



Private
Education
Policy
Forum

July 2026

Elite English Private Schools and Inequalities in University Destinations



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Commissioned by Private Education Policy Forum

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This report investigates the university destinations of three groups of English private schools, all of which are members of the Heads' Conference (HMC). The three groups are:

- Group 1: the ten most affluent boarding schools
- Group 2: the ten most affluent day schools
- Group 3: the ten least affluent day schools within the HMC

For 2024 entry, we explore whether elite private schools have university destinations that are substantially different from less affluent HMC schools. We also compared these figures to the total for all Independent Schools Council (ISC) private schools.

We find that pupils from the most affluent private schools are substantially more likely to access selective universities, including Oxbridge and universities ranked in the top 25 of the Times Good University Rankings. Of those entering higher education in the UK, we see:

- An average of 10.8% of affluent boarding school pupils and 15.0% of affluent day school pupils attending Oxbridge. In contrast the least affluent day schools had an average of 1.7%, falling below all ISC pupils (4.6%).
- Average access to a Top 25 university (excluding Oxbridge) was: 68.3% affluent boarding; 64.2% affluent day; and 51.4% least affluent day. By comparison, around 52% of ISC-educated attended these universities.

In contrast, university entrants from the most affluent private schools are substantially less likely to access higher education providers outside the top 50 from the Times Good University Guide. On average, only 3.4% of university entrants from the most affluent boarding and day schools access these providers, compared with 13% within the ISC.

The report adds nuance to headline figures that compare the destinations of leavers from private schools and state schools. Sector-level averages mask significant disparities within the private sector in terms of access to university for leavers, and to prestigious universities in particular.

Introduction

Access to higher education, particularly the most selective and prestigious universities, is influenced by the school that you attend. Academic research has consistently shown that privately-educated pupils are more likely to access university than their state-educated peers (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2021; Green, 2022). For example, Morag Henderson and colleagues (2020) found evidence that gaps in access to undergraduate study are around six percentage points, even when prior academic achievement and family background are accounted for.

The factors underlying this inequality are well explored. On a material level, private school pupils tend to benefit from substantially more funding per pupil, compared with their local state schools (Green and Kynaston, 2019). These resource gaps are magnified at elite private schools, with Sol Gamsu (2021) finding that elite boarding schools have an average funding per pupil seven times higher than their local state schools. Beyond these economic disparities, other studies have investigated the cultural and social resources that private schools can provide their pupils, and the ways these can lead to advantages within the university admissions process (Jones, 2013; Green *et al.*, 2018; Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024).

While we have a good understanding of the *average* inequality in university access for pupils in the private and state sectors, few studies have explored the diversity and variation within the private sector. This means we know little about how university destinations vary from school to school, and given the considerable variation in income and wealth within the private sector (Gamsu, 2021), it is possible that pupils attending elite private schools attain rates of university access that far exceed average rates. If this is the case, current statistics on the average inequality between the private and state sectors would mask both inequalities associated with elite private education and diversity within the private sector.

This report investigates university destinations at a range of private schools. We document how these destinations vary between schools, with a particular focus on access to the most selective universities.

Methods

This report investigates university destinations at 30 English private schools for pupils entering higher education in the UK in 2024. The 30 schools are all members of the Heads' Conference (HMC), a membership organisation containing many of the most affluent and prestigious private schools. In order to explore differences within the private sector, we identified three groups:

- Group 1: the ten most affluent boarding schools (average income per pupil: £48,276)
- Group 2: the ten most affluent day schools (average fee income per pupil: £25,867)
- Group 3: the ten least affluent day schools (average fee income per pupil: £15,693)

This three-group approach was inspired by Gamsu (2021), with affluence measured by income per pupil, drawing on Fryer, Tewari and Telling's (2025) dataset.¹

For each selected school, we sought publicly available data on the university destinations of its pupils. This included searching both school websites and Charity Commission Annual Accounts. If a school did not provide the university destinations of its pupils, or supplied only aggregated data (e.g. the number of pupils that attended Russell Group universities), then the school was removed and the 11th ranked school was included.² A full list of schools is provided in the Appendix.

Our sampling strategy prioritised variation, enabling us to investigate differences in university destinations within the private sector. This is our core aim. We make no attempt to analyse the 30 schools as a whole, as this sample is not representative of HMC schools nor all private schools. In addition, our sampling approach is likely to identify schools with more successful university destinations data, as these schools have an incentive to advertise their successes publicly on websites. This may lead to some inflation in rates of access, if the findings are generalised to other schools.

Our analysis focused on those entering higher education in the UK in 2024, assessing rates of access to different universities.³ University destinations were grouped into the following categories, using the Times Good University Ranking List 2025:

- Oxbridge
- Top 25 universities, excluding Oxbridge
- Top 26–50 universities
- Other higher education providers (i.e. those not ranked in the Top 50)

These university groupings were adopted to enable comparison with data from the Independent Schools Council's (ISC) Annual Census (2025). This provides information on university destinations of pupils from 800 senior or mixed-age private schools, many of which will also be members of the HMC. It is worth noting that the ISC does not represent all private schools: there are approximately 1,400 members of the ISC and 2,450 English private schools (Department for Education, 2026).

¹ Fryer, Tewari and Telling's (2025) dataset used income data from 2022–23 annual accounts. A school was identified as a boarding school, if the school had some boarders. Average income per pupil is calculated as the median. Harrow School had missing data on income per pupil, but this school was included in Group 1, based on our review of existing literature (e.g. Gamsu, 2022).

² Incomplete data led to the removal of five affluent boarding schools; two affluent day schools; and 24 of the least affluent day schools.

³ This includes all pupils that attend higher education providers in the UK, whether home or international students, due to a lack of data disaggregation. When information about deferred entry was given, these cases were excluded from the dataset.

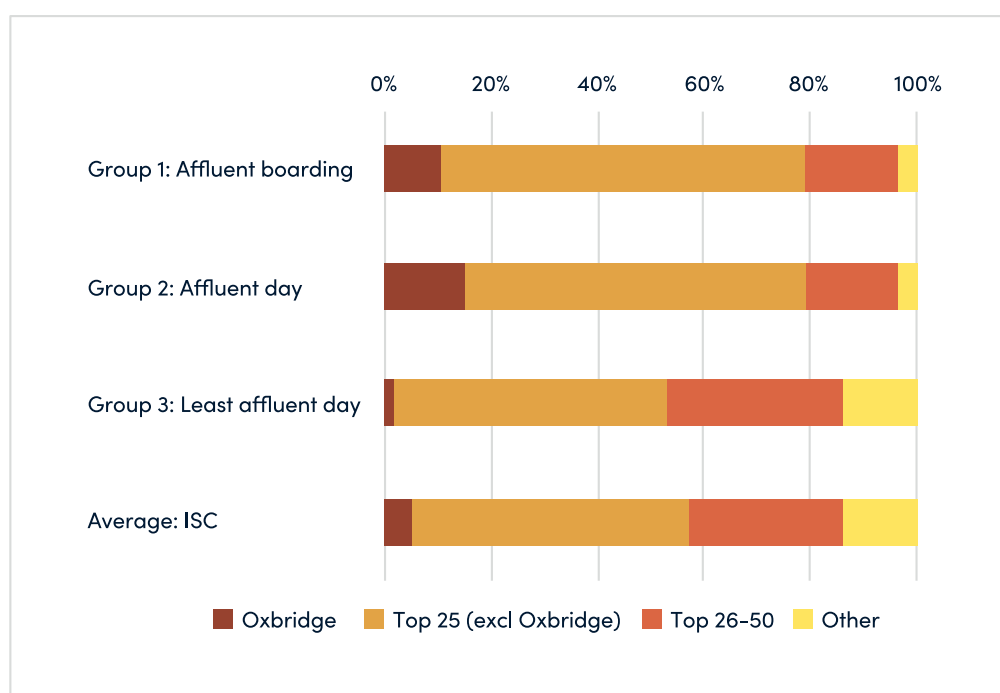
Within each of the three groups (affluent boarding; affluent day; least affluent), we calculated the average outcome across the ten schools. This approach gives equal weight to each school, whereas an alternative approach, adding up all university entrants within the ten schools would give more weight to larger schools.⁴ We compared these group averages with each other, as well as with the overall ISC data.⁵

The dataset will be made available for research purposes, upon request to the corresponding author.

Findings

The university destinations of the three groups in our sample are shown in Figure 1. This includes a comparison with ISC-educated university entrants.

Figure 1: Average percentage of university entrants accessing different higher education providers, compared with ISC-educated peers



The remainder of this section explores access to Oxbridge, Top 25, Top 26-50 and other higher education providers.

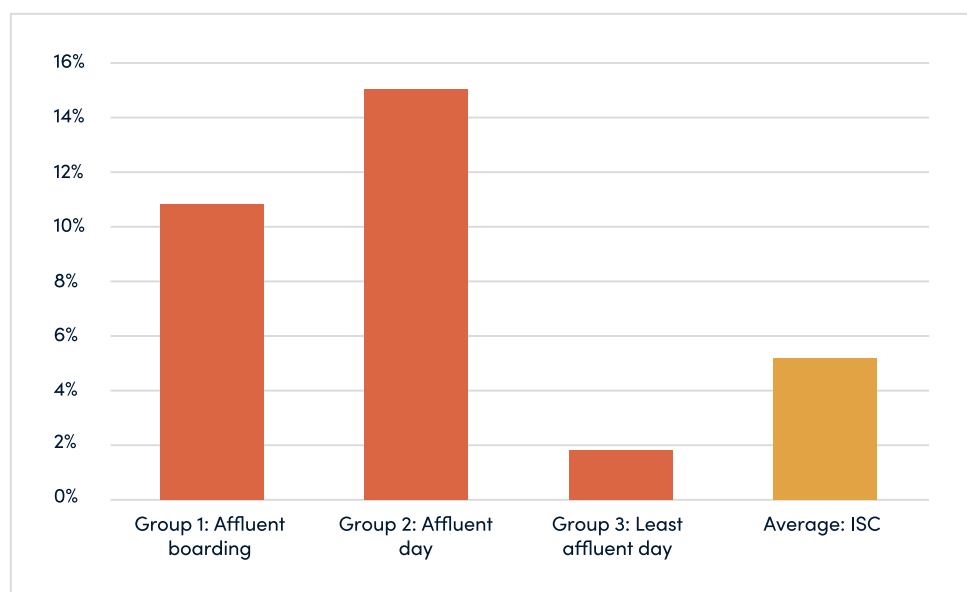
Access to Oxbridge

The most affluent schools are disproportionately sending students to Oxbridge (see Figure 2). These schools had an average percentage of university leavers entering Oxbridge in 2024 of 10.8% (affluent boarding) and 15.0% (affluent day). In contrast the least affluent day schools had much lower rates of access, at 1.7%, which is substantially below the total for all ISC pupils (4.6%).

⁴ A sensitivity analysis explored the impact of this decision (see Table 2, Appendix). The decision was found to have no material impact on our conclusions.

⁵ We calculated ISC statistics to reflect the above: Oxbridge; Top 25 excluding Oxbridge; Top 26-50; Other. This used Figure 37 (p.28) and Figure 39 (p.29), focusing on ISC pupils attending UK universities, excluding deferred entries.

Figure 2: Average percentage of university entrants accessing Oxbridge, compared with ISC-educated peers



In relative terms, this means those attending the most affluent day schools are 8.8 times more likely to gain access to Oxbridge, compared with the least affluent day schools. The equivalent statistic is 6.4 times for the most affluent boarding schools.

To further illustrate the disproportionate rates of access to Oxbridge experienced by the 20 affluent schools in our sample, we can contextualise these figures within overall access to Oxbridge. We find that around 1 in 20 acceptances at Oxbridge were from these 20 affluent schools.⁶

All the entry rates described above exceed the total for state-educated university entrants, with only around 1% of the latter entered for Oxbridge undergraduate programmes. This means that university entrants attending the most affluent day schools were around 15 times more likely to gain access to Oxbridge, and those attending the most affluent boarding are around 11 times more likely, compared with their state-educated peers.

Access to Top 25 universities

Extending our focus beyond Oxbridge to consider the other 23 universities in the Top 25 of the Times 2025 Good University Guide, we continue to see inequalities in access (see Figure 3). The average percentage of university entrants attending a Top 25 university (excluding Oxbridge) exceeds 50% for all three groups: 68.3% affluent boarding schools; 64.2% affluent day; 51.4% least affluent day. By comparison, around 52% of ISC university entrants attended these universities. This means the most affluent schools in our sample have disproportionate access to these highly ranked universities, with a gap in the region of 15 percentage points compared with the least affluent day schools and the ISC total.

⁶ 307 pupils attend Oxbridge from the 20 schools. Cambridge had 2,761 acceptances, including 88 international students educated at UK schools (University of Cambridge, 2025). Oxford had 2,519 acceptances, for UK-students only (University of Oxford, 2025). It was assumed that 88 international students were educated at UK schools accepted at Oxford, as this data was not given. This totals 5,368 acceptances for UK-educated pupils at Oxbridge. 307 pupils equates to 5.7%, which is around 1 in 20.

Figure 3: Average percentage of university entrants accessing Top 25 universities, excluding Oxbridge, compared with ISC-educated peers

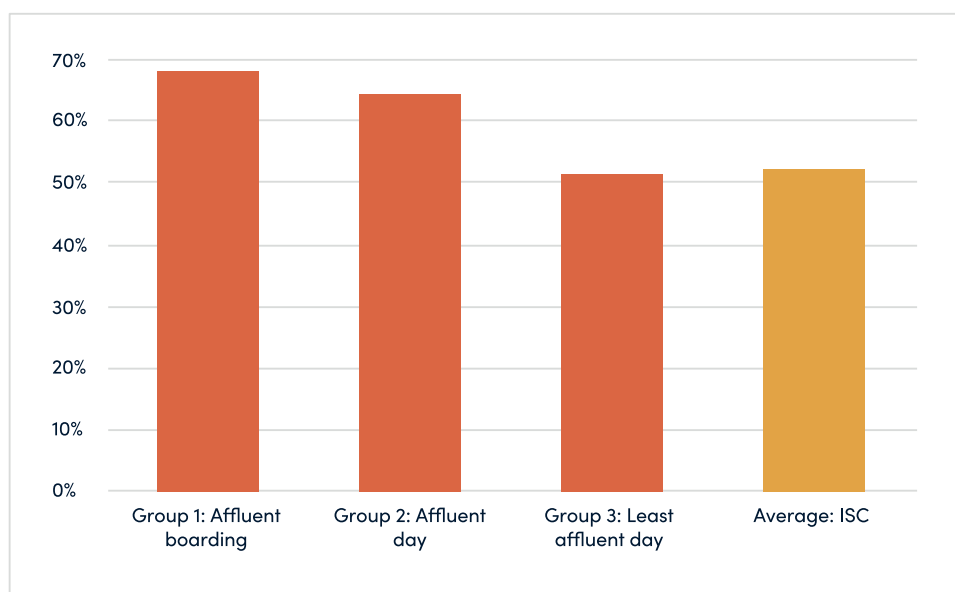


Table 1 presents data on access to Top 25 universities, *including* Oxbridge. These statistics reveal the extent of the inequality in access to highly ranked universities:

- Compared with the least affluent day schools, those attending the most affluent boarding and day schools are 1.5 times more likely to gain access.
- Compared with the overall ISC population, those attending the most affluent boarding and day schools are 1.4 times more likely to gain access.

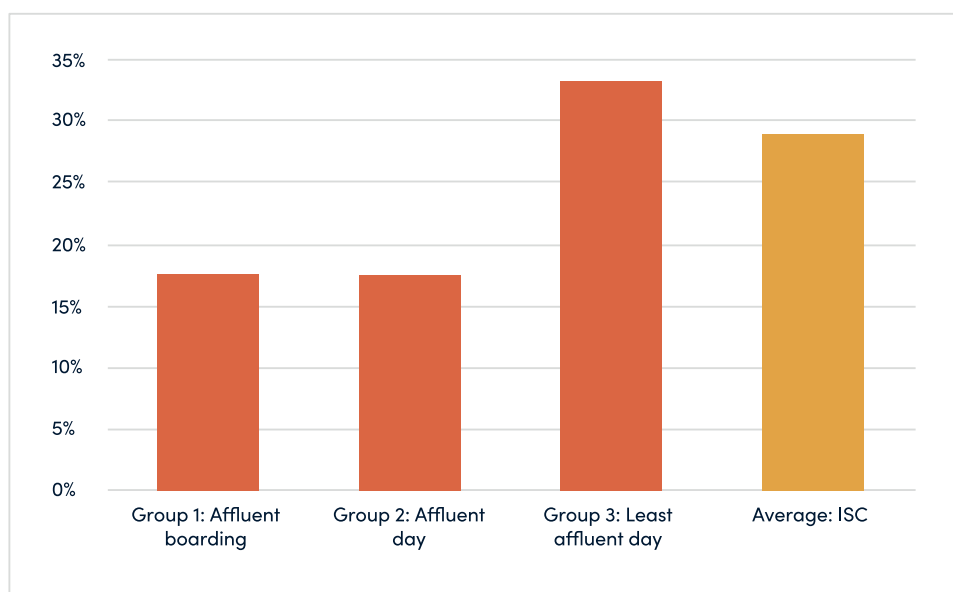
Table 1: The average percentage of university entrants accessing Top 25 universities, including Oxbridge, compared with ISC-educated peers

	Percentage (%)
Group 1: Affluent boarding	79.1
Group 2: Affluent day	79.2
Group 3: Least affluent day	53.1

Access to Top 26–50 universities

Figure 4 shows university entrants from the most affluent boarding and day schools were less likely to attend a Top 26–50 ranked university at 17.5% and 17.4%, respectively. In contrast, the rates of access are broadly similar for the least affluent day schools (33.0%) and the ISC (29%).

Figure 4: Average percentage of university entrants accessing Top 26-50 universities, compared with ISC-educated peers

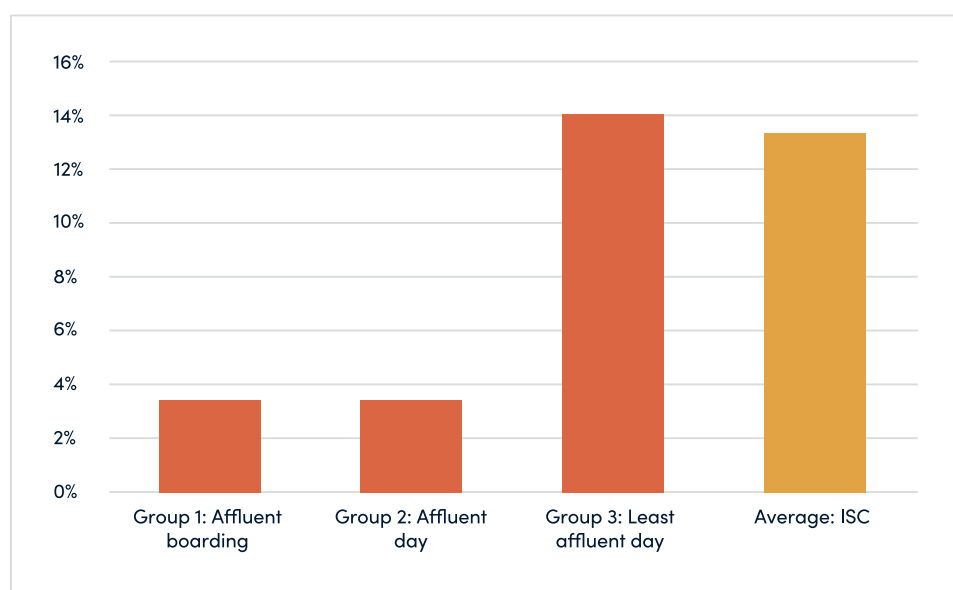


In relative terms, this means that while around 3 in 20 university entrants access Top 26-50 universities from the most affluent schools, this is around twice as high for the least affluent day schools and the ISC average.

Access to other providers

There are more significant differences when we consider the percentage that went on to attend a higher education provider that was not ranked in the top 50 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Average percentage of university entrants accessing other higher education providers, compared with ISC-educated peers



A small percentage of university entrants attend these other providers at the most affluent boarding schools (3.4%) and affluent day schools (3.4%). Rates are higher for the least affluent day schools (13.9%) and the overall ISC (13% approx.).

To put these differences into context, this means that compared with the least affluent day schools and the overall figures from the ISC, those university entrants attending the most affluent boarding and day schools are around four times less likely to attend these higher education providers. The differences may be even more stark than our data suggests, as our use of the Times Good University Ranking as a proxy for higher education status, could conflate less selective institutions and small/specialised providers. The latter, such as the Courtauld Institute of Art, can be very selective and reputable, despite not featuring within the Times Good University Ranking. Within our sample, private school pupils often attended these specialist higher education providers rather than other less selective institutions.

Discussion

Overall, our research demonstrates the continuing hold that private schools have on access to more selective universities. However, our analysis also shows that broad brushstroke averages across the private sector fail to account for significant differences within it.

Disparities within the private school sector

One of the most significant findings of this report is the variation within the private sector when it comes to destination outcomes. While an average of almost 80% of university entrants from the most affluent boarding schools progress to a Top 25 university, this is just over half for the least affluent private day schools.

Our findings demonstrate the substantial relationship between elite private education and access to some of the world's most prestigious universities.

To contextualise these figures, it is useful to compare our findings with the average for state-educated university entrants. Although these figures do not tell us about the variation within the state sector—there are state schools with high rates of access to elite universities—this comparison is useful to contextualise the rates of access we have observed in this report. Using the latest available HESA data,⁷ relating to 2020–21 entry, we see state-educated university entrants had on average the following access: 1.3% Oxbridge; 19.7% Top 25 (excluding Oxbridge); 28.8% Top 26–50; and 50.2% Other.

While these figures are not directly comparable with the findings of the paper, including due to the different year of entry, they do serve to highlight the disproportionate access from which those from elite private education benefit. To give one example, university leavers from the most affluent boarding and day schools in our findings were around 3.8 times more likely to gain access to these universities, compared with the average for their state-educated peers.

⁷ The state school figures are approximate, as the latest publicly available data is for entry 2020/21 (HESA, 2025). The number of entrants from state schools or colleges was added up for each university category (Oxbridge; Top 25; Top 26–50; Other), and a percentage was calculated.

Possible explanations for disparities

Existing research has suggested a range of possible reasons for the disparities in leavers' destinations within the private school sector. We engage with some of these potential reasons below.

On average, private school spending per pupil is more than double that of state schools (Green and Kynaston, 2019), and the wider literature indicates that the affluence of private schools is essential to their dominance and reproduction. However, this general economic picture masks significant differences between private schools. Gamsu's (2021) study of English HMC schools shows how mean income per pupil is almost seven times higher in elite boarding schools when compared with local state schools. Economic inequality thus exists amongst private schools as well as between private and state schools, and this may help explain the disparity in destinations for leavers of these different schools.

Existing research suggests a range of other factors, often building on these funding differences, are important to account for disparities in school leavers' destinations. Henderson and colleagues (2020) found that private schooling is associated with *both higher A-Level attainment and a greater selection of subjects that facilitates access to prestigious universities* (Dilnot, 2015). When these latter two factors were controlled, access to Russell Group universities was no longer associated with attending private school (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). This led Henderson and colleagues to suggest that A-Level attainment and subject availability appear to drive access to Russell Group institutions, underpinned by their greater access to resources. Pupil-teacher ratios, for instance, vary by the affluence of private schools and have been shown to correlate with attainment (Graddy and Stevens, 2005).

Another possible mechanism relates to the tailored support that schools are able to provide their pupils within university admissions processes. While conducting research for this report, we saw messaging on schools' websites that highlighted the resources they dedicate to Oxbridge and Ivy League application support, from mock interviews to additional tutoring for various university entrance exams. The most affluent schools described ongoing partnerships with Ivy League institutions and noted Oxbridge alumni within teaching staff. These observations closely match existing literature on the higher education admissions processes and culture of confidence that is cultivated in these schools (Donnelly, 2014; Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024).

An alternative explanation could lie in the academic and social selectivity of elite private schools. Many of these schools require not only substantial fees, but also that pupils pass various entrance examinations, including standardised tests, interviews, and small group activities. These processes could lead to a high-attaining student body, which, in combination with the schools' resources and activities, could contribute to the differential rates of access we observe in the report.

Conclusion

The aim of the research described in this report was to add more nuance to the observation that there are inequalities in access to higher education providers, and selective higher education providers in particular, associated with the school you attend. By constructing three distinct groups of HMC schools, we have identified substantial differences between the most and least affluent groups of schools. This ranged from 10.8% to 1.7% reaching an Oxbridge destination, and from 68.3% to 51.4% reaching a Top 25 University.

The study adds important nuance to headline figures that only track the difference between the private sector and the state sector in general terms.

Funding statement

This research was funded, in part, by the Learning Through Research Internship programme at University of Manchester.

Biographical note

Liv Shaw is Head of Regional Inequality Research at the Peterloo Institute and a third-year undergraduate student, studying BA Politics and Modern History at the University of Manchester. Tom Fryer and Kathryn Telling are lecturers at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester.

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Appendix

Sample Description

Our sample included an estimated 3,166 Year 13 pupils entering UK higher education providers in 2024. Our sample does not aim to be representative of the HMC, ISC, or all private schools. Instead, the 30 HMC schools in our sample are selected to give an indication of the diversity within the sector, with a specific focus on the most affluent schools.

The specific schools in our sample are:

- Group 1: Winchester College; Wellington College; Tonbridge School; Harrow School; The Leys School; Wycombe Abbey School; Cheltenham Ladies College; Benenden School; Sherborne School; Ampleforth College.
- Group 2: St Paul's Girls' School; St Alban's High School For Girls; St George's College; Kings' College School, Wimbledon; The Godolphin and Latymer School; Bancroft's School; Latymer Upper School; Lady Eleanor Holles School; Highgate School; University College School.
- Group 3: King's School, Macclesfield; King's School, Chester; Wolverhampton Grammar School; Birkenhead School; King Edward's School, Bath; Lingfield College; Leicester Grammar School; The King's School, Gloucester; Stockport Grammar School; St Benedict's School.

In terms of average school size (all year groups):

- Group 1: 705 pupils
- Group 2: 1,144 pupils
- Group 3: 1,044 pupils

In terms of region:

- Group 1: South East (5); South West (2); East (1); London (1); Yorkshire (1).
- Group 2: London (8); South East (1); East (1).
- Group 3: North West (5); South West (2); London (1); South East (1); West Midlands (1).

In terms of pupil sex at the schools:

- Group 1: Boys (4); Girls (3); Mixed (3).
- Group 2: Mixed (6); Girls (3); Boys (1).
- Group 3: Mixed (10).

This can be compared with ISC schools, using data from the Annual Census (2025). ISC schools include junior (623), mixed-age (519), and senior (281) schools. Data was not always disaggregated by these school types, but the following information was provided:

- 69.5% of ISC schools are day schools (p.7).
- The mean size for senior schools is 444 and mixed age schools is 537 (p.8).
- Just over half (52%) of ISC schools are located in London, South Central and the Southeast (p.8).
- 17% of ISC schools are single sex (p.32).

Sensitivity Analysis

Within the report, we calculated an average across the ten schools in each group. An alternative approach would have been to add up all the pupils within each group, and then calculate university destinations on this basis. The table below demonstrates the results, if we had adopted this alternative approach. There are small differences to those reported within the main body of the paper, all less than 2% points, which makes no material impact on our conclusions.

Table 2: University destinations for the three groups (add up all university entrants in each group)

	Group 1: Affluent Boarding	Group 2: Affluent Day	Group 3: Least Affluent Day
Oxbridge	11.2	15.0	1.8
Top 25 (Excl Oxbridge)	68.7	65.5	53.0
Top 25 (Incl Oxbridge)	79.9	80.5	54.9
Top 26 – 50	17.0	16.4	32.7
Remaining	3.1	3.0	12.4