

A Changed Institution

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THE undergraduate students arriving at the University of Oxford this October are entering a changed institution. This year's intake includes the highest ever proportion of students from UK state schools – 62.4%, up from 60.5% in 2018. The private school intake fell by 5.5% between 2017 and 2018 – the greatest relative fall since the mid-1960s. This year we have also admitted the largest ever share of female undergraduates, at 52.6%.

The way in which Oxford's undergraduates are selected has been under intense scrutiny in recent years, with the University publishing detailed statistics on the educational, social and ethnic background of its new entrants for the first time in 2018. However, concerns over the fairness of the Oxford admissions system have been widely voiced for many decades. A succession of reports was commissioned by the University over the course of the twentieth century. They concerned the twin issues of how to attract a greater diversity of students to apply to Oxford and how to ensure that those applications were assessed fairly.

Here we consider how the share of women and of state school students amongst Oxford's entrants have changed from the 1920s and '30s to the present day. In doing so, we will show how the interplay between changes in education policy at national level and changes to the admissions system at the University had a sometimes surprising effect on the make-up of Oxford's students year by year. The proportion of women students grew from 17% in the 1930s to over 50% today, while the share of students from state-funded schools rose from just 9% of all undergraduates in 1928 to over 60% ninety years later, in 2018. So how, when and why did the make-up of Oxford's students shift the most?

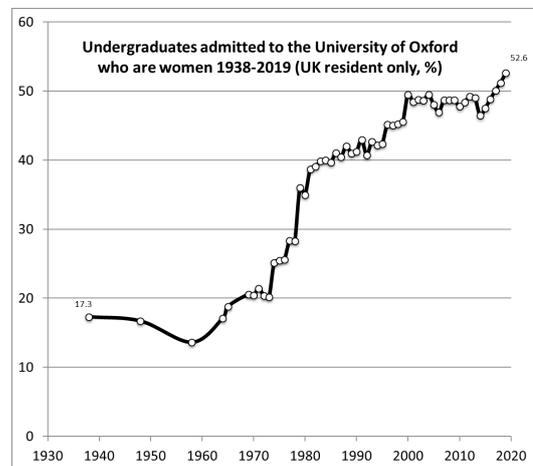
Towards gender parity in admissions

The proportion of Oxford undergraduates who were women was only one in seven in 1958, rising to one in six by 1964, one in five in 1970, one in four in 1974, one in three by 1979, and reaching 40% in 1985. In 2019, 52.6% of UK resident undergraduates at Oxford are women. However, as the graph below shows, the path to gender parity has not been steady and smooth. We saw a steep climb in the proportion of women in the 1970s, following the decision by five male colleges to admit women in 1974, with a further fifteen following suit in 1979. After almost reaching 50:50 gender balance at the turn of the millennium, the proportion of women undergraduates fell away over the next decade or so – as if the University had subconsciously decided that enough had been done on gender equality. Almost all other universities in the UK now admit a majority of women as undergraduates. Oxford joined them in 2017, when the 50% barrier for women was finally broken.

Young women overall do better at school today than young men, so if admissions simply reflected exam performance Oxford would have been a majority female student university some time ago. However, entrance to Oxford

depends on who chooses and is most encouraged to apply; how those applications are assessed; who performs best at interview; who then is offered a place; whether they accept that place (almost all do); and then – finally – whether they actually make the grades to get the places and what leniency, if any, is applied if they do not.

The focus of debates both within the University and nationally over recent decades has concerned whether Oxford is doing enough to ensure that not only women but other under-represented groups are encouraged to apply and that their applications are assessed fairly. We now turn our attention to the aspect of diversity that has most exercised University leaders and external commentators alike: the need for our undergraduate population to better represent the schools and colleges in which UK sixth formers are educated.



Sources: O.B. Franks, University of Oxford Hebdominal Council, *Report of Commission of Inquiry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); University of Oxford, *Report of the Vice-Chancellor's Working Party on Access*, May 1999; University of Oxford admissions data (1999-2019).

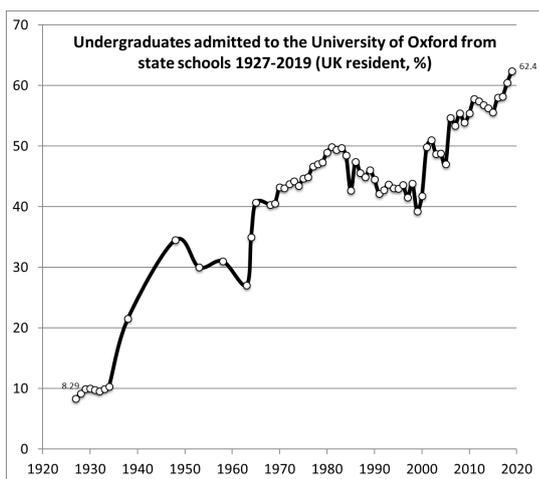
Widening access: the growth in state-educated undergraduates

A decision by the University back in 1868 to allow any man to study at Oxford under University tutors, to take the University examinations and to obtain degrees, without the expense and restrictions of belonging to a college, proved controversial because of the social diversity it was expected to usher in. It would 'throw Oxford open to a new class of students, hitherto excluded from the University by pecuniary or theological considerations' reported the *Dublin Evening Mail*. However, concerns were expressed that Oxford 'will have encumbered herself with an additional burden of youths, remarkable for nothing in particular, whose only characteristics are mental capacities of a very mediocre description, and manners probably of a very provincial stamp.'¹

Thankfully, views on the merits of diversity have changed markedly since the nineteenth century, and yet

perceptions of snobbery and elitism at Oxford persist. This is despite the concerted efforts by the University in recent decades to reach out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and to schools with no history of sending students to Oxford, all in an effort to show that being privately educated, from a wealthy family and living in the south of England are not prerequisites for gaining a place at Oxford.

The graph below shows what was achieved over the past 90 years. Just as with women, we see overall growth in the proportion of undergraduates from state schools² during this time, reaching a peak of 62.4% this year, but this has not been without significant fluctuations. Some of the sharper increases in the share of students from state schools can be associated with changes in University policy. A good example is the creation of a new, centralised admissions office following the Hardie report of 1963.³ It was only then that Oxford University introduced a standardised admissions form and a single entrance exam, whereas previously pupils applied directly to one or more colleges, which set their own entrance and scholarship exams. Many leading public schools had relationships with particular colleges, which placed pupils from those schools at significant advantage when applying to these colleges prior to 1964. The share of undergraduates coming from state schools rose from 27% in 1963, to 35% in 1964 and then 41% in 1965. This was and remains an unprecedentedly sudden shift.



Sources: O.B. Franks, University of Oxford Hebdominal Council, *Report of Commission of Inquiry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); University of Oxford, *Report of the Vice-Chancellor's Working Party on Access*, May 1999; University of Oxford admissions data (1999-2019).

The 1970s saw a sustained increase in the share of state school pupils amongst Oxford entrants. The rise coincided with two policy changes at the University. Firstly, language requirements were less stringent, with just one O Level pass in a language other than English required from 1969 and Latin no longer required from 1970. Secondly, the interplay between gender and school type affected the statistics. The admission of larger numbers of women, as many colleges became co-residential in the 1970s, was associated with an increase in the share of undergraduates from state schools, since Oxford tended to take more girls than boys from these schools. Between 1974 and 1981, an average of 52% of women undergraduates admitted were from state schools, compared to 44% of men.⁴

A major change in Oxford admissions procedure, one which had been mooted but rejected a number of times previously, was the abolition of the University entrance exam for 1997 admissions onwards. This was followed by a sharp fall in the proportion of students from private schools between 1998 and 1999, and marked the beginning of a steady increase in the share of state school students coming to Oxford, a trend which has continued to the present day. A great deal of evidence had been presented suggesting that the entrance exam was off-putting for potential applicants from state schools, and placed pupils from private schools at an advantage as they were more likely to be given opportunities to practise and prepare for the exam. Although candidates had had the option to make an application based on predicted A Level grades and an interview rather than an entrance exam since 1987 (so-called 'Mode N' entry) the greater success rates of pupils (especially those from private schools) in the exam suggested to some state school teachers that the entrance exam was the 'favoured' mode of entry.⁵

The influence of national education policy

Although changes to University policy often played a key part in altering the make-up of Oxford's student intake, the wider context should not be forgotten. The evolution of education policy in the UK had a more pervasive influence than might be expected on Oxford admissions, and it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle the internal and external influences. Taking the late 1990s as an example: the abolition of the entrance exam almost certainly helped to level the playing field for applicants from state and private schools, but the government's introduction of tuition fees a year later in 1998 is likely to have disproportionately affected students from families with modest incomes, and indeed there was a sharp increase in the proportion of students coming to Oxford from private schools, from 56% in 1998 to 61% in 1999. There was also a sustained fall in the share of undergraduates from state schools from 2012 to 2015, following the introduction of £9,000 a year tuition fees.

A major influence on University admissions (particularly for Oxbridge) from the 1950s to the 1970s was the division of schools into two types – not state and private in this case, but those who offered a 3-year Sixth Form and those who did not. The pupils perceived to be the most able in many private and selective state schools⁶ stayed on after taking their A Levels to undertake advanced work in a third year of Sixth Form. This included preparation for the Oxford entrance exam. Evidence presented to the Franks Commission in the early 1960s showed that pupils who applied to Oxford in their third year of sixth form were at significant advantage: 'the two streams in secondary education...produce boys and girls...unequally equipped to compete for entry.'⁷ Whilst the education system had been structured in this way essentially to prepare pupils for Oxbridge entrance, it was a change in Oxford's admissions policy that brought this to an end. A new admissions procedure introduced in 1987 removed the option of taking the Oxford entrance exam post-A level, which meant that a 3-year Sixth Form was no longer needed. In fact, this policy change created a 'bulge' in private school admissions as these schools rushed through their last cohort of third year Sixth formers before the change took effect,⁸ resulting in the fastest ever year-on-

year growth in private school admissions (11 percentage points) in 1985.

The division of schools into 'state' and 'private' is somewhat misleading in a historical context as there were lengthy periods (usually under Conservative governments) when a significant proportion of private school places were in fact state funded. Between 1945 and 1976, direct grant grammar schools acted as a bridge between state and private sectors. One quarter of places in these selective schools were directly funded by central government, while a further 25% were funded by the local education authority. The remaining half of the places were mostly privately funded through fees (although only 28% of pupils paid full fees).⁹ Up until 1981, an average of 16% of Oxford undergraduates came from direct grant schools. It may be a surprise to learn that more than two thirds of England's top private schools were principally state funded up to 1976. This includes 119 former direct grant schools plus 11 former voluntary aided schools whose places were all free until they became private in the mid-1970s.¹⁰

Between 1980 and 1997 the Assisted Places scheme in a sense replicated the effect of the direct grant schools. This scheme allowed more than 75,000 academically able children¹¹ from modest-income families to access private education, where otherwise they would have gone to a state school. Places were either fully or partially funded by the government, means tested on parents' income. Over one third of assisted place holders went on to Oxford or Cambridge—although they gained places with fewer A Level points on average than entrants from state schools, illustrating the persistence of the 'private school advantage' in securing Oxbridge entrance.¹² The steady increase in the proportion of Oxford undergraduates from private schools throughout the 1980s and 1990s could well have been explained in part by the operation of the assisted places scheme. Based on the Sutton Trust's calculations, up to one quarter of Oxford entrants in this period may have held an assisted place. Although they would be classed as coming from private schools, in reality their education had been wholly or partially state funded.

Conclusion

Looking back at the historic data has shown that the pace of change in Oxford is not as glacial as some may think. Several major changes in admissions policy made a marked difference to the make-up of the undergraduate population. Considering the share of state-educated students in particular, Oxford has done better than popular opinion may have us believe—partly helped by education policies championed (ironically) by Conservative governments. The University's latest admissions figures show that Oxford's undergraduate population is edging ever closer to matching the composition of UK sixth forms and Further Education colleges, with roughly 50:50 women and men and a large majority state-educated.

Although only 7% of all school children are privately educated, some 20% of sixth formers are. Moreover, two thirds of sixth formers gaining top A level grades are from state schools—not far off the current 62% of Oxford University students who were state-educated—though we do not know how many of them were privately educated before entering a state funded sixth form. New initiatives like Opportunity Oxford and Foundation Oxford will

probably bring our admissions figures ever closer to one third private and two thirds state-educated: a fairer intake than many of the Russell Group universities. The glass ceiling on female entry was finally broken in 2017, long after the rest of the Russell Group.

Now that gender parity in admissions has been achieved, and we are edging closer to two thirds state-educated undergraduates, our (and national) attention will shift. We will begin to ask what the proportion of women should be, given how much more studious young women tend to be. We will begin to look more carefully at the educational, economic and social backgrounds of undergraduates, rather than labelling them as 'state school' even if they only attended such a school for two years or attended one of the more elitist and selective of that kind. We are likely to look more carefully at both the positive and negative implicit and explicit biases at play in the admissions process, especially as regards ethnicity. And before all of that is done, we will have to question why there is so little national and local scrutiny of the social backgrounds of the majority of students we now admit: those who are postgraduates, not undergraduates.

¹ *The Dublin Evening Mail*, August 20, 1868.

² State schools here include grammar schools, comprehensives, sixth form colleges and further education colleges. We have included direct grant schools with independent schools, although up to 50% of direct grant pupils had their fees paid for by the state.

³ W. F. R. Hardie, *Report of Working Party on Admissions*, University of Oxford, 1963.

⁴ Unpublished admissions reports, Archives of the Undergraduate Admissions Office (Bodleian Library).

⁵ University of Oxford Joint Undergraduates Admissions Committee, *Report of Sub-Committee to Review the Operation of Admissions Procedures*, Interim Report, March 1994.

⁶ This was much more common in boys' than girls' schools.

⁷ University of Oxford, *Report of Commission of Inquiry*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 78.

⁸ John Izbicki, 'Fewer State pupils apply to Oxford', *The Daily Telegraph*, November 2, 1984.

⁹ D. Donnison, *Report on Independent Day Schools and Direct Grant Grammar Schools*, Public Schools Commission: Second Report, vol. I, London: HMSO, 1970.

¹⁰ The Sutton Trust, *State funded places in independent day schools before 1976*, 2012.

¹¹ Those who scored in the top 10-15% in the entrance exam for the independent schools they were to attend.

¹² S. Power, G. Whitty, E. Wisby, *The Educational and Career Trajectories of Assisted Place Holders*, Sutton Trust, 2006.