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## **The Missing 3000**

**State school students  
under-represented  
at leading universities**

August 2004

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# Preface

The analysis for this paper has been prepared by the Analytical Services Group at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The Sutton Trust is extremely grateful for their co-operation and excellent work. The views expressed in this paper are those of the Sutton Trust.

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# Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl

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The debate about who attends our leading universities has attracted considerable interest in recent years. The Government hopes to enable more young people from less privileged backgrounds to get to university, and to support more of them in attending the country's leading universities. Its opponents, including some in the independent sector, argue that this can only be done through 'social engineering': reducing the entry qualifications for students from state schools or giving them preference over their counterparts from the independent sector. Such suspicions have increased the controversy over proposals for a new Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

But, whatever the politicians' arguments, one startling fact remains. Every year there are some 3,000 well-qualified young people attending state schools and sixth form colleges who are not among the 30,000 students who are admitted to our dozen or so leading universities, despite achieving grades as good as or better than the entry requirements to courses in those universities.

This suggests perhaps a lack of ambition or confidence, but certainly a potential waste of talent. And the corollary is that, far from the university entry system discriminating against pupils from the independent sector, it is acting in their favour. There are 3,000 pupils from independent schools entering our leading universities each year who would not be there if higher achieving state pupils were taking up their fair share of places. While 45% of independent school students who obtain the equivalent of an A and two Bs go to a leading university, only 26% of state school students achieving the same grades do so.

This paper looks in some detail at these figures which have been generated by the Higher Education Funding Council and for which we are very grateful. It also examines what happens to those whom we are calling the 'missing 3,000'. We show that while they are still going to university, many are more likely to go to a new university, one of those designated post-92. Of course, there are many excellent new universities, and many fine courses provided by them. Their graduates will often emerge with degrees which require more vocational achievement than their counterparts at traditional universities.

However, there are wider social reasons why this disparity is undesirable. Our leading universities should fairly reflect the ability of the whole population, not just the small minority whose parents can afford to send their children to independent schools. Those who graduate from our leading universities have also been shown to be more likely to have better social networks, better jobs and higher salaries. Students

who do well at school should not feel discouraged or lack the ambition to attend them because of their unfamiliarity, their distance from home or their high academic standards.

We publish the data here to help inform the debate. The Sutton Trust has been trying to break down these barriers through developing summer schools and other initiatives at Oxford, Cambridge and other leading universities. The Government has adopted many of these ideas in its Aim Higher programme. But more needs to be done. The admissions task force, chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz and of which I am a member, is due to issue its final report on Admissions to Higher Education later this year. Addressing the disparities identified here will be a critical part of his task. Issues such as the timing of A levels (or their replacement) need to be addressed. But universities need to play their part too, by publishing key admissions statistics quickly to allow policy-makers to focus access measures where they are most needed. We still need to do far more to address such missed opportunities for so many.

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## Why fair access matters

The question of access to our leading universities is a crucial one for our country. Students at our leading universities have access to the best facilities and teaching, and are likely to be able to build up networks that will help them in their professional lives. This is one reason why they get better jobs and earn more than equally well qualified graduates who attended lower ranked universities. An equitable education system would ensure that every young person was enabled to achieve on his or her merits. And that means that where access seems to depend more on where students went to school than on their exam grades, we must be prepared to tackle the disparity.

## Statistical Background

Since 1999, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has published an annual report on performance indicators for universities. These reports have provided statistics for each university including the number of students admitted from independent schools, the numbers from families from less affluent social backgrounds (social classes IIIm-V) and the number of students from poorer areas (based on entrants' postcodes). As well as publishing the actual entrance statistics, HEFCE also calculates benchmark statistics, which show what the expected numbers are, based on entry qualifications obtained by students, and the subjects that those students are studying.

In May 2000, based on HEFCE statistics, the Sutton Trust published its analysis of access to the top 13 universities<sup>1</sup> (the universities' ranking was based on the average of newspaper league tables). These are described throughout this report as 'leading' or 'Sutton Trust' universities. This showed that out of the 28,000 young students who entered our leading universities in 1997, almost 11,000 – or 39% – were from independent schools. Just 7% of pupils are educated in independent schools. HEFCE's benchmarks – which show what the entry should be based on the entry qualifications obtained by students and the subjects taught at the institution – suggest that we would expect no more than 8,000 independent school pupils – 29% of the total – to have entered our leading universities.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, London School of Economics, University College London, York, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, St Andrews, Birmingham, Durham. See Appendix 1 for further details.

## Another year of missed opportunity

The Trust has updated this analysis each year, and whilst there are fluctuations in the intake in individual institutions, the overall picture remains the same: each year, 3,000 well-qualified state school students are not going to our leading universities.

State school entrants to Sutton Trust universities							
	Total entry	Entry from state schools	%	Benchmark state school entry <sup>2</sup>	%	Difference	%
1997/98	27,600	16,900	61	19,800	72	-2,900	-10.5
2000/01	30,000	19,300	64	22,400	75	-3,100	-10.3
2001/02	31,700	20,700	65	23,900	75	-3,200	-10.1

Given that the numbers of state school students entering these universities each year are below their benchmarks, the question arises as to where these state school students are going?

## New for old?

Our figures suggest that these well-qualified young people are not staying out of higher education, but they are setting their sights lower than either their grades permit or their peers in private schools. They are opting for the new universities rather than the traditional and leading institutions.

<sup>2</sup> The benchmark shows what the entry should be based on the entry qualifications obtained by students and the subjects taught at the institution.

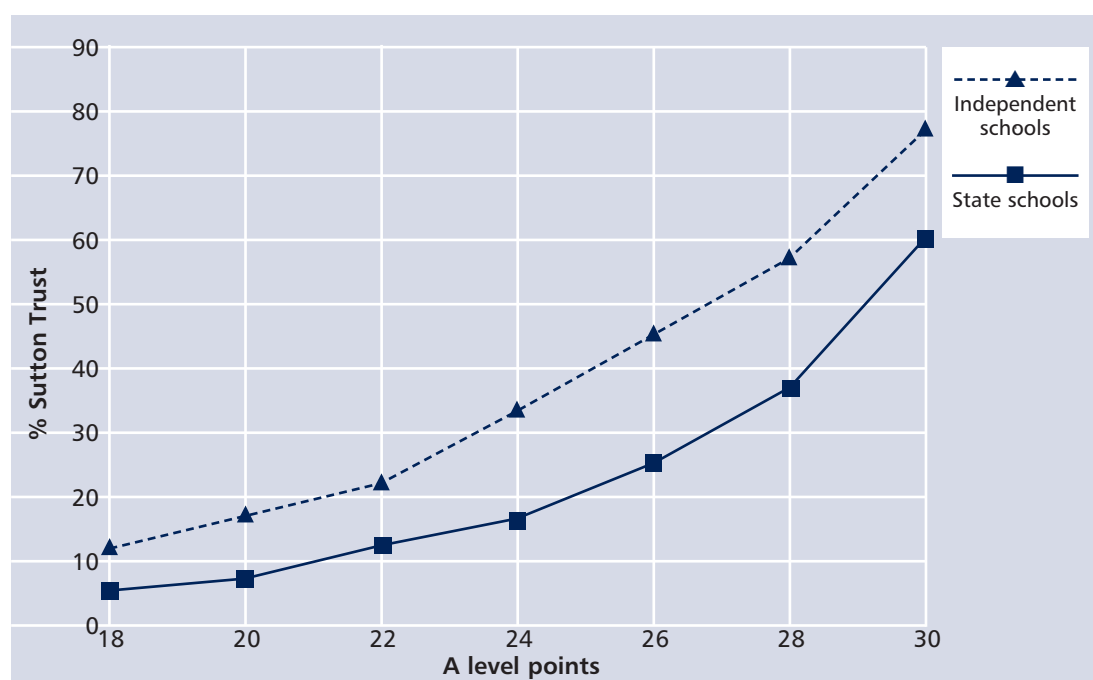
## Those attending leading universities...

In order to make a fair comparison, we have focused on the distribution of students by A level points, looking only at those gaining 18 or more points. Few students with fewer than 18 points are likely to attend our leading universities.

Figure 1 clearly shows that for any given number of A level points, a higher proportion of students from the independent sector go to leading universities than their counterparts in the state sector. One striking figure illustrates this. 45% of independent school students who obtain 26 points (the equivalent of an A and 2 Bs) go to a leading university, whereas just 26% of state school students with the same qualifications do. Another way of looking at this is that students from the independent sector are as likely to go to a leading university as students from the state sector who achieve two grades higher at A level. So, 17% of independent school students with 20 points (the equivalent of a B and 2 Cs) go to leading universities, as do 17% of state school students with 24 points (the equivalent of three Bs).

Of course, this does not necessarily mean there is discrimination against state school students by universities. There will be a number of different reasons, including the different pattern of applications. But it does suggest that thousands of pupils from state schools are not getting the same opportunity to fulfil their potential as their counterparts in the independent sector.

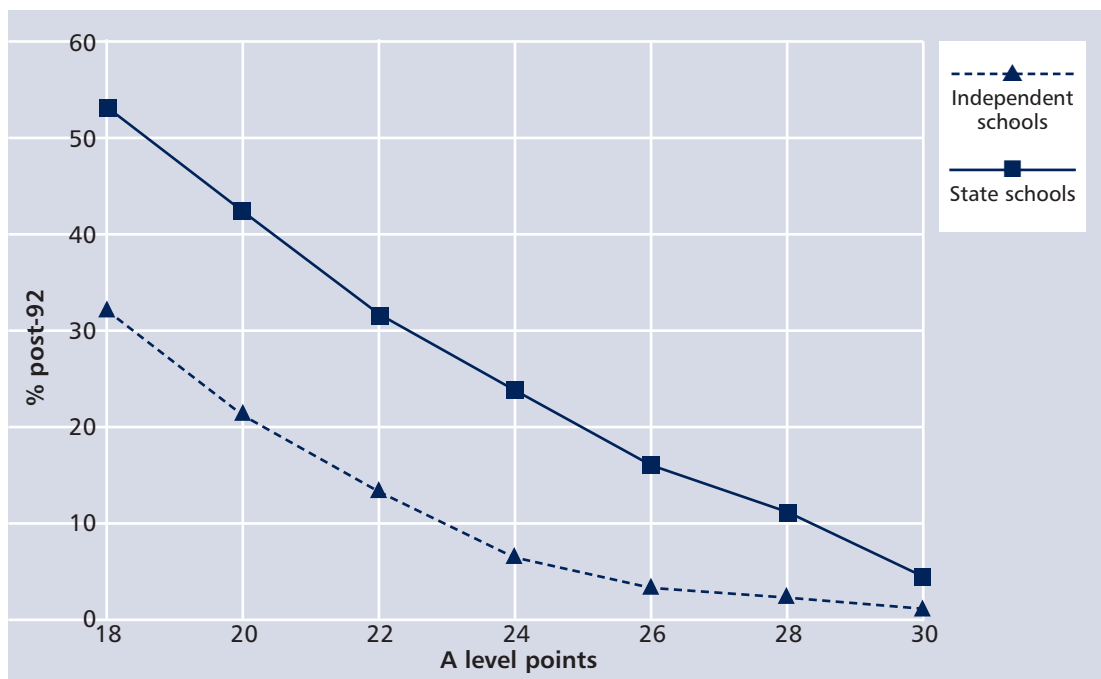
**Figure 1:** Percentage of entrants going to the 13 leading universities



## ...and those attending new universities

If many able young people are not attending our leading universities, then where are they going? The figures suggest that they are going into higher education, but they are choosing other universities, including those established after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. So, the pattern is reversed when we look at the percentage of entrants going to post-92 institutions, as compared with those attending the leading universities. In this case, for any given grades, independent school entrants are much less likely to go to post-92 institutions. Again, the gap is about four A level points: 31% of independent school students who gain 18 points at A level go to a post-92 institution, as do 31% of state school students who gain 22 points. This is shown in figure 2 below.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of entrants going to post-92 institutions



This results in substantial numbers of students who appear to be ‘over-qualified’ for their choice of course. For example, 2,670 state school students with 26 points or more (the equivalent of at least ABB) entered post-1992 institutions (almost 10% of the total cohort). Just 197 independent school students who achieved the same grades entered post-92 institutions (less than 2% of the total cohort).



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The pattern of entry to Russell Group and other pre-92 institutions falls between these extremes. We can show the changing pattern with increasing A level points by calculating the proportional increase (decrease) in numbers of state school entrants that would be needed to give the same proportions going to different institution types as for independent school students (see Appendix 2). This is not supposed to represent a practical proposal, it merely shows the differing patterns.

## **One reason for the disparity: distance travelled to university**

One reason why there may be this startling disparity could lie in students' willingness to travel. Preliminary analysis indicates that on average independent school students attend universities which are further away from their homes than state school students. This appears to be the case across type of institution attended and A level points achieved. It is also the case that students from independent schools are more likely to be closer to a leading university. It is possible that part of the explanation for the lack of state school students at the leading universities is the location of these institutions, and the greater preparedness of independent school students to travel.

This has important implications for the government's widening participation agenda, much of which now promotes local outreach work. Additionally, it is clear that if students from less well-off backgrounds are to live at a university away from home, they will need greater financial resources than if they lived at home. The Sutton Trust is also interested in the pattern of applications which are made by students from different groups, and hopes to be able to produce more evidence on this important but under-researched subject shortly.

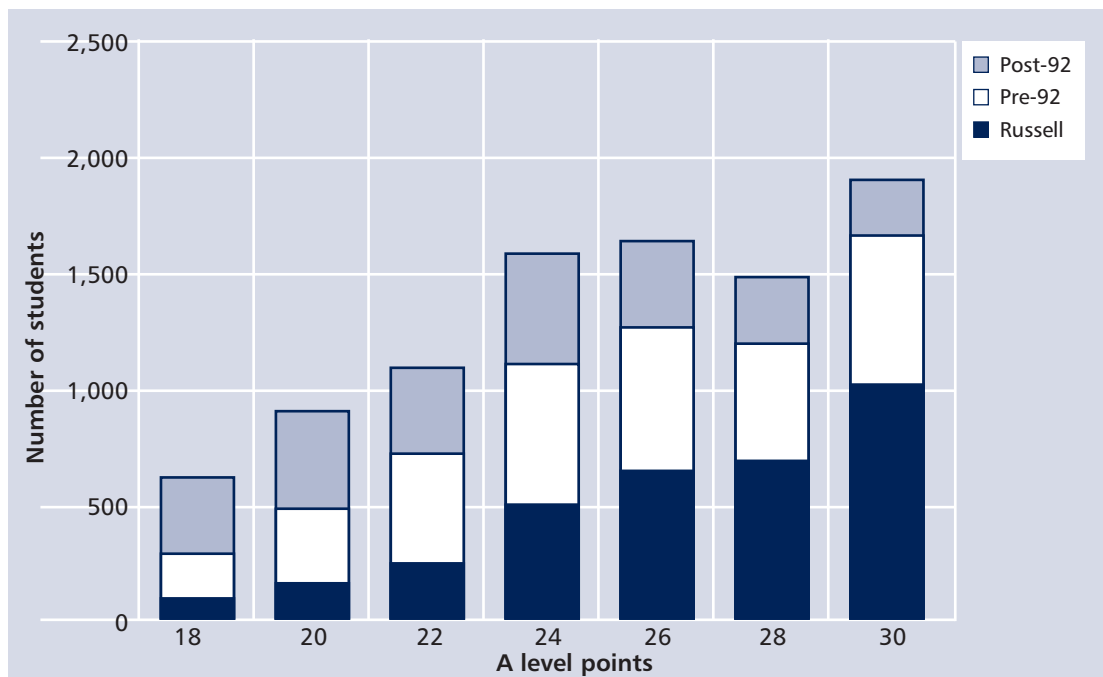
## Attracting students to leading universities – where would they have gone otherwise?

It has been suggested that the activities of leading universities, for example, putting on summer schools, only serves to attract applicants who would otherwise have attended other prestigious institutions. These data cannot test whether this is the case or not, though the Trust has evidence from many of those students attending its summer schools that their attendance has increased their willingness to consider applying to one of the leading universities.

But there is another figure we can consider. Suppose that the leading universities were to recruit the additional state school students shown in Appendix 2, and the students were taken in proportion to the numbers of state school students from the different university groups for each A level point value. The distribution of these extra state school students would be as shown in figure 3 below.

**Figure 3:**

Additional state school students drawn to leading universities from other institutions



Overall 37% would be taken from Russell Group universities, 37% from other pre-92 universities, and 26% from post-92 universities.

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## Conclusions

These figures are alarming. In the past four years, questions about university access have been politically prominent. Encouraged – and often funded – by the government, universities have spent increasing amounts of time and money on measures designed to improve access, but as this report shows the position in our leading universities doesn't reflect that investment, or the commitment to widening participation that underpins it.

Not every high achieving student who decides not to apply to a leading university is making a mistake. There are, of course, many excellent and academically demanding courses at other universities, where students will be able to reach their full potential. But the gap between state school students and their peers in the independent sector has significant implications for their later ability to access the best jobs and to contribute fully to society.

It is beyond the scope of this research precisely to identify the factors which are stopping state school pupils taking up the share of places at leading universities which their A level achievement merits. However, other research funded by the Sutton Trust and National Association for Headteachers and carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research suggests that a lack of confidence is a major factor in dissuading able students from applying to universities with demanding entry qualifications.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, we are unable to track students through the application procedure by looking at their applications to, offers from and places taken up at different universities. In order to increase transparency in this key area, it is important that universities should follow the example of Oxford and Cambridge by publishing key admissions statistics in a timely fashion. Publishing this breakdown would allow access measures to be focussed where they are needed most.

What the data show most clearly is that there continues to be a major problem regarding access to our leading universities for talented students from state schools. It is important that the recommendations of the Schwartz committee on admissions, and the debate around the Office for Fair Access, are seen in this context. There is still much to be done to ensure equitable access.

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<sup>3</sup> *Supporting students applying to higher education*, W. Keys, K. Mason, L. Kendall (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2002).

## **Definitions used**

### **Population**

This study uses the latest HEFCE Performance Indicators, which were published in December 2003. The analysis is based on English students with known school types who were beginning a first degree.

### **Institution type**

The groupings for institutions used are described as ‘Sutton Trust’, ‘Russell Group’, ‘Pre ‘92’ and ‘Other Institutions’. These groups have been defined to be mutually exclusive, so that an institution that is a member of both the Sutton Trust’s top 13 Universities and the Russell Group will be counted as a ‘Sutton Trust’ or ‘leading’ university. The Russell Group therefore excludes the ‘Sutton Trust’ universities, and the ‘pre-92’ institutions exclude those in either the Sutton Trust or the Russell Groups.

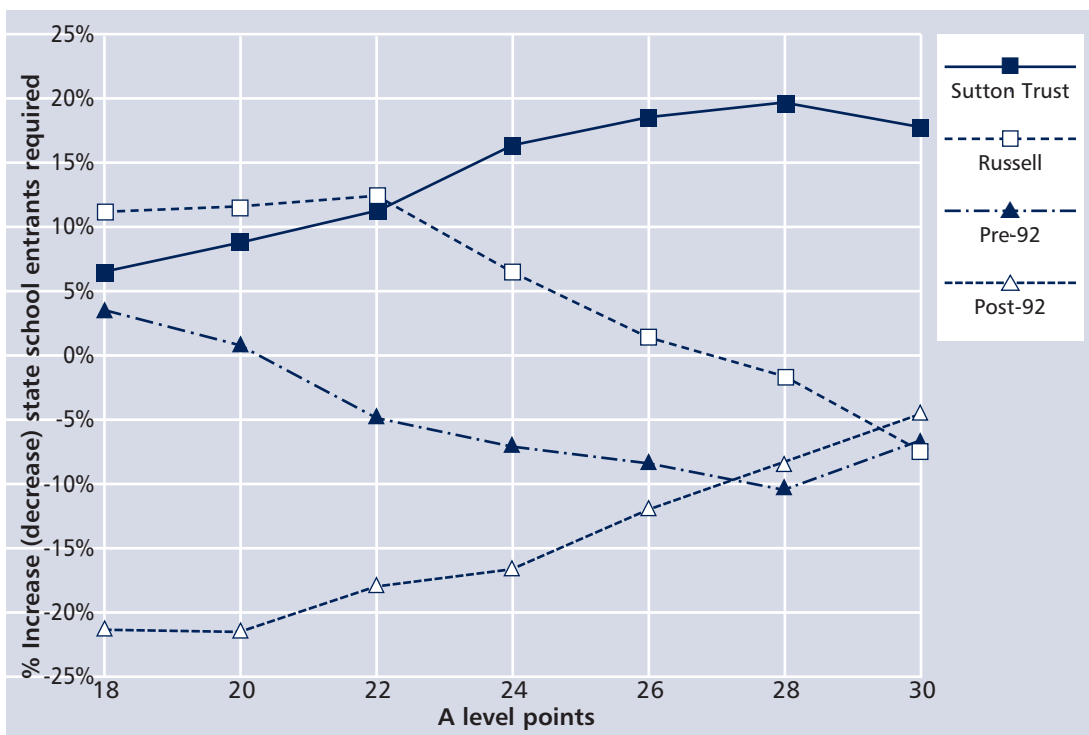
The 13 ‘Sutton Trust’ or ‘leading’ universities are: Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, London School of Economics, University College London, York, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, St Andrews, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Durham. This list was determined by using the average ranking from surveys published by *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* in 2000. Subsequent updates show there is little change in the rankings.

## Statistical Definitions and Notes

### Proportional changes

In the graph below, we can see that at the lower end of the A level range, state school students are under-represented at all the pre-92 institutions. At the top end, by contrast, the under-representation at the leading universities is balanced by a surplus of state school students at all the other institution groups.

**Proportional change in numbers of state school students required to have the same institutional distribution as independent school students**



## Odds ratios

This pattern can also be shown by plotting the ratio of odds ratios for the different institution groups.

An example for students with 30 A level points:

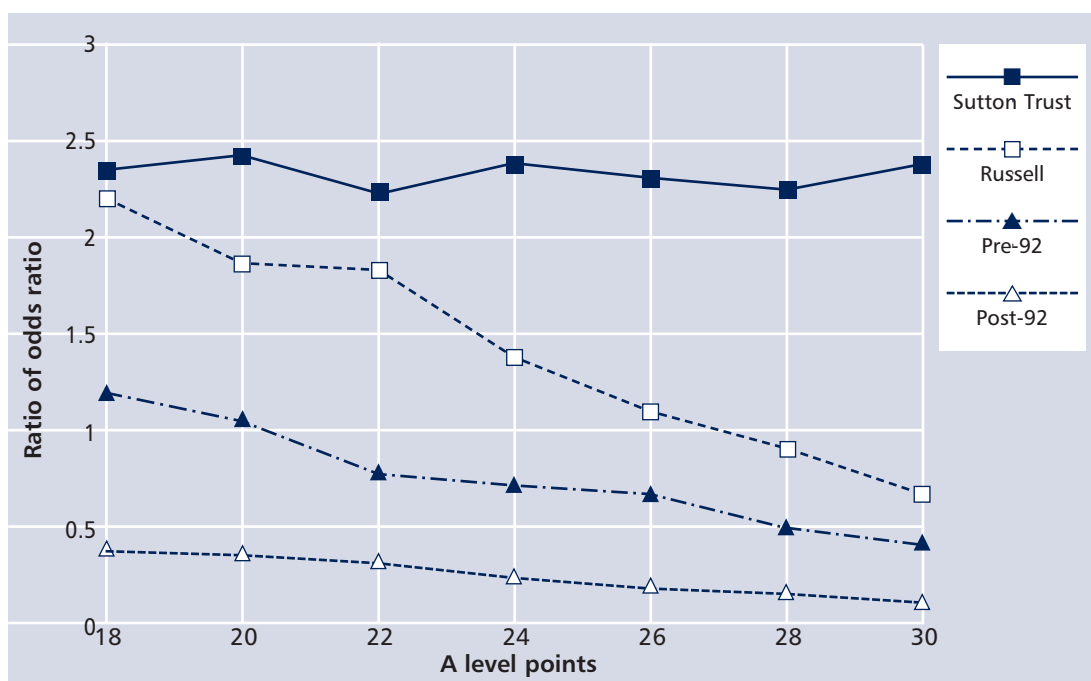
	Independent	State
Percentage of students with 30 points going to a leading university	78.2%	60.1%
Percentage of students with 30 points not going to a leading university	21.8%	39.9%
Odds ratios: Times more likely to go on to a leading university than not to go to a leading university	=78.2 / 21.8 3.60	= 60.1 / 39.9 1.51
Ratios of odds ratios	=3.60 / 1.51 2.38	

The ratio of odds ratios compares the likelihood of an independent and a state school student going to a leading university given that they have 30 points.

For this cohort, if the ratio of odds ratios is more than 1, then independent school students are more likely to go to a leading university. If the ratio of odds ratios is below 1 then state school students are more likely to go to a leading university.

The 2.38 shows that the independent school students are more likely to enter a leading university than state school entrants. The graph below shows a plot of these values.

## Ratio of odds ratios



This clearly shows that the under-representation of state school entrants at Sutton Trust goes right across the range of entry qualifications.



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