Mansfield College head Helen Mountfield wants to admit more state-school students
FRANCESCO GUIDICINI

State pupils flock to Oxford college — and degree results soar

Sian Griffiths, Education Editor

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The first head of an Oxford college to be educated at a comprehensive school has said the university could take up to 90% of its students from state schools — a change that would see the proportion of privately educated students cut by three-quarters.
Helen Mountfield QC, who was appointed 18 months ago as the principal of Mansfield College, said: “I would like to see [the proportion] to be broadly representative of the society from which people come. That would be about 90%.”

It was not class war or social engineering, she said. “What you’re trying to do is recognise some of the patterns of advantage of society and ... find potential by trying to set those aside.”

Mountfield, a human rights barrister, was educated at Stationers’ Crown Woods Academy in Eltham, south London, the biggest comprehensive in England and Wales in the 1980s, and where Stephen Lawrence’s killers were pupils.

She is proud that Mansfield is leading the way in admitting state-school pupils, with 90% of offers made to state-educated teenagers this year and a quarter of its students the first in their family to go to university. Across Oxford last year, state pupils won 60.5% of undergraduate places, up from 53.8% five years ago.
Nationally, 7% of GCSE students are privately educated. The proportion doubles in the sixth form.

After her college decided to seek bright teenagers from state schools and further education colleges, its number of first-class and 2:1 degrees rose, Mountfield said. It had been “at the bottom” of the Norrington table, which ranks Oxford colleges on the classifications of degrees awarded.

“We have consistently gone up and this year we are fifth. It shows that we are . . . not saying let’s let in some poor kids as a charity case . . . but identifying cleverer people because we are looking more broadly at who might benefit from being here.”

Admissions tutors consider, among other things, whether a teenager is the first in the family to go to university and if they come from a poor area.
“It might be the person with sparky ideas [of whom] you think, ‘I can teach you to write like a dream. But what I can’t teach you is ideas.’ So we’re just trying to find the people who might be slightly fumbling for it, who haven’t been taken to the theatre all through their childhood, or seen people reading broadsheet newspapers.”

Denying that it was social engineering, she recalled how she had once discussed with a judge positive discrimination for female lawyers wanting to join the bench. “He said, ‘You know, I think it would be dreadful for women. They would feel they were only there because they were women.’ And I said to him, ‘Does it undermine your self-confidence that you’re a white man? Do you ever think, maybe I’m only a judge because I’m a white man and if I was a woman I wouldn’t be here?’”