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Is access to clinical psychology training in the UK fair?

The impact of educational history on application success

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Key words: access, equality, clinical training, selection

Word count (including summary, main body of manuscript and references, but excluding supplementary results): 3506

Summary

Whether social and not just ethnic diversity within the profession needs increasing is hard to judge without solid evidence. This study investigated whether access to clinical psychology training is “fair” with regard to the potential effect of educational advantage.

INTRODUCTION

The British education system is famously tripartite, consisting of non-selective state, selective state, and independent schools. The independent sector educates around 6.5% of the total number of school children in the UK (and over 7% of the total number of school children in England), with the figure rising to more than 18% of pupils over the age of 16. The type of school young people in the UK attend influences their life chances; attending independent schools typically leads to career and economic advantages (Green, Machin, Murphy & Zhu, 2010).

Historically, the boom in professional services in the UK was credited with enhanced levels of social mobility. However, recently social mobility has slowed with access to the professions becoming less and not more socially representative. Evidence about unequal access to the professions was investigated by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, which issued its final report ‘*Unleashing Aspiration*’ in 2009 (The Cabinet Office, 2009). The panel concluded that while exam results have improved markedly in the recent past and more young people from poorer backgrounds go to university than ever before, the door to the professions is still very often closed. A follow-up report concluded that “*across the professions as a whole, the glass ceiling has been scratched but not broken*” (Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, 2012, p.3), and that the professions, especially at the top, remain dominated by a social elite. Well over half the members of many professions attended independent schools. Thus 75% of judges, 53% of journalists, 50% of doctors, 45% of top civil servants and 32% of MPs were independently schooled, see Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

Evidence suggests that this situation is improving slightly; some professions are becoming somewhat less dominated by independent schools while others, like medicine, remain largely unchanged, and in some, like journalism, the proportion of independently educated professionals has even increased over the period 1980 to 2000, see Figure 2. Thus, despite a sharp growth in professional employment opportunities over recent decades, access to the professions is continuing to be dominated by a small part of the social spectrum.

Figure 2 about here

Fair Access and Clinical Psychology

To date, there is no evidence whether the profession of clinical psychology is representative of the social spectrum of British society, or socially exclusive like some of the professions highlighted. While the under-representation of individuals from Black and minority ethnic communities within the profession has attracted considerable attention over the years, the effects of social and educational privilege have not been examined. This seems an important omission; if clinical psychology, similar to many other professions, were found to be unrepresentative of the society it serves, this not only raises concerns about issues of fairness and inequality, but also potentially about the ability of clinical psychologists to fully appreciate the negative effects of social disadvantage and poverty on both physical health and psychological functioning (Marmott Review, 2010; Friedly, 2009). Conversely, as a *new* profession, clinical psychology does not hold the same high status as traditional professions, such as medicine or the law, so may be much less socially exclusive.

Given that clinical psychology is a graduate entry profession, figures concerning the representativeness of undergraduate psychology merit brief consideration. For the academic year 2009/10, temporally close to the 2011 applicant cohort considered in this study, 92.4% of students accepted onto undergraduate psychology degree courses in the UK came from state school backgrounds (both selective and non-selective), compared with 88.8% for the higher education sector overall (figures provided by HESA, personal communication). This suggests, if anything, that psychology as a subject area is less affected by educational advantage than other subjects. It should be noted though that the proportion admitted from state schools varies by institution, with, for example, only 54.3% of psychology undergraduate students admitted to Oxford the same year coming from state schools.

In order to examine whether access to clinical psychology training appears to be a level playing field, we set out to answer the following questions: (1) Does the type of school an applicant attended during their A level years influence the likely success of their

application for clinical psychology training? Of note, we were only able to consider education from age 16 to 18 as this is the only secondary education provider recorded on Clearing House applications. (2) Does the type of university applicants attended affect their chances of success in applying for clinical psychology training? 3) When school type, university type and degree class are considered together, are some applicants advantaged in the selection process? In view of evidence that entry to the professions in the UK is affected by educational advantage, we predicted that applicants from independent schools would fare better than those from non-selective state schools. We expected pupils from selective state schools (i.e. grammars) to do similarly well as those from independent schools due to their academic abilities.

METHOD

Application data supplied anonymously by the Clearing House for Clinical Psychology at the University of Leeds for all 3528 applicants for September 2011 entry was considered. Applicants who either did not attend a UK secondary school (n=671), and those where the type of school attended was ambiguous (138) were excluded from the analysis. This left a total of 2719 applicants who were included in the study.

Classification of Educational Background

Type of secondary school attended was classified using the UCAS classification list. As we were only interested in the main categories of education provider, each applicant was classified as having attended either: 1) a state non-selective school (comprehensive); 2) a state selective school (grammar); or 3) an independent, fee-paying school. Church run schools, academies and free schools were included in groups 1 or 2, depending on whether they select on ability. The higher education UK institutions where applicants completed their first degree were initially classified into five groups, representing their relative position in the UK higher education sector (Oxbridge; Russell Group; Pre-1992 universities other than Russell Group or Oxbridge; post-1992 universities that converted from polytechnic to university status in 1992; post-1992 universities that are not former polytechnics). Given that this classification resulted in very small cell sizes in many cases, university type was collapsed into two groups, pre- and post-1992 institutions. Finally, applicants' degree class was recorded as 1st, 2:1, or 2:2 or below. Where applicants had more than one degree, the class of their first undergraduate degree was recorded.

While it would have been desirable to take other factors into account, particularly A level grades, applicants' relevant work experience, and references, these data were not available to us in a systematic format amenable to automated processing.

Stages of Selection Process

In order to examine the potential effect of applicants' educational background on success at different stages of the selection process nationally, a hierarchical coding system was developed for the selection stage reached by each applicant: (1) rejected without interview; (2) reserve list for interview (but progressed no further); (3) unsuccessful at interview; (4) received a reserve offer (but did not ultimately obtain a training place); (5) gained a training place. The code representing the furthest stage the candidate reached across all institutions they applied to was assigned. It was not possible to consider individual outcomes for courses an individual applied to, e.g. if they were offered more than one place, due to the way data was recorded by the Clearing House. In the Clearing House system, whenever an applicant accepts a place, all other institutions to which they had applied were marked as 'place declined'. This did not affect the analysis of progress at different stages of the selection process across all institutions though.

RESULTS

Of the 2719 applicants included in the study, 77.8% had attended non-selective state schools, 9.5% selective state (grammar) schools, and 12.7% independent schools. For their first degree, 20.7% (n=562) graduated with a 1st, 72.6% (n=1973) with a 2:1, and 6.9% (n=184) with a 2:2 or 3rd. Of the 2698 applicants who completed their first degree in the UK, 64.2% attended a pre-1992 university (n=1731) and 35.8% a post-1992 university (n=967). Those who had attended non-UK universities were excluded from all analyses concerning the type of university where an applicant completed their first degree. Here we report on analyses designed to develop a model that takes account of the effect of school type, university type and degree class on application success simultaneously. Separate analyses looking at the effect of school type and university type in isolation are available in a supplementary file.

Loglinear analyses were computed to simultaneously investigate simple and higher-order interactions between these factors. The variables considered in these analyses were: school type (S), university type (U), degree class (D) and whether or not an applicant was rejected without interview (R) or succeeded in gaining a place (P), the two stages that showed significant effects of school type on application success (see supplementary data). The data

were analysed backwards and stepwise, starting with the highest order interaction (SUDP/R), to find the optimal model to fit the data.

Rejection without interview

There were no three-way or four-way interactions between the variables; the model providing the best fit to the data contained only two-way interactions, $\chi^2(20)=15.89$, $p>.05$. This non-significant result indicates that the data predicted by the model was not significantly different from the observed data, indicating the model was a good fit. The model shows a number of two-way interactions relating to outright rejection (SR, UR, DR). Applicants who attended a non-selective state school were more likely to be rejected without an interview than someone from a grammar or independent school, as were applicants whose first degree was from a post-1992 university. Regarding the effect of degree class, there was a significant difference between the proportions within each degree class who were rejected, $\chi^2(2)=122.46$, $p<.001$. Of applicants with a 1st class degree, 34.2% were rejected outright (190 out of the 556 applicants who had a 1st from a UK university), as were 56% of applicants with a 2:1 (1090 out of 1960 of those with a 2:1), and 75.3% of applicants with a 2:2 degree (137 out of 182 of those with a 2:2) were rejected; all comparisons between the three groups were also significant ($ps<.001$). Thus applicants with 2:1 and 2:2 degrees were more likely to be rejected compared to those with 1st class degrees, and applicants with 2:2 degrees were more likely to be rejected than both other groups.

In summary, when all three factors were considered together, applicants were more likely to be rejected if they had attended a non-selective state school *or* went to a post-1992 university *or* graduated with a 2:1 or 2:2. However, applicants with all three factors together (or two out of three) experienced no significant *additional* disadvantage in terms of the likelihood of being rejected without interview.

Gaining a place

Again there were no three-way or four-way interactions between the variables; the model providing the best fit to the data contained only two-way interactions, $\chi^2(20)=11.13$, $p>.05$. For offer of a place a number of two-way interactions were identified: SP, UP and DP, analogous to the two-way interactions relating to being rejected without interview. So, an applicant who attended a grammar school was more likely to be offered a place than someone from a state school and as likely as someone from an independent school. An applicant whose first degree was from a pre-1992 university was more likely to be offered a place than an applicant from a post-1992 university. In terms of degree class and place offered, subsequent

analyses showed there was a significant overall difference. Of applicants with a 1st class degree, 29.7% were offered a place (n=165), compared to only 14.6% of applicants with a 2:1 (n=287), and 3.8% of those with a 2:2 or 3rd (n=7), $\chi^2(2) = 93.30, p < .001$; all comparisons were significant, $ps < .001$.

There were also two two-way interactions not involving place offered, DU and SU. In other words, the degree place x university type interaction (DU) and school type x university type interaction (SU), although significant, did not affect whether or not a place was offered. By way of example, while going to a grammar school increased the likelihood of getting into a pre-1992 university, this effect was not cumulative, that is it did not also increase the likelihood of gaining a training place. Therefore, of the factors analysed, applicants were more likely to be offered a place if they had been to a grammar or independent school *or* went to a pre-1992 university *or* obtained a 1st class degree. However, applicants with all three together (or two out of three) showed *no* significant additional advantage in terms of being offered a place.

DISCUSSION

This study is the first to address the question whether access to clinical psychology training is fair, in terms of potential inequities in the likelihood of applicants from different educational backgrounds gaining access to clinical psychology training places. To answer this question, the present study examined the effects of school and university type on the outcome of applications to UK clinical psychology training courses. In order to account for differences in the quality of applications, we took applicants' undergraduate degree class into account. While other factors not considered here, not least A level grades, applicants' work experience, personal statements and references, are taken into account in selection for clinical psychology training, if entry to the profession was as much influenced by social and educational privilege as other professions one would expect key indicators of such privilege, namely school and university type, to predict the likelihood of gaining a place.

The findings suggest that access to the profession is fair to a point. The profession, at least at the training grade, is much less dominated by privately educated individuals than other professions for which we have data (The Cabinet Office, 2009). Only 13.9% of those who gained training places were privately educated, compared to 45% of medics and over 50% of journalists in the UK. Likely reasons for the much lower proportion of independently schooled applicants for clinical psychologist include the apparent much lower appeal of this

career for privately educated individuals compared to more traditional professions such as medicine, journalism or the law. Secondly, clinical psychology is a graduate level entry profession. Thus, unlike for example medicine and law, where A level grades are key to gaining entry, the selection criteria for clinical psychology training are much broader. Furthermore the fact that training places are salaried may mean that the profession is more attractive to individuals from less economically advantaged backgrounds.

Of note, the vast majority of psychology undergraduates come from state schools, suggesting that psychology as a whole appeals to a diverse student body. However, in one year (2009/10), 92.4% of undergraduate psychology students came from state school backgrounds (non-selective and grammar), yet 86.1% of individuals starting clinical psychology training in 2011 did. Assuming these rates are fairly stable over time, this suggests a drop-off in the proportion of state school attendees from undergraduate to post-graduate clinical psychology level.

Considering the initial selection stage, rejection without interview, attending a non-selective state or post-1992 university or graduating with a 2:1 or 2:2 made rejection more likely. However, having two or three of these factors simultaneously was not associated with any additional disadvantage. The very same findings applied to offer of a place- while any one of these three factors increased the likelihood of not being offered a place, applicants were not placed at a greater disadvantage if two or three of these factors applied.

While reports about the effects of educational privilege such as *Unleashing Aspiration* focus on the distinction between state and privately educated individuals, our findings suggest that it is important to distinguish selective and non-selective state schools. The finding that applicants from grammar and independent schools were less likely to be rejected at the earliest stage than those who had attended non-selective state schools may be due to these two groups having better academic qualifications overall. However, the finding that independently schooled applicants were no more likely than their peers from non-selective state schools in ultimately gaining a place, might suggest that they are more likely to be offered an interview, perhaps due to better training in self-presentation in formal applications. Interestingly, at interview, grammar school pupils were far more likely to be successful than applicants from either non-selective state or independent schools. This may not be too surprising given that young people who gain a place at a grammar school do so mostly on the basis of outstanding academic ability, which is likely to also place them at an advantage further along in their careers. Of note though, only 24% of English education authorities have

grammar schools, thus most academically able pupils are likely to attend non-selective state schools.

A further point at which educational privilege may create a risk of unfair access to the professions relates to the potential advantage of attending a university that is more highly regarded by selectors. The UK higher education sector is highly stratified and the prestige as well as quality rating of different institutions varies markedly. In an admittedly crude comparison of graduates from “old” (pre-1992) and “new” (post-1992) universities, the latter were far more likely to be rejected without interview and much less likely to gain a place, a finding that is cause for concern and merits further investigation. At undergraduate level, around 52% of students who major in psychology in the UK do so at post-1992 universities (HESA, personal communication). However, only 36% of applicants for clinical psychology training were graduates of post-1992 institutions. This drop-off in the proportion of post-1992 graduates becomes even more pronounced for those who gained training places; only 23% of places offered to UK graduates went to those who studied at post-1992 institutions. Given that we found no 3-way interactions between university type, degree class and application outcome, the apparent advantage of pre-1992 graduates cannot simply be attributed to them having better degrees and thus a lower rate of rejection at the shortlisting stage. Future research should investigate whether the higher success rate of graduates from pre-1992 institutions may be attributable to factors other than the ones examined here. This question is even more important given that some population groups are concentrated in new universities, not least individuals from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (Turpin & Fensom, 2004). Furthermore with the introduction of much higher tuition fees many undergraduate students, particularly those from less wealthy backgrounds may feel compelled to stay closer to home and simply go to the nearest university, rather than the most aspirational.

Whether or not the results reported might be explicable in relation to differences in interview performance and applicant characteristics we cannot judge. It is possible that applicants’ A level grades, the range, volume and quality of their relevant work, and quality of personal statements and references could account for at least some of the effects observed. Some further limitations merit consideration. In view of the fact that a large proportion of applicants for clinical psychology training hold 2:1 degrees (72.6% of UK graduates in the current study), many training courses make a distinction between high, mid and low 2:1 degrees. As we did not have access to applicants’ degree transcripts, we were only able to examine the effect of degree class, without distinguishing the quality of 2:1 degrees. Finally,

in drawing conclusions from the present findings we should be very mindful that what is presented is a snapshot of one application cycle.

Conclusions

The present findings suggest that selection for clinical psychology training is fair to a degree with reference to the potential advantage conferred by social and education privilege. However, it would seem important for training courses to scrutinise their selection procedures, and particularly the status attached to degrees from different universities, information that, unlike school type, is readily available to selectors, not least due to intense media coverage of university league tables.

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Figures for main version of article

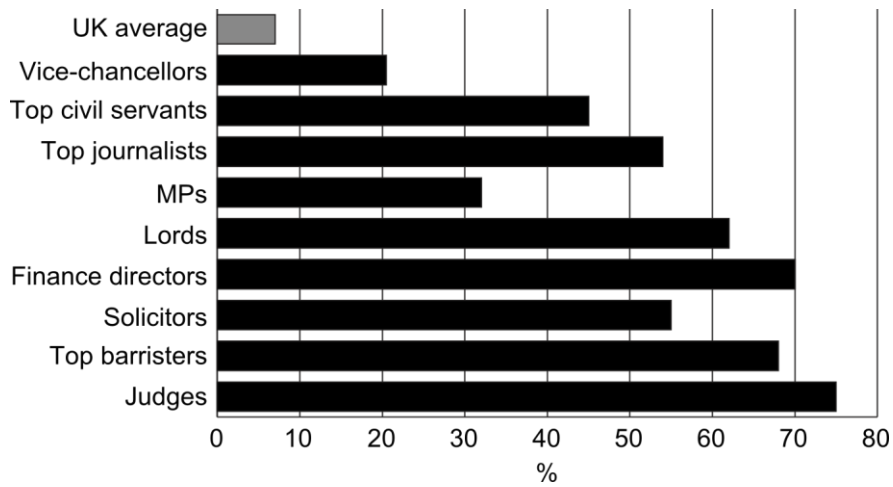


Figure 1: Proportion of professionals independently schooled by profession

(Taken from 'Unleashing Aspiration')

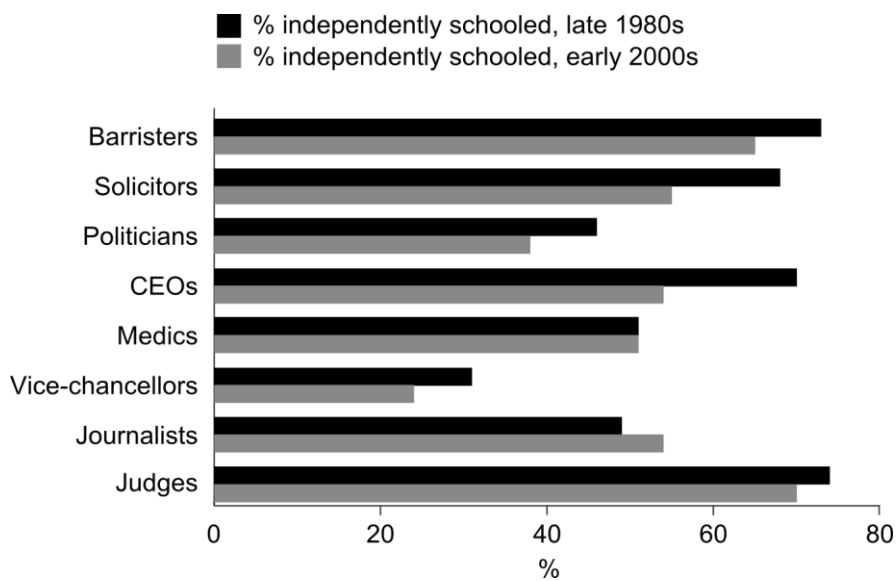


Figure 2: Percentage of professionals independently schooled, 1980s v 2000s

(Taken from 'Unleashing Aspiration')

Supplementary results to be made available as e-only

Effects of school type on application outcome

Of the 1437 applicants who were rejected without being offered an interview by any course, 81.1% had attended non-selective state schools, 7.4% grammar schools, and 11.5% independent schools. Of the 461 applicants (17% of applicants included in the analysis) who gained a place, 72.7% had attended non-selective state schools, 13.4% grammar schools, and 13.9% independent schools, see Figure 3.

Figure 3 about here

In order to examine the effect of school type on selection stage reached on its own, we compared the three school type groups at key stages of the selection process, see Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The proportions of applicants from each of the three school types who reached different stages of the selection process differed significantly for two stages, namely rejection without being shortlisted and offer of a place. There were no differences in the proportions placed on interview reserve lists, unsuccessful at interview or placed on reserve lists for a place post-interview.

In subsequent analyses we focused on the two stages where significant results were found. For those rejected without interview, the difference between non-selective state and grammar schools was significant, $\chi^2(1)=17.06$, $p<.001$, as was the difference between non-selective state and independent schools, $\chi^2(1)=6.24$, $p<.05$, but there was no significant difference between grammar and independent schools, $\chi^2(1)=2.41$, $p>.05$. For those offered a training place, the only significant difference was between non-selective state and grammar schools, $\chi^2(1)=11.10$, $p<.001$, with no significant difference between non-selective state and independent schools, $\chi^2(1) = 1.61$, $p>.05$, and independent and grammar schools, $\chi^2(1)=1.68$, $p>.05$). This suggests that attending a non-selective state school placed applicants at a disadvantage compared to their peers who attended grammar schools or independent schools. While one might argue to grammar school pupils were more likely to be successful due to their greater academic ability, it is important to note that only 36 of 152 local education

authorities in England have grammar schools and that the proportion of pupils schooled at different school types varies markedly across the UK.

Effect of university type on application outcome

Of those applicants who completed their first degree in the UK (N=2698), 64.2% attended a pre-1992 university (n=1731) and 35.8% a post-1992 university (n=967). Of those rejected without interview across all training courses who attended a UK university (N=1425), 58.1% (n=828) completed their first degree at a pre-1992 university, and 41.9% (n=597) at a post-1992 university. Of the 460 applicants who gained their first degree from a UK university and accepted a training place, 76.7% (n=353) graduated from pre-1992 institutions, and 23% (n=106) from post-1992 institutions, see figure 4.

Figure 4 about here

Among applicants who graduated from a pre-1992 university, 47.8% were rejected without an interview, compared to 61.7% of those who graduated from a post-1992 university, $\chi^2(1)=48.13, p<.001$). Thus when we consider only university type, without taking into account other applicant factors, applicants were more likely to be rejected if they graduated from a post-1992 institution. Of those applicants who gained a place (n=459), 76.9% had attended a pre-1992 university, and only 23.1% a post-1992 university. Looked at differently, among applicants who graduated from a pre-1992 university, 20.4% gained a place, compared to only 11.0% of those who had attended a post-1992 university, $\chi^2(1)=39.09, p<.001$. Thus when we consider only university type, without paying attention to other applicant factors, applicants were more likely to be offered a training place if they graduated from a pre-1992 institution.

Tables and Figures for supplementary results

Table 1 –Number and proportion of sample from state, grammar and independent schools reaching each stage of the application process

	Rejected without interview n=1437	Interview Reserve List n=252	Unsuccessful at interview n=299	Accepted place n=461	Reserve offer n=264	Total N=2719
Non-selective state	1165 (55.1%)	185 (8.7%)	220 (10.4%)	335 (15.8%)	206 (9.7%)	2116
Selective State (Grammar)	107 (41.5%)	31 (12.0%)	28 (10.9%)	62 (24.0%)	30 (11.6%)	258
Independent	165 (47.8%)	36 (10.4%)	51 (14.8%)	64 (18.6%)	28 (8.1%)	345
Chi-squared (2 df)	21.03**	3.57	5.84	11.7*	2.08	

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Note: Totals do not amount to 100% in all cases as six applicants withdrew their application after being shortlisted/interviewed.

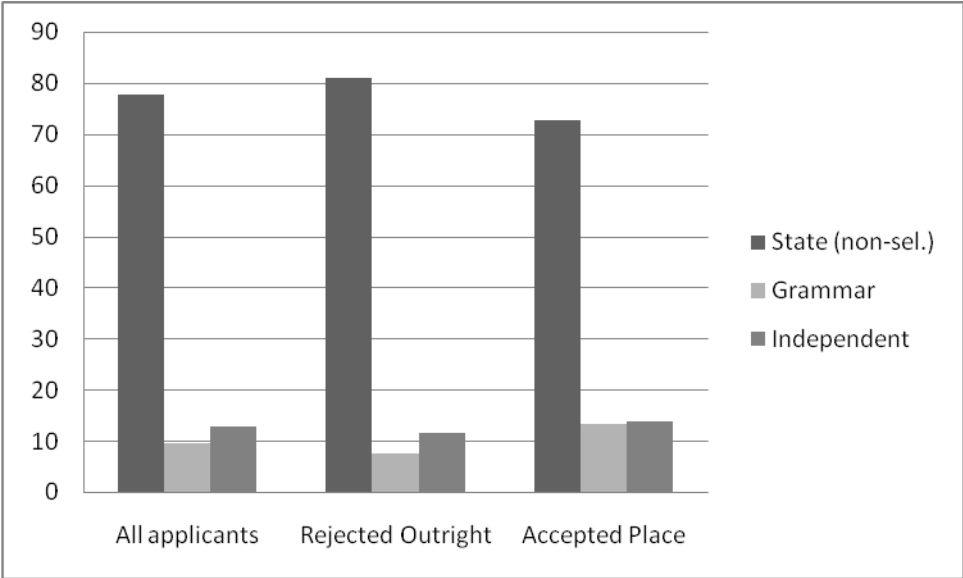


Figure 3: Proportion of applicants reaching key stages by school type

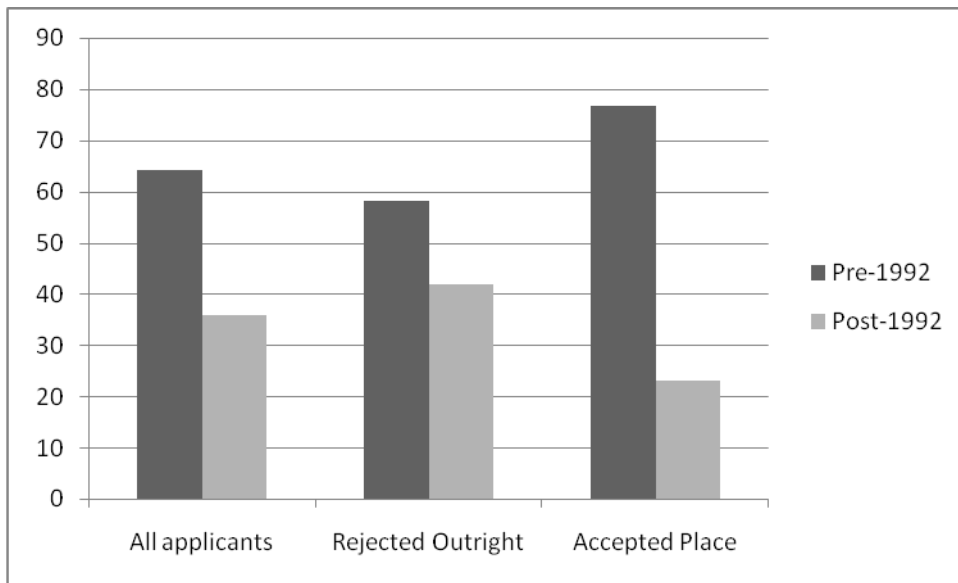


Figure 4: Proportion of applicants reaching key stages by university type

