

## **COMPREHENSIVE FUTURE BRIEFING NUMBER 2**

### **Selection and Higher Education**

#### **Did grammar schools offer a better way into HE for poorer students?**

1. Supporters of selection often argue that more working class pupils got into higher education when grammar schools were the norm, than in the comprehensive system. The clearest evidence demonstrating the nonsense of this assertion comes from a survey the Robbins Committee on Higher education carried out in 1961/62, (Robbins 1963) when a majority of pupils (73.2) attended secondary modern schools and 19.7% attended grammar schools. 5.3% were in comprehensives at this time, the others in technical and all-age schools.
2. In 1962 64% of students in higher education had fathers in professional or managerial jobs, 10% had fathers working in clerical jobs. Students in higher education with fathers in skilled manual jobs comprised 4%, and those with unskilled fathers, 2% (Robbins p 50) Of children with fathers in the skilled category, 96% did not reach HE and 98% of the those with unskilled fathers did not reach HE.
3. The small number of working class children who had made it to grammar schools in the early 1960s were less likely to achieve the necessary O and A levels largely because they left school early (Robbins p53). Robbins noted also that it was the children of professional parents who had increased their qualification levels not 'as sometimes imagined' those with manual parentage.
4. Furthermore evidence had indicated that working class entrants to grammar school actually decreased during the 1950s and 1960s. W.D.Furneaux made a study of selection for universities in 1961 (The Chosen Few) and later referred – prophetically – to “the extraordinary stability in the differentials in social class attainment...we have a social class structure, which is virtually self-perpetuating...unless we have done something about initiating social change we shall be in the same position in fifty years time as we are now” (quoted in Simon 1991).
5. By the 1970s the Oxford Mobility Studies were demonstrating the influence of parental social status on childrens’ acquisition of higher educational qualifications. (Halsey 1977) It was upper and middle class pupils in both private and state grammar and direct grant schools who were most likely to gain entry to universities and the more prestigious jobs. Between 1944 and 1972 an extra 1.5% of working class children arrived at university compared to an extra 13% of upper-middle class children.

6. The evidence does not suggest that there was a golden age when grammar schools prepared working class pupils for higher education. This is still the case today. Few poor children get into present day remaining grammar schools. A parliamentary answer in 2000 noted that the percentage of children eligible for free school meals in grammar schools was 2.7% while the English average was 17.1%. (Hansard 2000) Evidence from the DfES to a recent House of Commons Education and Skills enquiry showed grammar schools achieving the highest number of GCSE A-C passes with the lowest number of pupils on free school meals. (DfES 2003)
7. It was a combination of more pupils -especially girls- being prepared for higher education via comprehensive schools, a changed occupational structure with a larger aspirant 'skilled non manual' class, and a further expansion of higher education that brought about the rapid increase in enrolments in HE from 1990. It would not have been possible for some 40% to be enrolled, by 2002, in higher education (with a target of 50%) under a selective system. However, although comprehensive schools have been able to prepare increasing numbers of young people from manual working class homes for Higher Education, - from 4% in 1960 to 19% in 2000, 'The social class gap among those entering higher education is unacceptably wide. Those from the top three social classes are three times as likely to enter higher education as those from the bottom three'. (DfES 2003 b)
8. Thus Furneaux's 1961 prediction was accurate. The social class pattern of entrants remained stable. In 1991/2, 55% of those from professional homes were in HE, 12% from partly skilled and 6% from unskilled homes. By 1998 nearly 80% of those from professional homes were in HE, 18% from partly skilled homes, and 14% from unskilled homes. (Social Trends no 30 2000 p56)
9. A major preoccupation of government since the mid 1990s has been widening access and participation for 'non-traditional' students, especially those from lower socio-economic groups. ( DfES 2003b). Grammar schools, despite some philanthropic attempts to recruit 'bright' working class pupils, are unlikely to help achieve this aim. As shown above, they are predominantly schools for the middle classes and their pupils are far more likely to achieve the GCSEs necessary at 16 to even think about higher education. In 2000 74% of those with parents in the higher professional classes and 61% in the lower professional group achieved the GCSEs allowing them to carry on to A level, only 36% of lower supervisory and 29% of routine workers children achieved these. (DfES 2003 a) Selection of the children of higher social classes for grammar schools is also selection for higher education.
10. A recent DfES review of fair admissions to higher education (DFES 2003c) noted that nearly two thirds of those who obtained at least two A levels at 18 do go on to higher education. But all young people need a fair chance of beginning their preparation at 11. Selective schools continue to give a head start to small numbers of pupils from the higher social classes.
11. Critics of comprehensive education often focus their attack on Oxbridge entry, claiming that when there was selection for grammar schools more pupils from state than from private schools gained Oxbridge places. It is certainly the case that pre -1975 the highly selective and predominantly middle class direct-grant grammar schools provided a large percentage of Oxbridge and other University entrants, in 1971 34% of private and direct grant school leavers

gaining three A levels as against only 6.5% of those in other state schools.(Walford 1990). However, there is no evidence that grammar schools have ever provided anything but a token number of manual working class Oxbridge entrants, a situation which continues to the present day. The Oxford Vice-Chancellor's report on access in 1999 noted that 'a large number of able candidates from the maintained sector do not apply to Oxford and when they do apply their success rate is generally below that of candidates in the independent sector'. and there is currently concern that "well qualified young people from poorer backgrounds are not applying in proportionate numbers to the most selective universities.(DfES 2003b)

12. In conclusion, there was no golden age when grammar schools prepared working class pupils for higher education. Comprehensive schooling allowed for the expansion in numbers of pupils prepared for HE entry. Attempts to widen access to HE for the working class should look carefully at the privileged access selective schools give to the upper and middle classes, and to the causes of lower prior attainment by young people from poorer backgrounds.

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