Oxbridge leaders urge 95% intake from state schools

Helen Mountfield, principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, said the university should take more state school pupils

Sian Griffiths

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College heads at Oxford and Cambridge have dismissed claims of admissions “bias” while saying that the universities should aim for up to 95 per cent of their students to come from state schools — a huge rise that would slash the proportion of privately educated students.
The leader of Britain's top private schools has said that “alarm bells” should be ringing over methods to increase state school numbers. New figures show that, for the first time, these students were more likely than ones from private school to be admitted to Cambridge.

Melvyn Roffe, chairman of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference, which represents schools including Eton and Winchester, wrote in The Daily Telegraph: “There was a suspicion that school type is being used by universities as a ‘quick and dirty’ proxy measure to make the system look fairer. It may help targets, it may have some Oxford admissions tutors fist-bumping in glee. But is it really making things fairer?”

In response, Helen Mountfield, principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, said the university should take even more state school students in order to “fairly identify talent”.

Between 2017 and 2022, the state school intake increased from 62.7 to 72.5 per cent at Cambridge and from 58.2 to more than 68 per cent at Oxford. Just 7 per cent of UK pupils at GCSE level are privately educated.
Mountfield, a human rights barrister, said: "I believe academic aptitude and intellectual interest are widely spread in society, and so I would expect universities that are fairly identifying talent to end up with about 90-95 per cent of their home students being state school educated pupils, because that is broadly reflective of where students are educated."

Mountfield is one of the earliest college heads to have attended a comprehensive school. She said the college was proud to be leading the way in boosting state school numbers. "At Mansfield, 90-96 per cent of our students have come from the state sector for many years, and we think that is because we are looking at every student on their merits," she said.

Dorothy Byrne, president of the all-women's Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, takes a similar view. A former head of news and current affairs at Channel 4, she has said: "Ideally, the UK student population at Cambridge University should reflect the percentage of pupils at state schools, which is 93 per cent."

Byrne said this weekend: "State schools are increasingly encouraging their brightest pupils with great grades to apply to Cambridge. And they are succeeding in winning places. That’s great to see. It means that, over time, there is more competition, so it will change the percentage of students from independent schools."

Both Oxford and Cambridge use contextual data in offering places. This can include taking a pupil's school into account, and checking whether they been in care, would be the first in their family to go to university and whether they live in a deprived area.
The government has urged top universities to enrol more state school students. The regulator, the Office for Students, is consulting on a new framework for access to universities.

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