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## **State School Admissions to our Leading Universities**

**An update to 'The Missing 3000'**

March 2005

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# Preface

This report is compiled on the basis of data supplied by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), but the analysis and views expressed in it are those of the Sutton Trust.

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# Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl

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Government benchmarks for state school admissions to higher education have been helpful to press home a central message of the Sutton Trust: that, based on their A level performance, students from the state sector are not taking up the places they are entitled to at our top universities, and that schools, universities and the Government should look to address this waste of talent.

The Government's recently published benchmarks for 2002/03, however, threaten to undermine the credibility of the benchmarks system. Changes to the way these are calculated – using total UCAS points rather than A level grades – have led to sharp rises for many universities, which cannot be justified for those institutions which continue to select students on the basis of their A level grades. In turn, this has prompted a spurious debate in the media, which focuses on claims of Government 'social engineering' and the 'dumbing down' of standards.

This debate has detracted from a significant fact: from 1997/98 to 2002/03, the numbers of state school students admitted each year to our leading universities has risen both in actual numbers – from 16,900 to 22,800 – and as a proportion of the overall intake – from 61% to 68%. This 35% increase in numbers has meant that, since 1997, a total of 15,000 extra state school students have benefited from the opportunities offered by these leading institutions. It is also clear that more and more of these entrants are coming from poorer backgrounds: over the same period there has been a 49% rise in the admission of students from postcode areas which do not traditionally send pupils on to higher education – a good indicator of social and economic deprivation. Despite accounting for 30% of young people nationally, students from these areas make up only 8% of entrants to the top universities and, on the basis of their A level performance, there should be more of them.

Our analysis shows that these gains in widening access have not meant compromising on quality, or bias against private schools. The rise in overall student numbers has meant there has been no decline in students from the independent sector – in fact their numbers have increased. And far from standards falling, the average A level attainment of entrants to leading universities has increased from 26.4 points in 1997/98 to 26.8 in 2002/03 – a clear indication that these universities are not dumbing down.

Ministers should not allow the controversy over the new benchmarks to undermine the success of a range of initiatives to improve access, such as summer schools, hiring outreach officers and better university-school links. They should instead ask the new Director of Fair Access, Professor Sir Martin Harris, to work with universities to continue to develop their outreach activities, and to develop benchmarks which reflect their actual admission standards, setting challenging but realistic goals for the future.

This is no time for complacency – inequities in our education system continue to persist, and a discredited system of benchmarks threatens to undermine the gains made to date. We should recognise the significant progress made over the last five years in increasing the representation of state school students at our leading universities, and use this as a solid base from which to move forward.

Since its foundation, one of the principal activities of the Sutton Trust has been to work with schools, universities and the Government to ensure that state school pupils, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, take up their fair share of places at our leading universities.

In 1997, when the Trust was founded, Government performance indicators, or ‘benchmarks’, showed that the top 13 universities, identified as those with the highest average rankings in surveys published by *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* in 2000<sup>1</sup>, were taking only 61% of their intake from state schools, despite the fact that – based on A levels obtained and mix of subjects studied – 72% of the candidates eligible for admission came from the state sector. Then, as now, we view realistic benchmarks as a means of encouraging those involved in higher education to address these anomalies; ensuring that universities both encourage more candidates from maintained schools to apply and work towards a fairer admissions process.

However, the recent release of the 2002/03 performance indicators by HEFCE showed a sharp rise in the state school admissions benchmarks for the top 13 universities, from 75% in 2001/02 to 80% in 2003/04. In particular, Cambridge’s benchmark rose from 68% to 77%, while Oxford’s increased from 69% to 77%. These rises – due to changes in the way the benchmarks are calculated, using UCAS tariff points rather than A level grades – have been viewed by our leading universities as an unfair moving of the goalposts, which render the benchmarks meaningless. In turn, commentators have accused the Government of promoting social engineering, the ‘dumbing-down’ of standards and overt discrimination against the independent sector.

The truth is that every year there are many state school students achieving the necessary academic standards, but not attending our leading universities. But it is also the case that the benchmarks now being set by HEFCE – as opposed to those initially set by the present Government – overstate the number of students with appropriate qualifications.

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<sup>1</sup> The universities are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York. For consistency we have kept the same 13, but on a revised ranking all but two would remain.

The Sutton Trust has always believed that facts should be allowed to tell the story. And three incontrovertible facts lie at the heart of this debate:

- Firstly, compared with 1997, the total number of young entrants to the leading universities has increased by 6,000 a year, and this increase has come almost entirely from the state sector, where numbers have risen by 5,900 to 22,800, or 35%. This means that over the last five years, over 15,000 additional state-educated young people have gained access to the first-rate teaching, facilities and employment prospects offered by the top institutions.
- Secondly, it is not just state school pupils from the middle and higher social classes who are benefiting from this shift. Numbers of students admitted from low participation backgrounds have increased by 49% since 1997, compared with 20% for those from the more affluent postcode areas, and a general increase in student numbers of 22%.
- Lastly, far from requiring the lowering of standards, the widening of access to our leading universities has not required any compromise on quality or bias against private schools. The average A level score for entrants to the leading 13 has actually risen since 1997, and there remain some 3,000 state educated pupils each year who achieve the A level grades necessary to enter our top institutions, but who, for a variety of reasons, do not end up there.

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## Changes to the state school admission benchmarks

In previous years the HEFCE benchmarks were calculated on the basis of A level attainment and subject mix, giving a pool of candidates who were sufficiently qualified to be eligible for entry to each institution. The latest figures, however, use the UCAS points tariff as the basis for determining this candidate pool, so as well as counting A and AS levels, they include GNVQs and AVCEs. Furthermore, there is now no cap on the number of qualifications that can be counted, so a candidate with a large number of passes at a low grade can achieve the same tariff score as a candidate with a small number of passes at the highest grade.

In addition, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has changed the weighting attached to different A level grades. Under the old system, an A grade was worth 10 points, whereas an E was worth only two points (a 5:1 ratio); with the system in place since 2001, an A grade is worth 120 points, but an E is worth 40 points (a 3:1 ratio). What this means in practice is that an A grade (three of which are required for admission to over-subscribed courses at many leading universities) does not have the same premium that it used to.<sup>2</sup>

The sharp rise in the 2002/03 benchmarks for many of the leading universities (notably Oxbridge, but also Bristol, Imperial, LSE and Warwick) is mainly due to these changes. These institutions continue to make A level-based offers, as before, so the fact that the benchmarks include other post-16 qualifications is irrelevant to their admissions criteria, and results in the calculated numbers of potential entrants being far higher than the numbers who, in practice, would be eligible for admission. Research by Cambridge University suggests, for instance, that in 2002/03 over 55,000 students achieved 360 tariff points or more (the equivalent of 3 As at A level), but of those, only 17,000 actually achieved 3 A grades at A level, and so would be in a position to meet the standard Cambridge offer.

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<sup>2</sup> For full details of the new tariff, see [www.ucas.ac.uk/new/press/archive/news1999,press1012.html](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/new/press/archive/news1999,press1012.html)

## State school entrants

The focus on benchmarks has served to obscure a success story. Since 1997, universities, the Government, the Sutton Trust and others have been funding a range of programmes – such as summer schools, partnerships between schools and universities, and the use of outreach officers – that encourage suitably qualified state school students to apply to our leading universities. Again, the facts about the impact of these initiatives should be allowed to speak for themselves: both the number and the proportion of state school students entering these institutions has increased over the last five years.

As can be seen from the table below, York and Warwick increased their already high proportion of state school students; Birmingham has increased its intake by 9 percentage points; Oxford by 8 percentage points to 55%; and Cambridge by 6 percentage points to 58%. Overall, total admissions have increased by 5,975 (or 22%) and state school admissions by 5,888, from 61% of entrants in 1997/98 to 68% in 2002/03. The rise in overall numbers has meant there has been no decline in

Figure 1: State school admissions: performance 1997/98–2002/03

	1997/98			2002/03			Increase	
	Total young entrants	State school entrants	% of total intake	Total young entrants	State school entrants	% of total intake	in state school entrants	% points increase
<b>Birmingham</b>	3,314	2,316	70%	4,460	3,519	79%	1,203	9%
<b>Bristol</b>	2,310	1,271	55%	2,725	1,739	64%	468	9%
<b>Cambridge</b>	2,712	1,402	52%	2,975	1,714	58%	312	6%
<b>Durham</b>	2,418	1,499	62%	3,130	2,138	68%	639	6%
<b>Edinburgh</b>	2,979	1,826	61%	3,340	2,194	66%	368	5%
<b>Imperial</b>	1,278	684	54%	1,430	897	63%	213	9%
<b>LSE</b>	493	280	57%	685	453	66%	173	9%
<b>Nottingham</b>	2,768	1,885	68%	4,290	3,123	73%	1,238	5%
<b>Oxford</b>	2,957	1,384	47%	2,980	1,651	55%	267	8%
<b>St Andrews</b>	964	578	60%	900	562	62%	-16	2%
<b>UCL</b>	2,134	1,233	58%	2,445	1,501	61%	268	3%
<b>Warwick</b>	2,009	1,549	77%	2,440	1,898	78%	349	1%
<b>York</b>	1,264	1,002	79%	1,775	1,408	80%	406	1%
<b>Totals</b>	27,600	16,909	61%	33,575	22,797	68%	5,888	

*(Our calculations of actual student numbers are based on percentages of the total number of young entrants to the universities each year, rather than the proportion of those with known data. As a result, the numbers cited may differ slightly from those given by HEFCE/HESA.)*



admissions from the independent sector – in fact their numbers increased from 10,700 in 1997/98 to 10,800 in 2002/03.

The aggregated data of the leading 13 universities, shown in Figure 2, gives us a broader picture of admissions for highly able state-educated young people. Given the clear difficulties of using the latest benchmark figures (discussed above), we have instead assumed a rise in line with previous years; from 75.4% in 2001/02 to 76% in 2002/03.

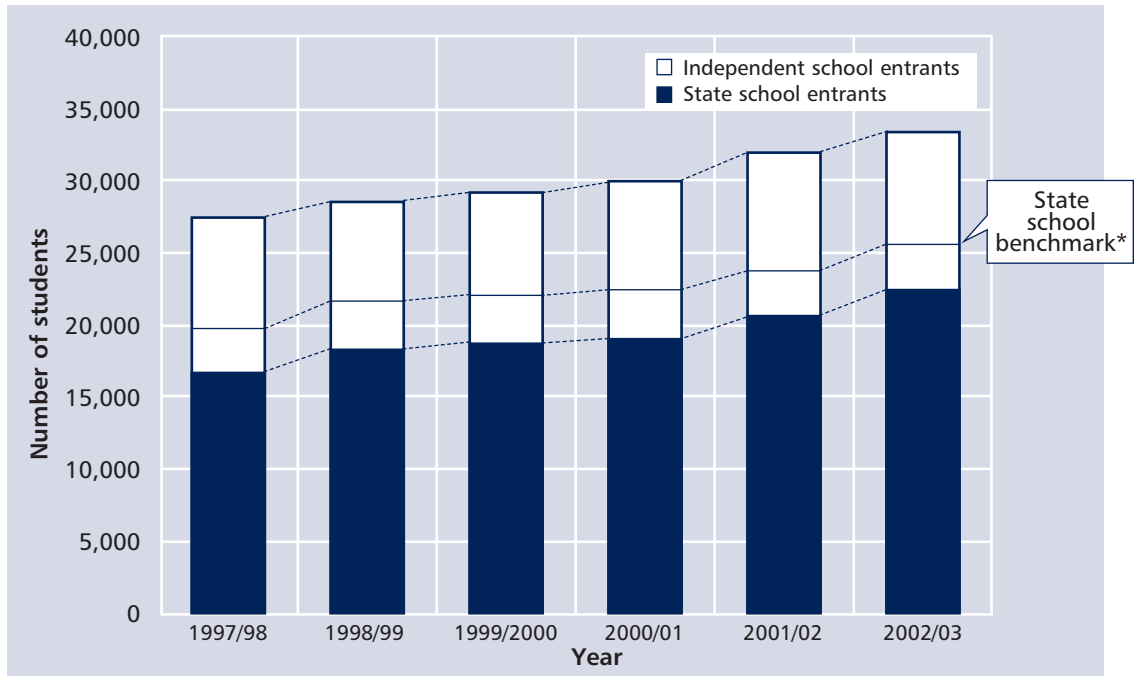
Figure 2: Overall admissions performance of the leading universities, 1997–2003

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
<b>Total number of young entrants</b>	27,600	28,900	29,500	30,000	31,700	33,600
<b>Benchmark from state school</b>	19,800 (71.7%)	21,500 (74.4%)	21,800 (73.9%)	22,400 (74.7%)	23,900 (75.4%)	25,500 (76%)*
<b>Actual intake from state schools</b>	16,900 (61.2%)	18,400 (63.7%)	18,700 (63.4%)	19,300 (64.3%)	20,700 (65.3%)	22,800 (67.9%)
<b>Difference</b>	2,900 (10.5%)	3,100 (10.7%)	3,100 (10.5%)	3,100 (10.4%)	3,200 (10.1%)	2,700 (8.1%)
<b>Increase in state school entrants since 1997/98</b>	–	1,500 (9%)	1,800 (10%)	2,400 (14%)	3,800 (22%)	5,900 (35%)
<b>Cumulative numbers of state school beneficiaries</b>	–	1,500	3,300	5,700	9,500	15,400

(\* The actual benchmark for 2002/03 – calculated using the UCAS tariff system – is 80%)

If we also disregard the 1997/98 figures – when there were some teething problems resulting from it being the first year the figures were compiled – since 1998/99 the state school admissions benchmark has averaged around 75% and actual intake has averaged 65%, resulting in a shortfall of some 3,000 state school students each year.

Figure 3:  
Increase in state school entrants to leading universities, in relation to actual and benchmark intakes



\* adjusted for 2002/03

## The missing state school students

Despite the fact that state school intake at the top universities has increased by 35%, or almost 6,000 students annually, there are still some 3,000 students from the maintained sector ‘missing’ from these top universities each year.<sup>3</sup> These are students who achieve A level grades high enough to attend our leading universities, but who – for one reason or another – are not admitted.

Thus it remains the case that in the years 1998/99 and 2001/02, for example, 9 of the 13 leading institutions had a deficit of ten or more percentage points between the proportion of state school pupils they could be taking and their actual intake. To put this into context, since 1997 there have been over 18,000 state school students who, on the basis of their A level grades, could have been admitted to our leading universities without the lowering of entry standards.

Figure 4: Benchmark and actual state school intakes, 1998/99–2001/02

	1998/99		2001/02	
	Benchmark	Actual	Benchmark	Actual
<b>Birmingham</b>	78%	73%	80%	76%
<b>Bristol</b>	73%	57%	74%	60%
<b>Cambridge</b>	66%	53%	68%	55%
<b>Durham</b>	77%	63%	78%	67%
<b>Edinburgh</b>	78%	66%	78%	63%
<b>Imperial</b>	73%	62%	74%	59%
<b>LSE</b>	74%	62%	74%	64%
<b>Nottingham</b>	75%	72%	76%	69%
<b>Oxford</b>	68%	50%	69%	55%
<b>St Andrews</b>	80%	59%	76%	62%
<b>UCL</b>	75%	57%	76%	58%
<b>Warwick</b>	76%	77%	76%	76%
<b>York</b>	77%	79%	77%	79%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>65%</b>

(Darker shading indicates universities with deficits of 10% or more between actual and benchmark intakes.)

The good news, however, is that the number of these ‘missing’ students has remained relatively steady since 1997 at around 3,000 a year, which means that as a percentage of the universities’ overall intake, the figure has been gradually falling.

<sup>3</sup> We have highlighted these in an earlier report, *The Missing 3000*, published in August 2004.

## Low participation neighbourhoods

Admissions from state schools do not tell the whole story as far as fair access is concerned – the maintained sector inevitably encompasses young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, not all of whom face obstacles in accessing the top universities. We have therefore also analysed the intake of the leading 13 in relation to the proportion of students admitted from areas where take-up of higher education is low – commonly referred to as ‘low participation postcodes’ – which are often neighbourhoods of economic and social deprivation. Here, we see a similar trend: there has been a rapid growth in students from these localities entering the top universities, over and above the general increase in numbers.

Figure 5: Entrants to leading 13 from low participation neighbourhoods

	1997/98	2002/03	Change	% change
<b>Birmingham</b>	265	495	230	87
<b>Bristol</b>	92	155	63	68
<b>Cambridge</b>	108	161	52	48
<b>Durham</b>	193	322	129	67
<b>Edinburgh</b>	209	297	89	43
<b>Imperial</b>	64	93	29	45
<b>LSE</b>	35	43	9	25
<b>Nottingham</b>	194	287	94	48
<b>Oxford</b>	118	173	55	46
<b>St Andrews</b>	67	73	5	8
<b>UCL</b>	128	156	28	22
<b>Warwick</b>	141	185	45	32
<b>York</b>	126	146	19	15
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,741</b>	<b>2,587</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>49%</b>

The 49% overall increase compares favourably with the rate of growth for those from the more affluent postcodes, at 20%, and with the rise in overall student admissions, at 22%. The growth translates to an extra 850 students entering the leading universities from these areas each year, or 14% of the 5,888 additional state school entrants.

Even so, the numbers are small: low participation neighbourhoods account for around 30% of all young people, but students from these areas make up only 8% of the 33,575 students at the leading universities. So while we have seen an improvement from the 1997 levels (at 6% of total admissions), there is still some way to go – particularly as the proportion of the intake from poor neighbourhoods has actually fallen at some of the leading thirteen. Indeed, the difference between actual and benchmark intakes indicates that every year there remain around 500 individuals from low participation postcodes who do not take up the places they could at top institutions.

Figure 6: Entrants from low participation neighbourhoods: benchmark vs actual

		1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
<b>Benchmark</b>	% of intake	8.3%	8.5%	8.7%	8.6%	8.8%	9.0%*
	Numbers	2,291	2,442	2,568	2,596	2,798	3,022
<b>Actual</b>	% of intake	6.3%	6.6%	6.7%	6.9%	6.9%	7.7%
	Numbers	1,740	1,910	1,975	2,062	2,176	2,586
<b>'Missing' students</b>		551	532	593	534	622	436

(\*The actual benchmark calculated by HEFCE is 10.3%, but as there is some question as to the validity of the 2002/03 benchmarks, we have used an estimate based on previous years' figures.)

## The dumbing down debate

Many commentators claim that the significant progress made in widening access to the leading universities has only been made at the expense of entry standards. In other words, it is now easier to get into a top university, and this explains the increase in state school students.

Our analysis proves otherwise. Not only are there many unadmitted state school students who meet or exceed the entry requirements of the top institutions, the average A level points score of entrants to the leading universities has increased from 26.4 in 1997/98 to 26.8 points in 2002/03.

Figure 7: Average A level points score for entrants to leading 13 universities

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
<b>Cambridge</b>	29.7	29.7	29.7	29.8	29.3	29.5
<b>Oxford</b>	29.2	29.3	29.5	29.5	29.5	29.3
<b>LSE</b>	27.7	27.9	28.2	28.3	28.3	28.3
<b>Imperial</b>	27.5	27.8	27.9	28	28.1	28.1
<b>Bristol</b>	26.4	26.7	26.5	27	27.2	27.2
<b>Edinburgh</b>	26.4	26.2	26.5	26.6	26.6	26.6
<b>Nottingham</b>	25.9	26.2	26.2	26	26.3	26.3
<b>Warwick</b>	25.9	25.9	26.3	26.6	26.7	26.7
<b>Durham</b>	25.2	25.1	25.4	25.7	25.3	25.3
<b>UCL</b>	25.1	25.3	25.8	25.7	25.7	25.7
<b>St Andrews</b>	25	23.3	24.7	26.3	26.4	26.4
<b>York</b>	24.5	25.4	25.5	25.7	25.3	25.3
<b>Birmingham</b>	24.3	24.6	23.7	23.8	24.2	24.2
<b>Averages</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>26.6</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>26.8</b>

Source: Times Higher Educational Supplement, University League Tables

Much work clearly remains to be done to ensure that state school pupils – particularly those from the most deprived areas – get their fair share of places at our leading universities. But this work should not fall solely at the feet of university admissions tutors: everyone interested in education should ask why state school pupils are less likely to stay on into further education; why independent school pupils achieve a disproportionate number of the highest A level grades; and why a large number of state school pupils and those from poorer neighbourhoods are still not admitted to our top universities, despite having sufficient qualifications. It is likely that aspirations, distance from home, inter-personal skills, and aversion to debt all have a bearing on these issues. The Sutton Trust is continuing to research the nature of these obstacles in order to find practical and effective ways of overcoming them.

Crucially, achieving the goal of fair representation requires intelligent debate based on realistic benchmarks. If those benchmarks lack credibility, there is a real danger that the universities will lose the momentum to increase participation, and that the gains made to date will be lost.

The limitations of performance indicators must not be allowed to detract from the central fact that progress has been made in improving access to our leading universities, and that good work is going on at admissions offices up and down the country. More than anything, these findings demonstrate that the deep-rooted inequities in our education system can be – and are being – addressed, without compromising the high standards of our top universities.



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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