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# **Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are grammar schools the answer?**

**Edited by John Furlong  
and Ingrid Lunt**



**Occasional Paper 22**

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## Foreword

**Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI**

Iain Mansfield's paper on *The Impact of Selective Secondary Education on Progression to Higher Education* (2019) is the second most controversial publication HEPI has issued in the last five years – behind one on open access and slightly ahead of a survey on students' illegal drug use.

Iain's paper used data to argue selective schools do well in getting pupils from under-represented groups to the UK's most selective universities. One new data point that stood out was on the number of grammar school pupils with Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds at the University of Cambridge. This led Iain to claim BME state school pupils are five times more likely to reach Oxbridge if they live in a selective area rather than a non-selective area.

The debate about grammar schools was encouraged by Iain's paper to such a degree that a group of experts asked for a right to reply. In the chapters that follow, academics from the University of Bath, Durham University, the University of Glasgow, the University of Oxford and UCL's Institute of Education approach the whole issue from different angles and question Iain's evidence and arguments.

The authors argue, for example, that the data in the original HEPI paper cannot bear the weight put upon them. They say any positive benefits for individuals from attending grammar schools are outweighed by negative effects on those who do not pass the 11+. They also firmly reject Iain's contention that personal ideologies may have infected the academic debate.

It is a fascinating and enduring question why, when there is such a broad consensus against grammar schools among educationalists, they continue not only to survive but to thrive. As Iain's paper implied, one answer could be that their existence reflects the demands of highly-selective universities.

The hyper-selectivity of our older universities is tackled directly by Professor Tim Blackman, the only vice-chancellor in the collection. As he heads up perhaps the only truly comprehensive UK university, the Open University, there is no one better to ask if the arguments against academic selection for children also apply to adults.

Professor Blackman suggests diversity encourages effective learning in classrooms and persuasively argues this is likely to be true of lecture halls too. In other words, more diverse institutions can encourage less effective homogenous learning environments but homogenous institutions could encourage more diverse and more effective learning environments. The deep-seated support for selectivity and hierarchy in higher education may be inimical to better learning in more diverse groups as well as providing grammar schools with a reason to exist.

The role of think tanks is often misunderstood, especially when they delve into controversial public policy questions. Our role is not to push a particular position but to make people think. Taken together, Iain Mansfield's original paper and this data-rich riposte will, we hope, encourage healthy debate about the place of academic selection in both compulsory and post-compulsory education in the twenty-first century.

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# Introduction

**John Furlong and Ingrid Lunt**

Despite the small number of pupils involved, the ‘grammar school question’ is still fiercely debated among academics and politicians. Proponents of state-funded selective schooling invariably claim it enhances social mobility by providing the opportunity for bright children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to access a high-quality secondary education alongside other similarly high-ability children, with positive impacts on educational attainment and subsequent life trajectories. Arguments against the system include its apparently divisive nature, the unfairness of the 11+ examination and, above all, evidence that suggests the system depresses overall educational achievement within a general catchment area and has a particularly negative effect on the poorest children in that area.

There are currently 163 grammar schools in England, left over from the general move to comprehensive schooling that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. They educate around 167,000 pupils – that is around 5 per cent of the total number of secondary pupils in the state-funded system of about 3,000 state secondary schools as a whole. Importantly, these grammar schools are not evenly distributed across the country. Some local authorities, such as Buckinghamshire, Kent and Lincolnshire, have maintained an overall commitment to a selective school system, with the majority of their young people being educated either in grammar schools or in secondary moderns. In other areas with grammar schools, there are comparatively small numbers of grammar schools with most young people going to their local comprehensive

schools, with grammar schools working alongside them. Yet whatever their distribution, it is clear that grammar schools are a small part of our educational system overall.

A significant recent political intervention was made in 2016, when Theresa May, as the incoming Prime Minister, made a commitment to extend selective education, by allowing existing grammar schools to expand and undertaking to allow new ones to be established where there was clear local demand. In reality, the expansion during Mrs May's time in office was relatively modest, though her intervention did breathe life into this longstanding debate. It may be that the relative lack of progress in the promised expansion of selective provision was the stimulus for the most recent intervention in the debate, made by Iain Mansfield in early 2019 in a HEPI Occasional Paper entitled *The Impact of Selective Secondary Education on Progression to Higher Education*.<sup>1</sup> His aim, explicitly stated in the recommendations at the end of the paper, was to put the issue of grammar schools firmly back on the policy agenda. This second HEPI paper on the topic is intended as a rejoinder to Mansfield.

Mansfield's argument in favour of grammar schools is an empirical one: it is based on his evidence that they contribute to social mobility. In itself, this is not a new argument but here it is presented with a new twist. Mansfield makes the point that we need to take seriously the fact that, although the number of children in grammar schools from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds (as measured by Free School Meals) remains low (currently only about 3 per cent instead of the 9 per cent that could be expected), the intake to grammar schools overall demonstrates that significant numbers of children from modest income backgrounds do gain places.

Drawing on Department for Education data he argues that 45 per cent of grammar school pupils come from families with income levels below the median income.<sup>2</sup> This, combined with what he argues is clear evidence that grammar schools have a disproportionate success in placing their students in selective higher education, particularly at Oxbridge, means they are a significant force in promoting social mobility in England. In other words, he argues that for middle and lower-income families, if not the lowest-income families, grammar schools are a significant force for good and we should therefore promote them, even though there are still challenges in making sure they provide equal opportunities for all pupils.

But is it true? Does Mansfield's evidence back up his argument that overall grammar schools are a positive force for social mobility? A central purpose in this rejoinder to his discussion paper is to test the evidence. Given his arguments are empirically based, if his methods or his evidence are flawed then his argument must fall. At least, this is what the first three of our contributors argue.

Matt Dickson and Lindsey Macmillan examine Mansfield's methodology and argue it is flawed.

- The first issue concerns problems with the data, which mean the proportion of disadvantaged students attending selective schools is largely overstated. The Department for Education itself warns the income data used are incomplete and particularly so for higher-income families. So large numbers of higher-income families are excluded, making it appear that a larger proportion of grammar school students come from poorer households than is actually the case.

- Their second issue questions the statistical analysis, which they argue conflates correlation with causality, thus overestimating the selective school advantage. There are differences between areas which chose to keep grammar schools, which are generally more affluent areas, and those that became comprehensive. This means it is not possible to attribute all differences in progression rates between selective and non-selective areas to grammar schools rather than differences in the pupil population or other factors.
- Dickson and Macmillan's third point is to claim Mansfield ignores the impact of selective schooling on those who do not attend grammar schools and the 'aggregate impact on social mobility'.

In the second section, Vikki Boliver and Queralt Capsada-Munsech argue Mansfield's argument cannot be sustained because key elements of the data are missing. They say the Department for Education data used by Mansfield relate only to those pupils who were still in education at Key Stage 5 (that is, post 16), thereby ignoring the pupils leaving school at 16 in secondary modern schools. Further missing data relate to family income. Boliver and Capsada-Munsech conclude Mansfield's claims for grammar schools tell us nothing about the causal mechanisms involved and whether it is grammar schools that are having an effect or other factors.

Then, Alice Sullivan considers previous research on the issue of grammar schools and social mobility. Drawing on the three major longitudinal datasets of 1946, 1958 and 1970 cohorts, she argues there is substantial robust data to suggest grammar schools have not acted as an engine of social mobility in Britain.

Data from the 1958 cohort show the benefits of attending a grammar school were balanced by the disadvantages of attending a secondary modern school, leading to no overall social mobility advantage. Evidence from the 1970 cohort study show that, after controlling for factors such as family background and cognitive test scores on entry to grammar school, there was no statistically significant advantage in the chances of accessing an 'elite' university for students from grammar schools.

As we have suggested, Mansfield's arguments in favour of grammar schools are primarily focused on their contribution to social mobility; they are based on empirical evidence that our first three chapters consider problematic. But the arguments about grammar schools are not only concerned with their effectiveness in promoting social mobility and are not only empirical; they can be moral as well. As Coe et al argue in their authoritative review of the literature on the grammar school debate on behalf of the Sutton Trust, there are a large number of other concerns about grammar schools.<sup>3</sup> There are, for example, concerns the 11+ selection tests are unreliable. Coe et al provide evidence to suggest that around 22 per cent of pupils are routinely wrongly allocated, making the decision to offer a grammar school place something of a lottery. Even if the 11+ test were reliable, the assumption that ability is something fixed by the age of 11 is highly problematic. In reality, ability is something that changes over time.<sup>4</sup> Identifying a subset of pupils for special treatment at the age of 11 is therefore both arbitrary and unfair.

Another concern is the impact that selection at age 11 has on the educational chances of those not selected. As Dickson and

Macmillan demonstrate, there is strong evidence that where they are part of a wider selective system, grammar schools depress rather than increase overall levels of achievement for the whole school population. Moreover, there is evidence that the negative impact of failing the 11+ can be long lasting. In their large-scale study of adult learners, Rees et al found attitudes to learning of many people, even in their 60s, were still coloured by whether or not they had passed the 11+.<sup>5</sup> Such findings raise moral concerns about the impact of selection. There are also moral arguments against the social segregation that is the consequence of selective secondary education. Given that, notwithstanding Mansfield's arguments, children from better-off families are over-represented in grammar schools, those schools increase rather than decrease social divisions. This, many argue, is unacceptable. At a time of increasing social division and inequality in England, we believe what is needed is a high-quality and comprehensive system which educates all pupils effectively, as is clearly demonstrated by countries such as Finland.<sup>6</sup>

The final contribution, by Tim Blackman, raises a further challenge to Mansfield's argument. Fundamental to Mansfield's position is a taken-for-granted assumption that selective higher education is a 'good thing' – that if we can only get the selection mechanisms right, then 'supercharging' the life and career chances of that small minority of 18-year olds who have access to Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities, is an unquestionable social good. Blackman raises questions about that assumption, arguing that perhaps it is time to reconsider the social value of what is in effect one of the world's most highly-selective higher education systems.<sup>7</sup>

# A methodological critique

**Matt Dickson and Lindsey Macmillan**

We offer a methodological critique of the claim that selective schooling contributes to social mobility by enabling better access to elite higher education, made by Iain Mansfield. We make three points that challenge this claim:

- i. there are significant data issues that mean the proportion of disadvantaged students attending selective schools is overstated;
- ii. the statistical analysis is flawed, conflating correlation with causality, and therefore severely overestimating the selective school advantage in (elite) higher education progression rates; and
- iii. the conceptual methodology is limited, ignoring the impact of selective schooling systems on those who do not attend grammar schools.

Taken together, these three critiques offer the opposite conclusion: selective schooling limits social mobility.

## *i. Data issues*

One of the key statements made in Mansfield's paper – and the foundation for the claim that the grammar system enhances social mobility – is that:

*Grammar schools have a socially diverse range of pupils, with 45 per cent coming from families with income levels below the median income for families with children.*



This 45 per cent figure is repeated 15 times in the 60-page paper. However, as is clearly outlined in the Department for Education *Technical Report* from which this figure derives, the income data used is incomplete and particularly so for higher income families:

*The data and threshold used to define households as below the median income in this analysis should therefore be treated as provisional. Caution should be taken in drawing definitive conclusions from these findings until we have completed further work.*<sup>8</sup>

Despite this cautionary note from the Department for Education, the 45 per cent figure is repeated unqualified. The data issue is driven by the difficulty of linking records on parental income to records of pupils' education in the National Pupil Database (NPD). While parents who claim any form of benefit can be linked to their children's education records, there is no way to link parents, particularly second parents who are not the recipients of the Child Benefit payments, who do not claim benefits. This means parental income records are only linked to pupils' education records for middle and low-income families typically. This is reflected in the Department for Education report's acknowledgement that 70 per cent of pupils in the data come from households with income below the national median for families with children.

A calculation of the proportion of the full distribution that would need to be missing to result in this 70 per cent figure suggests that the top 30 per cent of the income distribution is likely to be unobserved. Indeed, in recent discussions with the Department for Education, they have made it clear that the data are only considered reliable for the bottom 60 per

cent of the income distribution. So Mansfield's claim is based on an analysis that excludes large numbers of higher-income families. With these families missing, it will inevitably appear that a larger proportion of grammar school students come from poorer households than is actually the case.

Mansfield is right to highlight the limitations of grammar school analysis based on the blunt distinction between pupils who are and are not eligible for Free School Meals. There is a large difference between the resources of those towards the top and those at the bottom of the range among the 85 per cent of pupils who are not eligible for Free School Meals.

The most recent relevant analysis, using the most comprehensive composite measure of a pupil's family background in the literature to date, is by Burgess et al.<sup>9</sup> They use National Pupil Database data to construct a socio-economic status measure that combines: information from index of multiple deprivation scores; A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN) categories (based on the socio-economic characteristics, financial holdings and property details of the 15 nearest households); Free School Meal eligibility; and the proportion of the nearest 150 households working in professional or managerial occupations, with education at Level Three or above, and who own their own home. Pupils are assigned to a percentile and a quintile of this continuous index.

This analysis indicates that in selective areas the proportion of children attending a grammar school from what would be considered 'just about managing' or 'ordinary working' families is at most 20 per cent.<sup>10</sup> Further, the analysis shows that 50 per cent of the places at grammar schools are taken by pupils from

the top 25 per cent best-off families using this comprehensive measure of background: people who would be entirely missing from the data used to make the claim by Mansfield. Put simply, if we could observe parents' income for all pupils' education records, rather than missing the richest 30 per cent to 40 per cent of families, the true proportion of grammar school pupils from the lower half of the income distribution is likely to be considerably less than the 45 per cent reported. This weakens one of the central planks of Iain Mansfield's thesis: that selective schooling enhances social mobility.

This highlights that, while grammar schools do have a small proportion of students from the lower half of the socio-economic status distribution, the vast majority of places are taken by students in the upper deciles. Therefore, if grammar school areas do help students reach elite higher education institutions more than in other areas, the benefit is disproportionately to children from better-off families, which seriously undermines any claim that these areas promote social mobility.

## *ii. Statistical analysis*

The next key question in Mansfield's paper is whether selective areas promote a greater rate of access to elite higher education than non-selective (comprehensive) areas. The main findings of the paper are reported in the table and show the figures suggest they do: while both systems send a similar percentage of pupils to higher education overall, selective areas send a higher percentage to highly-selective higher education (39 per cent) compared to comprehensive areas (23 per cent).<sup>11</sup>

System	Cohort Size	Per cent to HE	Per cent to highly-selective HE	Per cent to Oxbridge
Grammar Schools and Secondary Moderns	35,090	65	39	3
Comprehensives	147,785	59	23	1
Ratio	--	1.1	1.7	2.6

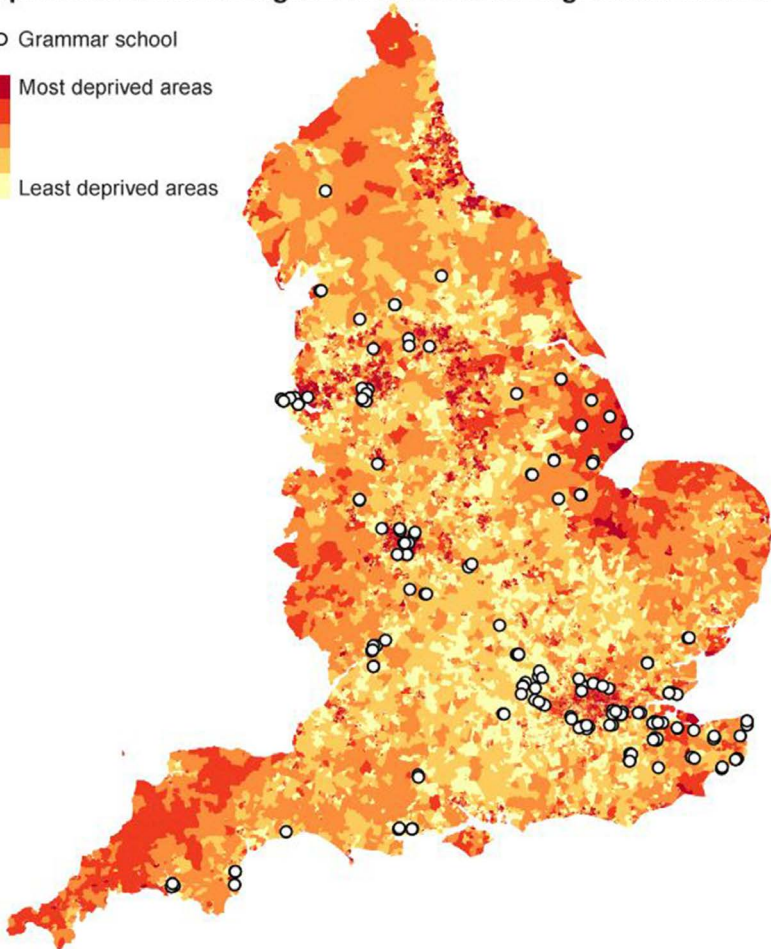
However, as Mansfield points out when discussing other studies' naïve comparisons of schools in selective versus non-selective areas:

*such comparisons are limited as they equate correlation with causation: they do not fully take account of potential differences in the population between selective and non-selective areas.*

This critique equally applies to the comparison made in Mansfield's own work. His comparison takes no account of the differences between selective and non-selective areas, attributing all of the 16 percentage point difference in progression between the areas to the differing school systems, and assuming selective and non-selective areas are on average equal in all other aspects that may affect progression to elite higher education. This is an heroic assumption. The areas that chose to keep grammar schools are not random; they have specific characteristics that will also affect higher education progression. As the map below shows, grammar schools are largely located in some of the least deprived areas of the country.

## Deprivation levels in England and locations of grammar schools

- Grammar school
- Most deprived areas
- Least deprived areas



Source: DCLG Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015

BBC

Map taken from BBC News website at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-37482018>

A low level of deprivation is one of the factors that predicts higher levels of access to elite universities, and so we would

naturally expect to see more pupils in grammar school areas attending highly-selective higher education institutions. As such, comparing grammar school areas with all other areas will upwardly bias the grammar school effect. Local deprivation is just one relevant area characteristic; the correct comparison would be to look at the progression rates of selective areas and only the non-selective areas that have similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics to the selective areas.<sup>12</sup>

A recent study that tries to take into account the differences between characteristics of selective and non-selective areas at the individual level finds grammar school pupils are on average only 7 percentage points more likely to attend a high-status institution than their non-selective peers, and that this 'selective system' advantage is entirely wiped out by the fact that pupils in selective areas who just miss out on a grammar place are 7 percentage points less likely to attend a high-status HE institution than their matched non-selective peers.<sup>13</sup> This brings us onto the final, and perhaps, most important critique of the approach taken by Mansfield.

### *iii. Conceptual methodology*

Mansfield makes the crucial assumption that the impact of a schooling system on social mobility can be measured solely by its effect on the area-level progression rate to elite higher education. Even if grammar schools increase the chances of disadvantaged children who attend them progressing to elite higher education institutions, the aggregate impact on social mobility depends on whether there is any offsetting impact on the disadvantaged children in these areas who do not attend grammar schools.

Here the evidence is clear: comparing pupils from similar socio-economic backgrounds with similar prior attainment and demographic characteristics, Burgess et al show that those in the selective system who do not attend grammar schools are significantly less likely to attend an elite higher education institution than the comparable child in a comprehensive area.<sup>14</sup> This echoes the findings of previous work by Burgess et al, highlighting that earnings inequality is larger for those growing up in selective areas than for those growing up in very similar non-selective areas.<sup>15</sup> Selective areas may be useful to the pupils who get in to grammar schools, but cause harm to people who do not. Given the socio-economic make-up of those who do and do not make it to grammar schools, these negative effects on the middle and bottom of the attainment distribution disproportionately affect those from disadvantaged families. As such the overall impact of the selective schooling system on social mobility – as measured by progression to elite higher education – will be negative.

### *Conclusion*

Mansfield draws the conclusion that the selective schooling system enhances social mobility by providing disadvantaged children with a greater chance of progressing to elite higher education. This is based on the claims that the aggregate progression rate to elite higher education is higher for selective areas than non-selective ones and that almost half of the pupils in grammar schools come from families in the lower half of the income distribution. Both of these claims are unsound.

As detailed here, the methods used to make the first claim and the data used to make the second claim are not up to the task. In contrast, when sounder methods and data are

used, the most reliable conclusion that can be drawn is that social mobility – as measured by progression to elite higher education – is unequivocally damaged by the selective schooling system.

The most robust evidence available suggests that access to grammar schools remains strongly socially graded, and that the selective system does not confer any advantage over the comprehensive system when it comes to elite higher education progression once comparing like-with-like across the whole system. Even if the progression rate to elite higher education in selective areas were higher than in comparable non-selective areas, this would only enhance social mobility if the benefit for disadvantaged grammar attendees outweighed any negative impact for the disadvantaged pupils lower down the prior attainment distribution. The evidence discussed here strongly suggests that this is not the case.





# **Selective secondary education and progression to higher education**

**Vikki Boliver and Queralt Capsada-Munsech**

## *Introduction*

In the Executive Summary of his report, Mansfield offers this summary of his empirical findings:

*Although further data is required to fully assess all scenarios, the findings suggest that grammar schools can increase the likelihood of progression [to the most academically selective universities] for pupils from some traditionally disadvantaged groups, including pupils in the most disadvantaged two quintiles of social disadvantage and pupils with Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BME).*

In this response, we argue that Mansfield's findings do not suggest what he claims they do. In fact, his findings cannot suggest anything either way because several crucial elements of 'further data' are missing from his analysis, including the subset of pupils who did not make it to Key Stage 5 (A-Level year) and a measure that genuinely captures the socio-economic circumstances of individuals.

These and other crucial pieces of missing data notwithstanding, Mansfield's claim that 'grammar schools can increase the likelihood of progression' to the most academically selective universities tells us nothing about the causal mechanisms at play. As such, while the hypotheses Mansfield poses are important ones, his own empirical work fails to put any of them to the test.

We also respond to Mansfield's charge that most academic experts are critical of selective education systems because their 'views' are coloured by 'unconscious bias'.

*'Further data is required' ... on those who leave education early*

Mansfield's analysis of national data provided by the Department for Education purports to show that 'selective areas perform significantly better than non-selective areas at enabling progression to highly-selective universities'. However, the statistics he presents appear to relate only to the population of pupils who were still in education at Key Stage 5, while those who left school at the end of Key Stage 4 (after GCSEs or equivalents) or earlier are entirely missing from the analysis. This is indicated by the fact that, in Mansfield's data, grammar school pupils outnumber secondary modern school pupils by a ratio of 2 to 1 (N=23,135 as compared to N=11,955), roughly the reverse of the ratio we would expect to see at Key Stage 4. By restricting the population to pupils in Key Stage 5, Mansfield obscures from view the much higher rate at which secondary modern school pupils leave education early compared to grammar school pupils. If Mansfield had included the entire Key Stage 4 population in his analysis, he might well have found selective areas were doing no better and perhaps even worse than non-selective areas in terms of their rates of progression to highly selective universities, due to high rates of early exit from education on the part of secondary modern school pupils.

*'Further data is required' ... about the socio-economics*

Mansfield acknowledges pupils in receipt of Free School Meals are among the most socio-economically disadvantaged and the least likely to attend grammar schools. However, he

argues that other comparatively disadvantaged pupils should be considered too, specifically pupils from ‘families with incomes lower than the median for families with children’, who Mansfield claims make up 45 per cent of all grammar school pupils. As Dickson and Macmillan point out, missing data on family income mean that this figure is likely to be an overestimate. But even if it were not, it is important to recognise that Mansfield’s work tells us nothing specifically about these below median income pupils. Mansfield reports that he was unable to access the national data necessary to test his hypothesis that selective school systems benefit pupils from lower and higher income families alike. His hypothesis, therefore, remains unsubstantiated. This is also the case in relation to Mansfield’s analysis of data for Cambridge University. This time, Mansfield does have a proxy for comparatively disadvantaged pupils, the area-level measure of the young higher education participation rate known as POLAR. But, as several previous studies have clearly demonstrated, POLAR is a poor proxy for socio-economic disadvantage at the individual level.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, most socio-economically disadvantaged pupils, as indexed by Free School Meal status, do not live in low higher education participation areas, and many pupils living in low higher education participation areas are not themselves socio-economically disadvantaged.<sup>17</sup> Mansfield concludes:

*grammar schools therefore play a significant role in supporting social mobility, providing children from the lower half of the income spectrum the same access to highly-selective higher education that is otherwise only achieved by the independent sector.*

But this constitutes a considerable misstatement of his actual findings.

## *A causal black box*

Ignoring for a moment the fact that Mansfield's own empirical work fails to provide any evidence in support of his statement that 'selective areas perform significantly better than non-selective areas at enabling progression to highly-selective universities', we would do well to ask what it means to couch this claim in such causal terms. Mansfield appears to assume that the causal agents are grammar schools themselves and that the causal forces at play are the positive things that grammar schools do in the process of educating and supporting their pupils. Mansfield makes selective mention of one prior study which found that grammar school pupils achieve slightly better GCSE grades than ostensibly similar pupils educated in comprehensives, while ignoring many other studies which find no differential effect.<sup>18</sup> Besides this, nowhere in the report does Mansfield specify, still less demonstrate, what it is that grammar schools do to bring about purportedly better outcomes for their pupils. Any apparently positive association between grammar school attendance and access to highly-selective universities may be due to inadequate statistical controls for socio-economic background, or may simply be a 'badging' effect. On the other hand, if grammar schools genuinely are doing a better job of educating and supporting their students, we would do well to find out what exactly these superior practices are and to ask why these could not be adopted by all schools within a fully comprehensive system.

## *Views versus evidence*

As Sullivan says in the next chapter, most empirical studies find that selective education systems do not boost educational

attainment or foster social mobility. Mansfield attributes near-consensus in the research field to an ideologically-driven 'unconscious bias' on the part of left-leaning academics, which he claims affects the issues and evidence with which researchers have chosen to engage.

Mansfield is right to point out that researchers' ideological leanings influence what they consider to be 'right' and 'fair', but he is wrong to state that researchers' ideological leanings necessarily colour the conclusions they draw from the findings of empirical research. Indeed, to dismiss a virtual consensus among academics as merely the 'views' of experts is to fail to appreciate the difference between subjective beliefs on the one hand and objective evidence on the other. Ironically, the charge of ideologically driven 'unconscious bias' could be levelled at Mansfield himself. His advocacy of grammar schools seems to be driven by an ideological commitment to competition and hierarchy, rather than by an impartial appraisal of the full range of available research evidence.



# **What do cohort studies reveal about grammar schools, higher education and social mobility?**

**Alice Sullivan**

Mansfield's paper claiming grammar schools promote social mobility via access to higher education disregards a wealth of prior evidence. This paper summarises what previous research shows, with a focus on evidence from the British Birth Cohort Studies. This suggests that grammar schools have not acted as an engine of social mobility.

The claim grammar schools promote social mobility is attractive to Conservative commentators. For example, the 2017 Conservative manifesto pledged to reintroduce grammar schools, as part of a drive to turn Britain into 'the world's Great Meritocracy'. Academic commentators have typically been highly sceptical of this view, given a wealth of evidence to the contrary.<sup>19</sup> For example, a review of the evidence produced by one of Parliament's in-house sources of independent analysis makes it clear there is no evidence to suggest selection will help Britain tackle educational inequality and increase social mobility, noting that working-class children are under-represented at grammar schools.<sup>20</sup> In this context, Mansfield's intervention is an interesting one, as it presents conclusions opposed to much of the existing evidence, and argues education researchers are biased on this issue, but does not engage with most of the extant literature in the field.

## *Evidence from the British Birth Cohorts*

One of the major challenges in carrying out research into the outcomes of schooling is accounting for differences in the characteristics of children attending selective and non-



selective schools. Pupils at selective secondary schools have higher primary-school test scores and more advantaged home backgrounds than those at comprehensives or secondary moderns. Accounting for such differences ideally requires high-quality longitudinal data. Britain is fortunate in having a series of Birth Cohort Studies, which have allowed researchers to examine the long-term outcomes of schooling, while controlling appropriately for confounding factors.<sup>21</sup> The 1946, 1958 and 1970 cohorts have all been used to examine selective schooling and social mobility.

**National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD):** Follows the lives of over 5,000 people born in 1946, who started secondary school around 1969.

**National Child Development Study (NCDS):** Follows the lives of over 17,000 people born in 1958, who started secondary school around 1957.

**1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70):** Follows the lives of over 17,000 people born in 1970, who started secondary school around 1981.

Research using the 1946 cohort was ground breaking in implicating selective schooling in the wastage of working class talent in Britain.<sup>22</sup> The British Birth Cohort Studies have continued to play a large part in recent debates on the role of schooling in educational attainment and social mobility.<sup>23</sup> Some Conservatives have blamed the decline in grammar schooling for a lack of progress in social mobility, though it has been shown that the benefits of attending grammar school for the 1958 cohort were balanced by the disadvantages of attending a secondary modern school, leading to no overall social mobility advantage or disadvantage for the tripartite (or grammar / secondary modern) system.<sup>24</sup> These findings

showed selective schooling produces winners and losers at an individual level, but no overall impact on the level of social mobility in British society.

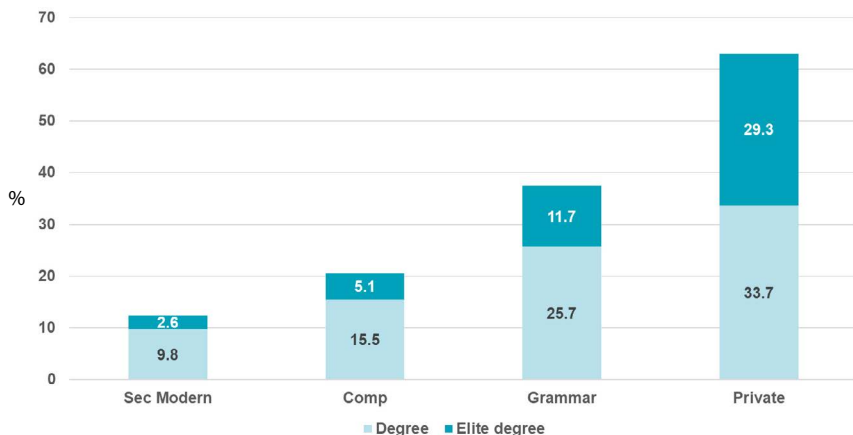
### *Highly-selective universities and top jobs: The 1970 British Cohort Study*

A recent research project addressed entry to highly-selective universities and occupational outcomes using the 1970 British Cohort Study.<sup>25</sup> Britain has a highly-selective university system. The role of secondary schools in determining access to top universities is therefore potentially important. We assessed the link between secondary schooling and university access for the generation born in 1970, looking at both getting any university degree, and the chances of getting a degree from a university now in the Russell Group.<sup>26</sup>

There were stark differences by school type in the chances of getting a degree, as shown in Figure 1: 64 per cent of individuals who had been to private schools had a degree by age 42, compared to 37 per cent of those who had attended grammar schools, 21 per cent from comprehensives and just 12 per cent from secondary moderns.

The differences in the chances of getting an 'elite' degree from a highly-selective university were even more stark: 29 per cent of private school pupils got degrees from elite universities, compared to 12 per cent of those from grammars, 5 per cent from comprehensives and just 3 per cent from secondary moderns. One could infer from this that grammar schools provided an important advantage in university entrance compared to non-selective schools.

Figure 1: Degree status age 42 by secondary school type



However, children who attended private and grammar schools were generally from more advantaged backgrounds and had higher cognitive test scores before they started secondary school than those who attended comprehensives. It is important to take this into account. We were able to exploit detailed information on the cohort members' family backgrounds and educational histories. This allowed us to examine the role of childhood socio-economic circumstances and to assess whether the type of secondary school a child attended made a difference for children from similar backgrounds and with similar test scores up to the age of ten.

Once we had controlled for these factors, there was no advantage in the chances of accessing a 'top' university for people who had been to grammar schools compared to those who had been to comprehensives. In contrast, private schooling was still associated with the chances of getting a

degree and the chance of going to an elite university even once these factors were controlled for. In other words, private schools appeared to confer a genuine advantage in the chances of attending an elite university whereas grammar school pupils' chances were comparable to those of comprehensive school pupils with similar socio-economic backgrounds and primary school test scores.

We went on to address whether individuals who had been to private and grammar schools had an advantage in gaining jobs in the top social class and in the top 5 per cent of earnings.<sup>27</sup> Controlling for prior socio-economic and cognitive factors, having attended a private school was associated with a strong advantage in access to top social class positions (defined by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)) and high earnings.<sup>28</sup> However, there was no grammar school advantage. The effects of social origins on adult occupational attainment were not explained by the type of school attended, suggesting that secondary school type was not as important a vehicle of social advantage as is commonly supposed. Family background matters a great deal, and this is not driven primarily by access to private or selective schools.

Given the policy interest in the idea that selective schools may promote social mobility for less privileged children, we tested whether there was a pattern of differential advantage by social origins. In other words, even if attending a selective school made no difference on average, perhaps it made a difference for working-class children. We found no evidence for this. Grammar schools did not make any more difference to life chances for children from working-class origins than for those from middle-class origins. This is important because the idea that selective schools provide an essential leg-up for less

advantaged children is central to the claim that these schools promote both meritocracy and social mobility.

### *Conclusion*

Britain has a long history of selective schooling and of collecting longitudinal data, which allows researchers to track the experiences of successive generations to learn from the past. Evidence from the British Birth Cohort Studies does not suggest that expanding the number of grammar schools represents a promising intervention to increase levels of educational or social mobility.

# **Rolling forward comprehensive education: the case for including universities**

**Tim Blackman**

My aim in this paper is to turn Iain Mansfield's case for grammar schools on its head, arguing that instead of more selection in secondary education what is needed is less selection in higher education. Not only would this achieve more diverse and inclusive student communities in every university, it would also likely improve educational outcomes.

The case for comprehensive education as a better way to learn has evidence on its side, but curiously it is a case not often made for higher education. If, as other papers in this publication have argued, any individual educational gains from selective schooling are minimal or non-existent and non-selective school systems achieve higher educational attainment overall, why should this not also be true of higher education?<sup>29</sup> Secondary education is almost entirely comprehensive across the UK but we have one of the most hierarchical higher education sectors in the world, driven by different degrees of selection across institutions.<sup>30</sup>

This question is all the more important given that the evidence for schools shows selection can be harmful, especially the negative impact of selective schools on non-selective schools in the same area.<sup>31</sup> This impact is caused by selective schools creaming off students who would otherwise be part of the mix in non-selective schools. The same effect occurs at scale in higher education. The prestige accorded to very selective institutions attracts students with high prior attainment, often enabled by multiple socio-economic advantages, denying

these students to other institutions and polarising the sector academically and socially.

While there is only one predominantly non-selective university in the UK, The Open University, many universities require much lower grades for the same subject than others. The published entry requirement for a Computer Science degree, for example, varies from two Cs at A-Level to three A-Levels at A\*A\*A, with the actual range likely to be even wider.<sup>32</sup> The recent Augar report suggests, with caveats, that an appropriate minimum entry threshold would be three Ds at A-Level, although any such threshold is fraught with problems given that some students with lower grades succeed and some with higher grades do not.<sup>33</sup> The reality is that high entry grades are generally used wherever possible to signal prestige and that, unlike schools, there is virtually no expectation on universities to add value to students' prior attainment. In fact, the sector's regulator, the Office for Students, appears to regard degree attainment that is not correlated with prior attainment to be suspect, indicating possible 'grade inflation' if there is a trend over time away from what prior attainment would predict.<sup>34</sup>

Just like non-selective schools, less selective universities are denuded of students with higher prior attainment, who are generally easier to teach and have less support needs. Institutions that attract these students, with their budgets boosted by premium fee-paying international and postgraduate students attracted by their brand, also tend to attract (and pay a premium for) academics wanting to focus on research performance, further adding to their prestige. Both more and less selective universities become less diverse in different ways, concentrating advantage and disadvantage at each pole.

## *Highly-selective universities cast their shadow*

As the retired Chief Inspector of Schools Michael Wilshaw recollected about his days as the head teacher of a comprehensive school, his top 20 per cent of achievers who would have been lost to a nearby grammar school were very important to his whole school's performance because they raised everyone's game.<sup>35</sup> Why is this not more of an issue in higher education?

The social segregation created by academic selection is not only damaging to social cohesion but almost certainly to educational attainment as well. Of all the factors that contribute to educational attainment, it is teacher expertise that matters most, and this is likely to be as true of higher as secondary education.<sup>36</sup> But the student mix makes a difference too, especially in the hands of expert teachers. Streaming by prior academic attainment has little effect on future attainment, but approaches such as peer-to-peer learning are very effective, especially with mixed-ability classes where it is possible for students to multiply each others' abilities.<sup>37</sup>

Yet ironically, the head teachers and governors of many comprehensive schools regard their students being admitted by highly-selective universities as great achievements. Similarly, one of the main drivers of parents choosing a selective school is entry to a selective university, and paying for exclusive private schooling smooths the transition to highly-selective universities. Their existence casts a shadow over the whole education system.

If academic selection at age 11 is wrong, then it is unclear why it is right at 18 for university, although not for further education colleges which, although comprehensive, have suffered in the



same way as comprehensives with nearby grammar schools by being denuded of high attainment, socially-advantaged students who choose higher instead of further education.

The argument is sometimes made that by age 18 a young person has demonstrated their potential, or that they would not work to realise that potential at age 18 if they did not have the prospect of a highly-selective university place. However, the sixth form of a good comprehensive school does not select students on the basis of the highest GCSE grades it can demand, using the fear of not achieving these grades as motivation to achieve in GCSEs. It uses minimum thresholds, contextualised to each student's circumstances and aimed at ensuring all students can progress to opportunities appropriate to their interests and prior learning. The emphasis is on the expertise of teachers to continue adding value. Large comprehensive sixth-forms mean they can offer a wide range of subjects taught by appropriately-qualified teachers, even attracting students transferring from nearby private schools. Their student bodies are more diverse across subjects, abilities and backgrounds. Their students do better at university than private school students with the same A-Level results.<sup>38</sup>

### *There is a diversity bonus denied by selective education*

Students with different abilities, identities and experiences learning together creates valuable opportunities for peer learning but also encourages mutual understanding and inclusion. It is also likely to enhance complex learning, given evidence that critical thinking and complex problem solving are more successfully developed in cognitively diverse groups.<sup>39</sup> Many studies, mainly from the United States, have demonstrated benefits from diverse student bodies, including

better engagement and attainment.<sup>40</sup> The effects appear to arise from experiencing a wider range of perspectives, creativity and ways of constructing solutions and, while small, have been shown to be statistically significant.<sup>41</sup> Particularly important, however, is that these effects are likely to be much stronger if teaching and learning techniques deliberately use student diversity as a resource that classes bring to learning.<sup>42</sup>

There is surprisingly little research or debate on this topic in the UK, where the diversity issue in higher education is framed as one of equity in access and attainment. Debate and policy are still focused on how a relatively small number of school students whose high academic potential has been held back by disadvantage can gain access to the highly-selective universities they 'deserve' and the unequal opportunities these institutions create. The sorting function of these universities as pathways to some of the best career opportunities is largely unquestioned, with hirers in the best paid professions mostly themselves graduates of these highly-selective institutions.

The case is often made for these institutions to use admission requirements that are 'contextualised', whereby reduced grades are asked of students with prior educational disadvantage. The grade discounts, though, are small and the offers further cream off students from less selective institutions.<sup>43</sup> In addition, no measure of disadvantage used this way is likely to capture the variety of reasons why a student fails to achieve their full potential at 18. Even the more ambitious approach in Scotland of expecting every university and programme to allocate a proportion of places with lower admission requirements confines access to these places to students from Scotland's most deprived areas, a type of geographical rough justice given many disadvantaged students live outside these areas.<sup>44</sup>

Students who achieve less than they could have done in a set of assessments should generally have the opportunity to learn alongside students who did achieve their potential. In fact, the learning environment is likely to be richer as a result if teachers use the variation in achievement to enable peer learning. This is not to argue that prior attainment does not matter, because students need to be prepared by good teaching for their next level of study, but it is to argue that admissions should aim to create a range of abilities and backgrounds on programmes rather than select at the highest grades feasible.

A minimum threshold is likely to be needed for a variety of reasons but should be at a level where there is ambition for the quality of teaching and not just the 'quality' of students. There is surely no justification for advocates of comprehensive education in schools to accept a situation whereby universities can be as selective as they wish, with this selectivity driving institutional prestige and access to some of the best career opportunities.

### *Completing comprehensive reform*

Our highly-selective universities come under little of the criticism made of selective schools that they are damaging other institutions. This is despite being the elite grammar schools of the sector, creating 'secondary moderns' of many other universities. Their lesser prestige means they cannot respond by raising entry requirements. Many would not want to, given their inclusive missions.

Introducing the same minimum course entry requirements for all universities would initially see increased demand for universities that were previously more selective and empty places at others. Reintroducing student number controls

and course quotas would be a rational response, with random allocation if a university is over-subscribed, as is sometimes used for schools. The sector would be returned to a more planned and less marketised system that could take into account skills needs as well as student demand and save hundreds of millions of pounds currently devoted to marketing, regulation and access initiatives.

The approach could be taken a step further by achieving diversity more deliberately with stratified quotas, using different bands of prior attainment so that a mixed-ability intake is created for each university and course, building on the Scottish example and precedents in some school systems. This would also address the problem experienced with 'selective' comprehensive schools caused by residential segregation between wealthier and poorer areas, since quotas would distribute access opportunities across grades.<sup>45</sup>

Such reform would break down prestige-based distinctions between universities and focus them on using their student diversity. Additional benefits would flow from students being less likely to relocate long distances to study, reducing the student maintenance and environmental costs of the UK's exceptionally high proportion of residential university places, particularly in the most selective institutions.<sup>46</sup>

Whether UK higher education's strong but institutionally concentrated research performance, and its ability to deliver economic benefits by attracting international students, would change is less clear. It is uncertain how far these are dependent on the sector's high level of stratification by prior attainment and social class. If there is a proven need for high-quality research to require a high level of selection of students

(and I am not aware of that evidence), then some universities may need to be exempted from comprehensive reform, not because they are better institutions but because their role is explicitly a research rather than educational one. A similar case may exist to protect international student recruitment, especially as international rankings currently place so much emphasis on research performance.

There are various ways that reform could be designed to take into account the distinctiveness of higher compared to secondary education. Some institutions, or subject groups within them, might become entirely postgraduate to support their high level of research performance, while others might group into systems analogous to parts of the US, with transfer opportunities between universities. Reform, though, would need to establish comprehensive higher education as the normal model.

It was Jennie Lee who, as the Minister who drove establishing The Open University, said that despite its open access principle the OU was not and would not be a working-class university. What educationally disadvantaged working-class people wanted was not special treatment but access to a university for everyone.<sup>47</sup> That vision has largely been realised with the OU but we are far from achieving it in the rest of the sector.

The advocacy group Comprehensive Future has argued for slowly opening up grammar schools to a fully comprehensive intake to complete the comprehensive reforms of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>48</sup> Yet this would not complete these reforms: there is one more step, and that is higher education.

## **Concluding comments**

**John Furlong and Ingrid Lunt**

The contributors to this paper provide strong evidence that challenges Mansfield's claims that grammar schools promote social mobility. However, the uncomfortable fact remains that none of this evidence is particularly new. This raises the question as to why grammar schools still find so many supporters and why proposals to increase their numbers come back onto the policy agenda every few years. There are a number of possible reasons.

Part of the answer is that most families interpret their experience individually: success in passing the 11+ is understood as a personal achievement. As such, families are not aware of the evidence and particularly the impact that selection at 11 has on the educational achievement overall in the communities where they live. And those of an older generation who are often the most ardent supporters of grammar schools do not recognise that the increased mobility that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s did not come about as a result of grammar schools but because of structural changes that brought about substantially increased opportunities for social mobility. There literally was 'more room at the top' that had to be filled whether or not there were grammar schools at the time. Finally of course, challenging selection at 11 is a very difficult argument to win in a society where so many of those in positions of leadership have benefited from selection of a different sort – through private education. Why should high-achieving 11-year olds from poorer backgrounds be denied a privileged education when others can and do pay for that

privilege? Defending grammar school selection is therefore also a way of defending private schooling.

The modern grammar school concept was introduced by the 1944 Education Act with the aim to provide an 'academic' education for around 20 per cent of the student population with the remainder going to secondary modern schools. At their peak in 1964 there were 1,298 grammar schools in England providing for 26 per cent of secondary pupils, compared to the 5 per cent now attending grammar schools. Seventy-five years after their introduction, we now know unequivocally that the inequality implied and created by a divisive education system continues to contribute to the ever-widening divisions that are seen in England today.

In a society that aspires to greater social equality and equality of opportunity there can be little justification for the continued existence of grammar schools today, let alone their expansion. They are the product of educational thinking from a very different era from our own. They are part of our educational history; that does not mean they should be part of our educational future.

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