Primed for success? State school entry to prestigious universities

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Introduction

This paper presents research that examines five state schools where significant numbers of students go on to attend prestigious universities. It is based on interviews with staff and with students who applied to prestigious universities in the 2007/08 academic year.

The definition and number of ‘prestigious’ universities is, not surprisingly, a contentious issue. There are various supposed indicators of status, such as membership of the Russell Group, the 1994 group, or more generally being a pre-1992 university. In this paper we base our analysis mainly on those groups of universities that are sometimes referred to as the Sutton Trust 13, largely because of available data. However, consideration is also given to another, overlapping, measure of status, membership of the Russell Group.

These universities are variously described as ‘elite universities’, ‘top universities’, ‘leading universities’ and so on. In this paper 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’.

There appear to be considerable benefits that result from attending prestigious universities. For example, forthcoming research suggests that the type of university attended can have a huge impact on earnings later on in a graduate’s career (see Hussain et al. and Power and Whitty, both forthcoming).

Yet access to these universities appears to be uneven by school type. 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.

1 The Sutton Trust 13 are 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.
2 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.

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 2 are comprehensives. Of the top 100 schools for Oxbridge entry, 80 are independent schools, 18 are grammar schools and, again, only 2 are comprehensives.

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. 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 (the smallest had 162 students). Secondly, they had to have a free school meal (FSM) rate higher than the national average over a five year 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 paper. The five case study schools that were selected are located in the following areas: Birmingham, Doncaster, Leeds, inner London and outer London.

At least 5 staff members were interviewed in each school, totalling 29 interviews. 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 each 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 their having applied to a prestigious university. The entire sample had 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 were male and 19 were female. Eleven of the students had two graduate parents, 10 had one graduate parent, and 16 were first generation higher education applicants. Twelve of the students also had older

3 Throughout this report students coming from families where neither parent went to university will be referred to as ‘first generation’ students.
siblings who have either been to or are at university. Twenty-one of the sample had been students at the schools since Year 7 and 16 joined in Year 12. Twenty students were White British and 15 were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (2 did not want their ethnicity to be recorded).

This paper is somewhat narrower in scope than the full report (see Curtis et al., 2008). While the full report looks at school characteristics, the university application process and university status differentiation, this paper focuses on the latter two areas. It aims to explore the processes through which students choose universities, the guidance they receive and their perceptions of universities’ status. In addition, teachers’ role in this process and their own perceptions of university status is also considered.

The paper begins by briefly looking at the characteristics of the case study schools before moving on to the university application process. This includes decision-making, perceptions of status, aspirations and Oxbridge entry. At the end of the paper various policy implications are discussed.

The case study schools

In some respects, the five case study 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 and its ethos is informed by Christian Gospel values. It has over 1200 students on role with a sixth-form of around 150. It has the most disadvantaged intake of the five case study schools with an average of just under 40% of students being eligible for FSM over the last 5 years.

**Inner London School (North London)**
This voluntary-aided girls’ school is the smallest of the five schools, with just under 1000 students, and is located in an ethnically diverse inner London area characterised by extremes of wealth and poverty. It has had an average FSM rate of just over 20% over the last 5 years. The school has a long-standing tradition of academic success and espouses liberal and individualist values. Its sixth-form is the proportionately largest in relation to the rest of the school in the sample, with over 400 students.

**Yorkshire School (Doncaster)**
This is a very large school in Doncaster, with just under 2000 students taught across a split site. The ethos is caring and ambitious, with a strong element of social justice and had an average FSM rate of just under 20% over 5 years. The sixth-form, with over 500 pupils, is the largest in the study. It recently announced that it is joining the Trust Schools programme.

**Northern School (Leeds)**
This school in Leeds has over 1500 pupils and 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. It has had an average FSM rate of 20% over the last 5 years. The sixth-form has just over 200 students.

**Greater London School (Outer London)**
This is an academically ambitious school with over 1400 students which serves an area of predominantly second generation Asian families in east (greater) London. The sixth-form has over 450 students. Its ethos emphasises achievement and success. Although the catchment area has pockets of economic disadvantage, and an average FSM rate of 17% over 5 years, the school has levels of attainment well above the local authority and the national average.

**School characteristics**
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. Yorkshire School is almost twice the size of the average school.

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.

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. This meant that there was less variety of teaching styles in sixth-form and the teaching was more prescriptive. Three of the schools, Midlands School, Yorkshire School and Greater London School, were reviewing the nature of pedagogy at this level partly out of concern that good practice in the main school was not always being carried through to the sixth form.

All the schools emphasised the importance of extra-curricular activities, yet the level seemed to vary. Activities include *Amnesty International* groups, charity work, involvement with the local community, sport and the arts. 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 university application process – especially where interviews are involved.

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4 The generic term ‘Asian’ is used here to include families of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other Asian countries’ heritage.
Applying to university

In our questionnaire sample of 488 Year 13 students, 405 were applying for entry in 2008. Participants listed their five choices of higher education institutions (HEIs) in order of preference. In total 140 different HEIs were cited.

Table 1 indicates the first choice institution of all of students who were intending to go into higher education. It notes the overall percentage that applied 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 that applied to an institution that is either in the Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group as their first choice:

Table 1: Proportion of students that applied to Sutton Trust and Russell Group universities and average predicted grades.

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

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 that applied 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. Yet at these two schools a large proportion of students applied to Leeds (a Russell Group University). Overall, Inner London School, on all of the above measures, had the most applicants to prestigious universities by some distance, and these are mainly to institutions outside the city.

It is worth briefly looking at the profile of those that applied to these universities to ascertain the extent to which their aspirations might simply reflect their background characteristics rather than other influences, such as the initiatives put in place by the schools we were investigating. The table below presents the relationship between parental education and those applying to prestigious universities:
Table 2 Year 13 students’ applications to prestigious universities by parental experience of HE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sutton Trust 13 University</th>
<th>Russell Group University</th>
<th>Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither parent</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those students with two graduate parents were over 20% more likely to have applied to prestigious universities than first generation students.

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. 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). Therefore those planning to stay in the parental home can have their potential university choices greatly restricted.

The table below presents the proportion of students in the sample that were planning to stay in the parental home by school.

Table 3 Year 13 students intending to stay at home by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Plan to stay in the parental home</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands School</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London School</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire School</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern School</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater London School</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were great differences between the schools in the respect. This in part reflects family background. Overall, students with two graduate parents were nearly 20% less likely to be planning to stay at home than those with one graduate parent and first generation students.
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 in this respect.

**Understanding the landscape of higher education**

In order to gain a greater insight into the decision-making process and perceptions of university status, 37 students were interviewed in more depth. These students 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 had 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.

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 more 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.

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 student 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. 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.

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 not clear 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 league 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.

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. Yet the Head of Sixth-Form at the school felt that the staff also had a ‘duty’ to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of the students and their parents:

Often their parents now don’t remember the old civic universities and the polytechnics which converted […] That is a problem. There is no background knowledge or appreciation of status of universities. So we do do some work with them.

Therefore status differentials appear to be made more subtly and are conveyed on an individual student basis. She outlined 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.

Applying to a range of universities in terms of status within the original five choices was quite common.

The staff interviewed also emphasised 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 Andrew’s as opposed to picking Sussex. So we do try and talk through with them all those kinds of issues.

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.

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

‘Cooling out aspirations’

While there were some anxieties about students under-aspiring, all of the schools referred to over-aspiring as an issue and some of the staff 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 believed that certain 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.

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.

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’.

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.

Research has indicated that those students from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to receive accurate predicted grades (Hayward et al., 2005). 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.
The table below 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 at A level).

### Table 4 Year 13 students applying to prestigious universities by predicted grades and family educational background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental experience of HE</th>
<th>Sutton Trust 13 University</th>
<th>Russell Group University</th>
<th>Sutton Trust 13 or Russell Group University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicted below 300 tariff points</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither parent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted 300 tariff points or above</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>68.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither parent</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 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 potentially 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. But this proposal has met from opposition from both Oxford and Cambridge, as well as Million+, a think-tank which represents new universities (Lightfoot and Asthana, 2008: 22).

**Targeting students for Oxbridge**

While there appeared to be no overt systematic strategy to push students towards prestigious universities on the whole, certain students were clearly steered towards Oxbridge. In contrast to recent research suggesting that some state school teachers are hesitant to recommend to their highest achieving students that they should apply to Oxford or Cambridge (Sutton Trust, 2008), there appeared to be strong encouragement to do so in the case study schools. 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 in 2008 by school is presented in the table below:
Table 5 Oxbridge applicants in 2007-08 by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Oxbridge Applicants</th>
<th>Offers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midlands School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London School</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire School</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater London School</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>67</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 who were made offers. In their current cohort 11 had 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.

Sometimes students needed encouragement to apply for Oxford or Cambridge, and there were instances where a teacher planted the idea in their heads. More generally staff could act as a role model. For example, this Cambridge applicant 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.

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 were used to dispel myths about the institution.
The case study schools seemed 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.

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.

At Yorkshire School a former Deputy Head (a graduate from Leeds University) conducts the interviews. He 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, but it does seem likely that school input is particularly important for first generation higher education students. Even within our sample of relatively successful schools, the resources available to support them varied considerably.

By steering high performing students towards Oxbridge an overt status distinction appears to have been made in the schools, but only a very narrow one. It could be argued that it is unfair to focus so many resources on such a small group of students.
Summary

The status of universities was rarely overtly discussed with the student body by staff in our five schools. In some contexts, this is because consideration had to be paid to the entire year group, many of whom did not have the necessary grades to apply to the most prestigious institutions. Nevertheless, status was clearly taken into account by both teachers and students in deciding on individual choices, along with various other factors, such as location. Students that applied to what could be seen as institutions with lower status were sometimes encouraged also to apply to the top institutions within their grade range, although instances of this were rare. More common were students applying to institutions out of their reach in terms of grades, and staff felt 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 that applied to, and also eventually entering, prestigious universities, Inner London School, is quite distinctive amongst the case study schools. Its students had frequent exposure to speakers from prestigious universities, often in events unconnected to outreach and university recruitment. They also had a high level of extra curricular activities.

In addition, 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 had the greatest percentage of students with graduate parents. They were also the students least likely to be planning to live in the parental home during university, and more generally the least likely to have been planning to stay in their home city. Not only did 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 constrained in terms of location.

It could be argued that links between schools and universities should be more greatly 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. Naturally 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 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. The 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. They could become a much more valuable tool if they were more interactive and took into account many other factors that might help students ‘sift’ through so many HEIs.
In addition, 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.

Discussion
Are the apparent differences in the status ascribed to universities deserved? If so, should students be made explicitly aware of this? Otherwise are students from graduate families, more aware of the higher education market, at an advantage in this sense as schools do not appear to provide explicit guidance? How might the disadvantages experienced by first generation higher education applicants best be addressed?
References


http://search1.ucas.co.uk/candq/grades.pdf


Lightfoot, L. and Asthana. 2008. ‘Students to “trade up” for better college’, *The Observer* August 10th, 22.


