to apply to universities, they do not appear to represent a strategic approach to opening up a range of higher education horizons. And while Oxbridge open days may reassure students about applying to these institutions, Year 12 is possibly too late for many potential applicants.

## **Informal knowledge and guidance**

### *Teachers' background*

We were interested in the extent to which the teachers own university history was used in informing choices. Twelve of the 26 teachers interviewed had been undergraduates at a Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University, and 17 had at least one qualification from one of these institutions.

Some of the staff, particularly younger members, spoke about how their own general higher education experience was of interest to the students. Some of those who attended prestigious universities felt this fact to be important too. For example, this teacher at Greater London School had taken her undergraduate degree at LSE:

I went to London School of Economics, but I came from Barking so I sort of had a similar background to the students here and then ended up at a good university myself ... And I think it's nice that they can see that someone from the local community has gone to a good university and it's something they can do.

These personal connections are clearly important. Although fewer than half of the pupil interviewees (16/37) knew whether their teachers had been to the institutions they were applying to, one quarter (9) claimed that this had influenced their own choice, for example through helping them choose one of their subsidiary choices.

Students found it was helpful to know someone who had been to that particular university. This Yorkshire School student, who had applied to Imperial, felt reassured about what his teacher had told him about the institution and London:

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It was nice to know he'd been there and said good things about it. And the only downside about Imperial from a lot of people's point of view is it's the centre of London. But he said that 'It's not a bad thing, it's not expensive once you know where to go.' So that was quite helpful actually, to know that.

This personal knowledge appears to be particularly important in relation to Oxbridge and other universities which require an interview. This teacher from Northern School feels that his experience is still pertinent, even though he graduated from Oxford thirty years earlier:

Prospective Oxbridge students are always interested in interviews, interview techniques, they're also interested in the tutorial system which still operates at Oxford, I can tell them about that. I can tell them about the social life.

This Cambridge applicant also found his English teacher, a Cambridge graduate, reassuring:

He was able to get rid of some stereotypes and tell me about his own interview process, because it's not really changed that much ... it makes it more realistic if you know someone relatively down to earth who's gone there.

If, as these data seem to suggest, teachers' educational backgrounds are important in helping students decide which universities to apply to, then it seems that schools with relatively few teachers holding qualifications from prestigious universities may well need more help in opening up these horizons to their students.

## **Use of league tables and awareness of university status**

In addition to teachers' knowledge and school links, students can gain information about the relative status of different universities from the various performance tables that are published. League tables can serve a variety of functions. They can provide an indication of status or prestige. Yet they can also serve a more practical purpose. With a course in mind a student can see a list of institutions that are offering a course that is within their grade range. League tables can also provide the student with the opportunity of selecting a 'spread' of institutions, with a couple of choices as 'back-ups' with lower entry requirements. It should be noted however that league tables are formulated on a variety of factors and the top ten in any given subject may not necessarily be Sutton Trust 13 and/or Russell Group universities, and indeed may not necessarily have the highest entry requirements for that subject. A recent HEFCE-commissioned report questioned various aspects of league tables, including a tendency to focus on institutional as opposed to subject-based rankings. It was also critical of some of the methodologies used, and suggested that league tables could be more accessible and interactive (HEFCE 2008: 58-9)

Three quarters of the qualitative interviewees referred to league tables, although some of these (6 of the overall total) did so with caution or only in a cursory way. It was rare for students to select

all five institutions on status alone, although there were some instances of students just choosing the 'best' with few other considerations. The student below is an example of this:

Because at the end of the day if it is something that you want to do you may as well sort of go all out. And they [my choices] were sort of the top five universities.

But for most of the interviewees other factors normally came into play at this point, e.g.:

I got the like the ratings out of the Times thing for Geography and then crossed out all the places in London [due to expense], crossed out Oxbridge because I didn't like it. And then crossed out places I didn't want to go, like too far south or too far north and it left those really. And that I wanted to be in a reasonable size city as well.

...I looked at the Times Education Guide and [chose] the ones that were the top ones and I went to quite a lot of open days and those were suited to me [...] a couple of them are like campus ones which is just what I prefer [...] I've never been wanting to go to a big city.

For some students, looking at the league tables could put them off a choice they had otherwise been settled on:

I've already got into Leeds and everything about Leeds seems so perfect, it's the perfect course, everything about it is right. But I looked at it on the league table and it was a bit lower than I would have wanted. And I think 'What shall I do, what shall I do?' And my Mum's saying 'It doesn't matter how low down it is. If it's the perfect course then you should go for it.' But I suppose there's something inside me, if I'm being honest, there's always going to be that prestige thing.

However, while students did refer to these tables, and all had applied to at least one university in either the Sutton Trust 13 or the Russell Group, it is debatable just how much the students were aware of status distinctions. The majority (29/37) held a general notion that there were status differences between universities, but not one specifically mentioned the Russell Group or the pre/post-1992 university divide.

These tables may have given students a much clearer idea of status differences, though, than they appear to have received from their teachers. School staff were often reticent to talk about a differentiation between universities in terms of status in briefings to year groups as a whole, although this was often outlined in advice to individual students. Only 3 out of 29 (both teaching and non-teaching) staff members interviewed made a clear and overt statement about status differences, such as this teacher from Northern School:

I'm afraid I do. But there again I am an old snob really, aren't I? [...] But, you know, there is a certain cache to Oxford or Cambridge. After that in the hierarchy of worthiness then I suppose it's the collegiate redbrick universities, like Durham and Edinburgh. We send a few people to Edinburgh every now and then. And, you know, Leeds and places like that. And then there are the old polytechnics which have splendidly renamed themselves. So they come in third as it were.



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While other staff across the schools appear to have views on status or 'hierarchies' of universities, they think it is important to shield their students from this to some extent. This sixth-form Year Head at Yorkshire School replied:

We do [recognise status] but we don't broadcast the fact that there is an almost two tier or three tier system.

This was justified in terms of not upsetting those students with low grade profiles which make entry to prestigious universities unlikely. The Head of Sixth-form at the school concurred with this view, although she thought status was less of an issue now:

I think that five years ago they were talking about the different categories of universities. I think that that has quietly disappeared. Nevertheless we do feel that we are under some sort of – obligation is the wrong word – duty – that's hard as well – to say to somebody who's thinks 'Do I go to Warwick or do I go to Bolton? Because they both look really good and they both do my course' [...] because you've got to be fair, you don't want a three B grade student going to Bolton Institute. They'd never forgive you. So that is a hard one [...] because if you are talking generally to the sixth-form there will be some for whom Bolton Institute is aspirational.

The Deputy Head at Greater London School spoke about their students ranking universities by subject areas:

So the vast vast majority of our students do, when they go on to university, go to London universities. As I say, the pecking order is very clear in their minds, and, you know, they get it right: Imperial for science, LSE for economics and law. And then UCL I think is seen as the next one down in the kids' minds. And then we have that middle band, Queen Mary's, where we have a host of students every year going to Queen Mary's to do a range of particularly science related courses.

Interestingly, when he was asked about the ranking judgement, he wondered if the staff perpetuated the cycle somewhat:

...I know our students' perceptions, they might say they get them from us, but I think they are driven to do their own research quite assiduously. They have a clear pecking order in their heads but it's skewed by the London thing, you know.

There are, of course, sensitive issues here. Explicit acknowledgement of the status differences between universities is likely to help perpetuate those differences. On the other hand, there clearly are differences in the perceived status of different universities, whether or not they are always entirely justified. Unless applicants are made aware of these status differences, they may well chose universities lower down the hierarchy than other students with similar grades. In her study of higher education choice at a sixth-form college, Brooks (2005: 120-1) also found a lack of clear messages about the status of institutions, with only Oxford and Cambridge being marked out.



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Those students with no parental experience of higher education may be more likely to make such choices without having considered the implications.

## **Supporting students in the application process**

The 37 students interviewed mostly had a high predicted grade profile, with 31 of them being predicted 340 points (the equivalent to AAB at A-level) or more. They therefore have a vast range of HEIs that they could choose from. This section will explore how they made their choices and the factors that came into play.

Some students experience difficulties in choosing a course/institution. While the students interviewed for this project tended to have a clear idea about what course they wanted to do from an early stage (see below), many of the other applicants in the schools did not. Obviously the staff members interviewed dealt with students across the year group. A few of the members of staff have to provide aid to students having problems with this. This careers co-ordinator at Inner London School explains how she assists them:

There is so much choice out there, it is baffling. When I sit down with them and just log on to the UCAS site and say 'Okay where are we going to start?' And then clicking onto the university, clicking onto the website. I think some students find that whole process really quite difficult. And when they see me do it, I mean I might spend an hour, an hour and half with them, you know, you need quite a chunk of time. And then they understand the process, how to do the sifting.

Clearly an important factor in the sifting process is to ensure there is some relation between the predicted grades and the entry requirements. One of the consistent findings is that students from comprehensive schools are underrepresented at the most prestigious universities, even when their A-level scores are taken into account (Boliver 2006; Sutton Trust, 2004, 2005).

### ***Targeting students for Oxbridge***

All of the schools were pleased to have sent students to Oxford or Cambridge over recent years. A full list of the number of Oxbridge applicants and offers by school is presented in the table overleaf:

**Table 11: Oxbridge applicants in 2007-08 by school**

School	Oxbridge Applicants	Offers
Midlands School	0	0
Inner London School	30	11
Yorkshire School	10	4
Northern School	4	1
Greater London School	23	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>19</b>

Numbers in this regard greatly varied between the schools. Midlands School (the smallest sixth-form in the study) normally sends a student every year or so to Oxford or Cambridge, but there were no applicants this year. Inner London School was by far the most successful. They had consistently sent around 10 students a year to Oxford and Cambridge over a five year period. Last year they had 15 students made offers. In their current cohort 11 have been made offers.

However, all of the schools had a strategy of identifying potential Oxbridge students. This usually entailed a spreadsheet or a list being compiled after GCSEs (including those students joining the school in the sixth-form). Other students can enter into the process, although the schools try to deter those with very slim chances (for example those with very mediocre GCSE or AS results). Various efforts are then focused on to this group, which can cause some resentment from those who are not included:

I thought to base it on your GCSEs was a bit, I thought it was unfair because it was kind of an exclusion...

Clearly if you are not put in this group your chances of going to Oxbridge are more limited. It would appear crucial then to establish the basis on which students are identified as potential candidates. One student felt that it was not on attainment alone:

But I don't think it was ever on an academic basis it is just sort of like how passionate and how determined you were to study the subject because they said that is the main reason why people sort of get rejected.

The notion of 'passion' is important here and it can relate to a student's social background and cultural capital.

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Once identified, these groups were taken to various Oxbridge events. All of the schools make use of outreach schemes run by Oxford and Cambridge. These are used to dispel myths about the institution, as this student at Yorkshire School found:

It existed as a stereotype before it, you know, was the real place. And like you have all the ideas of it, you know – ‘full of toffs’ (*laughs*).

The case study schools seem to have a strong awareness of the application process at both institutions which has been built up over the years. Preparation for the Oxbridge application process (with its early deadline) has to start earlier than most other applications. At Inner London School this begins in the summer term of Year 12:

We do quite a lot of Oxbridge preparation in the summer term [in Year 12], where we meet them together, have about ten meetings, various aspects about the sorts of things they should be doing and how to prepare for it.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of a school encouraging students to apply to Oxford or Cambridge when they had not thought about it before. Sometimes, a student would pick up on a teacher’s suggestion:

I think it’s because [the Head of Sixth-form] mentioned it I thought ‘Well, you know, I really, if I put my mind to it, I could get here and I could do this.’ So I just thought, you know, ‘A bit of a challenge, put it down’.

Another student at the school, who would also later be made an offer, was approached by the Head of Sixth-form after receiving his AS-level results. Although he was considering applying there already, he found it ‘a bit of an ego trip’ and it further encouraged him to apply.

The Head of Sixth-form at Northern School actively encourages students to apply to Oxford and Cambridge because she worries about under-aspiration. She invites all the students that could potentially apply to Oxford or Cambridge (identified by GCSE results) via a secret memo in Year 12. She tells them that they have the kind of GCSE profile that is good enough for a state school student to be accepted by Oxford or Cambridge. She then tells them about her own experience:

...I tell them all the tale about how I should have gone to Cambridge and I didn’t ‘cos I didn’t have the confidence and I thought that I was too common and I didn’t have enough money and my background’s not good enough and all that. And I say to them ‘I don’t want any of you to feel like that. I don’t want any of you at this point to tell me that you’re not good enough to go to Oxford or Cambridge because your GCSE results say you are’.

Preparation for the interview is seen as important and all of the case study schools offer Oxford and Cambridge applicants mock interviews if they get to the interview stage. Having people with Oxbridge connections involved in this process is deemed to be advantageous. Therefore having a large number of teaching staff and parents who have attended Oxford or Cambridge is particularly

useful and they can be used in the mock interview process. Inner London School appeared to have extensive connections in this respect:

...we set up practice interviews with admissions tutors where we can, we call on the parent body to help because a lot of them are university people who do it for a job. We try to marry up subject to subject, call up our university friends, you know, links to come in, governors, anybody that'll help.

Systems can be built up over a number of years, yet may not be durable. For example, Greater London School had to change their Oxbridge interview preparation at a late stage this academic year:

The background is that we [once] had a member of staff in the school who was a Cambridge graduate. And she had some friends, some contacts, who set themselves up as a little group of people who were offering mock interviews. And so we asked them to come in and do some mock interviews for our kids [each year]. [*But the school lost contact with these people*] So we happened to have three members of staff who are Cambridge graduates working in the school this year. And so we asked them to contact people from their own contact list. And I think we've done it better this year than we've ever done it before because we've got individual contacts [...] we have an Oxford maths graduate working here and her husband is also an Oxford graduate, works at Canary Wharf, so we took a few of them there for mock interviews as well.

At Yorkshire School a former Deputy Head (a graduate from Leeds University) conducts the interviews. He does not think the term 'mock interview' is the most appropriate, however. Rather he feels 'pre-interview' is more accurate. As well as subject specific questions, he also tries to get the students to speak about more general matters. He believes that his feedback is more important than the actual interview segment itself. Yet he also worries about the stress and disappointment of applying to Oxford or Cambridge when students are unsuccessful. He is particularly mindful that not being successful would be a shock to these students:

...one of the things you do have to bear in mind is that if a student is rejected from Oxford or Cambridge it is the first setback academically in their life. They've sailed through GCSEs, they've sailed through AS, predicted As, you know. So that there is a downside to this process you have to be aware of.

It is difficult to evaluate the value or outcomes of the schools' Oxbridge preparation processes. Having Oxbridge graduates on the staff can not only provide role models but also potentially furnish information about the process. Again it is difficult to disentangle the value of contributions from the strength of the candidates and their family backgrounds.

### *'Cooling out aspirations'*

While there were some anxieties about students under-aspiring, all of the schools referred to over-aspiring as an issue and said that many of their students had 'unrealistic' ambitions.

Midlands School, for example, had the lowest average A-level points profile of the five schools. Those who go to a Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University mostly tend to go to Birmingham, a local university. In the qualitative sample, of the 6 students interviewed at the school, 5 had applied there. At least 2 of these applicants might be described as 'speculative', with the students being predicted mainly Cs. Yet for these students Birmingham was seen primarily as one of several local universities, its prestige not being a major factor. This sixth-form tutor and English teacher at the school believes that such expectations are unrealistic for some of her tutor group:

I was saying to them 'Look, if you want to go to Birmingham and do something like an English degree you need three straight As', and realistically they wouldn't be getting that. So I sort of said to them, you know, 'Start to think of your other choices, like places like De Montfort where you can do English but you might only need two Bs and a C, or three Bs'. So it's easier for them. And I did explain the difference between the universities. And, you know, there are lots of students in my tutor group that have applied for the traditional redbrick universities like Birmingham.

A sixth-form Year Head at Yorkshire School spoke about giving them a 'dollop of realism', and the other sixth-form Year Head at the school commented:

You've got to be realistic. You can't build up hopes when there isn't any chance. But you've also got to be encouraging when there is a chance. So I won't blow it out of the water unless there really isn't a chance.

The Head of Sixth-form at the school outlines how intricate the process of 'matching' students and universities can be:

...the tutors will go through with them very carefully 'Where are you applying to, what are you applying for?' And at that point they will say you could be more aspirational than that' or 'that's a bit too optimistic perhaps we should have another back-up'. And the beauty is because they've got five choices, you could manage a spread of that. So they should know roughly where they stand, they should know they're looking at. I think there are two things. One, they tend to look and if it says 3 Cs and they are predicted 2 Cs and D they do still rigidly think 'Oh, you can't that'. So we've got to move them beyond that. And then the other problem is the one that the upper sixth are facing now, and I've talked to them about it, is when you are come to make your final decisions. Because they've said 'Manchester are asking for 3 Bs and Hull are asking for a B and 2 Cs, so I better put Hull down as my first choice because I only got a B and 2 Cs.' We say 'Look you're firm [offer], that's the whole point, it's aspirational. Make Hull your insurance.'

At Northern School staff had been compelled to prevent students from making certain applications. The Head of Sixth-form tells them:

'...the academic reference predicted grades are lower than the courses you've chosen so I'm not prepared to send it because I'm not prepared to set you up to be rejected and so unless you alter those then there will be no further action'.

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The Head of Sixth-form at Greater London School also felt that low aspirations are rarer than unrealistically high ones, although it did happen:

...it could be the other way around, occasionally it is, [We say] 'If you're predicted all As why are you applying to do X there?', you know, and they say 'Well, I want to make sure I get in'. You know [and we say] 'Aim high, why don't you put an application into one of the, you know, to a really high ranking university, for a couple of your applications and then okay, a back-up of some others just in case'. So sometimes there's a little bit of fear, but generally speaking it's the other way round. They want to do what is out of their reach really. And we have had a couple that have applied for Cambridge this year who really shouldn't have done so.

The staff interviewed also emphasise considerations students need to think about other than just the status of universities, even if they have certain views on status themselves. This head of Year 13 at Inner London School highlights the need for looking at various factors:

I mean I don't think that we try to push them towards the Russell Group Universities particularly or away from those universities. But we do try to look at each student individually and see what they are likely to get at A-level grades, what the requirements are for the courses they want to do. We do try to talk through with them the implications of going for a city university or a campus university or what the implications might be in terms of cost of travel if they pick St Andrews as opposed to picking Sussex. So we do try and talk through with them all those kinds of issues.

While clearly it is not desirable for students to apply to institutions for which they have virtually no chance of being selected, there must be some concerns that teachers' judgments of 'unrealistic' expectations themselves reflect a lack of aspiration for particular students.

The predicted grades of our 'first generation' HE aspirants in the questionnaire were generally lower than those of their fellow students. They were also, regardless of predicted grades, less likely to apply to prestigious universities.

Table 12 opposite looks at students applying to prestigious universities by family educational background and predicted grades (the cut-off point being 300 tariff points – the equivalent of 3 Bs).

**Table 12: Year 13 students applying to prestigious universities by predicted grades and family educational background**

	Parental experience of HE	Sutton Trust 13 University	Russell Group University	Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University
Predicted below 300 tariff points	Both parents	5 21.7%	12 52.2%	12 52.2%
	One parent	3 14.3%	7 33.3%	7 33.3%
	Neither parent	6 6.9%	15 17.2%	16 18.4%
Predicted 300 tariff points or above	Both parents	36 55.4%	45 69.2%	47 72.3%
	One parent	32 47.8%	46 68.7%	50 74.6%
	Neither parent	45 38.8%	74 63.8%	76 65.5%

Students with two graduate parents were considerably more likely to apply to prestigious universities than first generation students. This was true both for students predicted under 300 tariff points (equivalent to 3 Bs) and those predicted 300 or over. These differential levels of expectation and aspiration on the part of students and staff may be among the factors which contribute to the under-representation of disadvantaged students at the most prestigious universities – even at these largely successful schools.

The current proposal whereby students can revise their choice of university after receiving their results could enable more such students to enter prestigious universities. This may be more helpful to these students than a full-blown system of post-qualification applications.

## Filling in the forms

The UCAS process took up a great deal of time in the sixth-form, especially the Autumn Term of Year 13. A Year Head at Inner London School describes the process as a ‘bureaucratic nightmare’ and it certainly is extremely time-consuming. There have been major changes in the application process over the last decade, with the internet completely changing the process, especially in terms of the volume of information available to students. For example, the Deputy Head at Greater London School remembers that there used to be two books ‘chained in the library’ detailing higher education courses. Now, in addition to the wealth of information available, the applications



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themselves are made online. Again at Inner London School they found this difficult, especially when elements of the electronic form are altered each year and the staff have to adapt. A problem mentioned in several schools was that staff could not edit parts of the students' applications. While they could understand the reasons for this, it meant that it dramatically increased the 'to-ing and fro-ing' of the form from them to the student, often just to make the most simple correction.

The Heads of Sixth-form, Year Heads, and other sixth-form staff have a great deal of knowledge about the UCAS process. Two schools (Inner London School and Greater London School) have members of staff with roles that specifically entail working on university applications. A third school was also considering employing a retiring teacher in the role. The necessity for this was not just having someone with specific expertise, but also to relieve the pressure on other members of sixth-form staff.

In all five of the schools the UCAS process begins to be addressed overtly in the summer term of Year 12. The post-AS exam period before the summer holidays is filled with activities. This is also usually the period where potential Oxbridge candidates are formally identified. Students are introduced to university guides/resources, often in PSE lessons, and there are sessions looking at different courses and institutions. Often, the first steps in writing a personal statement are made at this stage.

The process then gains momentum at the beginning of Year 13. At Greater London School the process is completed the earliest of the five schools (by mid-October). This is partly in order to process so many applications (over 200) efficiently and also because they 'don't want UCAS to dominate the whole of the Autumn term, which it can do'. This academic year the final official national UCAS deadline had been moved from December 15th to January 15th. Some of the staff were not appreciative of this, and in fact one school did not tell the students the deadline was this late in order to prevent delays in completing the applications.

The staff were asked which part of the application process students tended to struggle with the most. Overall, of 22 staff members interviewed who had direct involvement with university applications, 19 found that writing the personal statement was the aspect of the process that students particularly struggled with. Two members of staff felt it was technical aspects of completing the form the students had most difficulties with and one felt that it was choosing a course.

Nine staff identified additional aspects of the process that students tended to struggle with, but to a lesser degree. In this connection, seven mentioned choosing a course and/or a university, one cited technical aspects of completing the form, and one the personal statement.

Of the 37 students interviewed, 26 found the application process 'straightforward', 'all right' or 'easy', but 6 of the other students commented how they found it time consuming or stressful. The personal statement was frequently cited as something they needed assistance with, yet in all the schools they generally seemed well supported, although there was a variation in the level of support given by some tutors in one school.



Often the personal statement was the first piece of writing about themselves that the students had undertaken, and some staff specifically felt that students found it hard to 'sell themselves'. In certain cases, problems with the statement were related to science and maths students in particular finding it difficult to write prose. At Greater London School it was felt by some staff that students would often take long words from a thesaurus and use them out of context, making the statement incomprehensible in places. In addition, over 70% of students at the school have English as an additional language. There were other issues in seeking to make the statement convincing. For example, if students had applied for more than one type of subject it was difficult to focus the personal statement on their interest in a particular prospective course.

Across the schools there is extensive re-drafting of personal statements, with staff sometimes re-writing segments of it. Senior staff, such as Heads of Sixth-form, often made further adjustments to the statements. The director of admissions at Cambridge, Geoff Parks, believes there is now massive cynicism among university staff about personal statements: 'You can't advantage your application by producing a good one because no one believes they're the sole work of the applicant any more I'm afraid.' There is also various advice about what to put in the personal statement by private companies and guidebooks, particularly for Oxford and Cambridge (for example Pallis, 2003; Stourton, 2005).

## Summary

The status of universities was rarely overtly discussed by staff in our five schools. In some contexts, this is because consideration has to be paid to the entire year group, many of whom do not have the necessary grades to apply to the most prestigious institutions. Nevertheless, status is clearly taken into account by both teachers and students in deciding on individual choices, along with various other factors, such as location. Students applying to what could be seen as institutions with lower status are sometimes encouraged also to apply to the top institutions within their grade range, although instances of this are rare. More common are students applying to institutions out of their reach in terms of grades, and staff feel compelled in these instances to encourage students to make more realistic choices.

It is difficult to isolate the factor most important in applying to prestigious universities. The relative importance of school characteristics and their institutional processes is difficult to ascertain. The school with the highest proportions of students applying to, and also eventually entering, prestigious universities, Inner London School, is quite distinctive amongst the case study schools. Its students have frequent exposure to speakers from prestigious universities, often in events unconnected to outreach and university recruitment. They also have a high level of extra-curricular activities.

While grade profile is very important, for the practical reason of meeting grade requirements, it is not the only factor. The school with the best A-level scores, Greater London School, does not have

the highest rates for entering prestigious universities. The school that does, Inner London School, also has the greatest percentage of students with graduate parents. They are also the students least likely to be planning to live in the parental home during university, and more generally the least likely planning to stay in their home city. Not only do the parents at the school seemingly have significant cultural capital from their own educational background, they also appear to have financial capital enabling students not to be so constrained in terms of location.

## Encouragement of students

- Explicit encouragement to consider university entry should be given by schools much earlier than appears to be common practice. This is especially relevant for first generation higher education applicants. It is also particularly important in 11-16 schools, where the visible role model of high aspiring sixth-form students is missing.
- Greater efforts should be made to encourage appropriate students from schools without sixth-forms to enter 11-18 schools with academically successful sixth-forms in Year 12, as well as sixth-form colleges.

## University Links

- Outreach schemes, in some instances, can have a profound effect on students in terms of attitudes to higher education and choice of course. University outreach work needs to be maintained and developed, especially in schools with few university links. Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of outreach services, and state schools should be encouraged to make more use of these.
- More generally, links between schools and universities should be encouraged, and greater attention given, within schools, to developing links with a broader spectrum of universities, especially where there are few prestigious universities in the immediate vicinity.

## Applications Process

- In guiding student choices about which university to apply to, there is clearly a delicate balance to be struck between reinforcing irrelevant status differences between universities and encouraging those who can to aim for the most prestigious institutions. However, schools should provide information about the relative status of universities in order that students not already 'in the know' are not disadvantaged.
- League tables are often used by students to help them 'sift' through the multitude of UK HEIs. Greater discussion is needed about their methodology and use. A recent HEFCE Report (2008) questioned various aspects of league tables. It recommended promoting greater public understanding of both league tables and alternative information about universities.
- In relation to the application process, it appears that support for writing the personal statement is extremely time-consuming. It is unclear, however, just how important these statements are in university admissions procedures. In line with the recent announcement by the Department

for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) about having to publish their admissions policies, universities should be more transparent about their admissions practices so that schools can concentrate on what matters most. For example, universities could be clearer about the importance of the personal statement and extra-curricular activities.

- The UCAS process requires considerable staff expertise and experience to run smoothly. Some schools employ designated staff to deal with aspects of the process. It would be helpful to establish, and evaluate, some pilot programmes of extra support for the application process in schools less experienced in gaining access to prestigious universities.

## **Post-Qualification Application**

- First generation higher education students tend to take decisions on higher education later than others, and also often have lower predicted grades. The current proposal whereby students can revise their choice of university after receiving their results could enable more such students to enter prestigious universities. This may be more helpful to these students than a full-blown system of post-qualification applications.

## **Size of sixth-form**

- The importance of size of sixth form needs to be taken into account in any future arrangements for post-16 education. In relation to the particular issues with which this report is concerned, a further proliferation of small sixth-forms would seem undesirable.
- Establishing pre-vocational options in the sixth-form does not seem to have been a priority for the schools in this study, so students from schools with academic sixth-forms who wish to follow such options will clearly need to take advantage of the sorts of local collaborative arrangements that are developing in connection with Diplomas.

## **New Universities**

- A notable feature of our students' accounts was the importance of having a local university. Clearly, there is no quick fix to this problem but decisions about the establishment of new higher education institutions and their potential university partners should take account of geographical inequalities in the current distribution of prestigious universities.

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111 Upper Richmond Road  
Putney  
London SW15 2TJ

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Telephone 020 8788 3223  
Facsimile 020 8788 3993  
Email [sutton@suttontrust.com](mailto:sutton@suttontrust.com)  
<http://www.suttontrust.com>

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