

# It's not easy to raise prior attainment, but universities could better contextualise applicants' grades

**ISE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/its-not-easy-to-raise-prior-attainment-but-universities-could-be-less-picky-about-applicants-grades/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/its-not-easy-to-raise-prior-attainment-but-universities-could-be-less-picky-about-applicants-grades/)

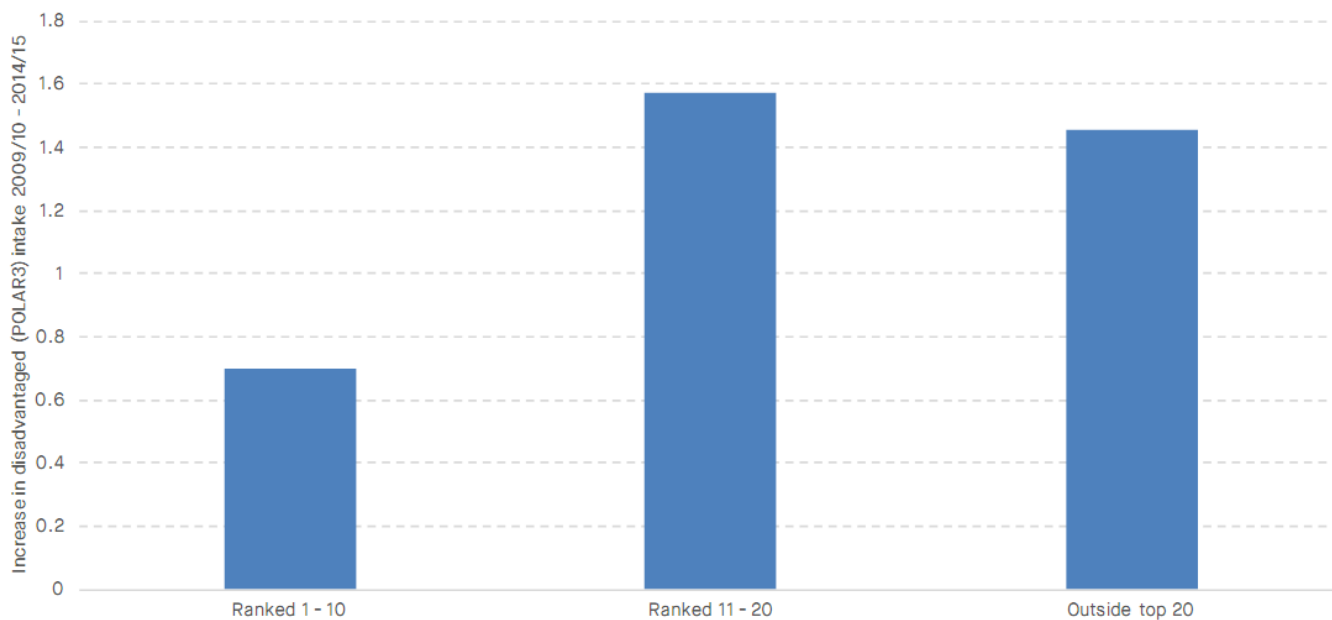
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The government has [challenged](#) the Higher Education sector to double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and to raise by 20 per cent the number of undergraduates from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. A [report](#) by the Social Market Foundation casts doubt on the achievability of these [2020 goals](#): we're on track to do neither. **Steve Jones** outlines the important findings but challenges some of the solutions on offer.



Among the observations offered by the Social Market Foundation (SMF) is that the spread of disadvantaged students across UK universities is very patchy. While some institutions' Widening Participation (WP) intake is pushing 30 per cent, proportions elsewhere barely top 2 per cent. No surprise there, perhaps. But what may come as more of a shock are differences in the *rate* of improvement. As the SMF graph below shows, progress since 2009 among Top 10 institutions (according to rankings in the [Times Higher](#)) is less than half that made by institutions ranked 11-20 and by those outside the Top 20. In other words, the rate at which the UK's highest prestige universities are growing their WP intake is more sluggish than everywhere else.

Top 10 universities (THE league table) have made less progress in increasing disadvantaged intake since 2009; similar pattern among the rest



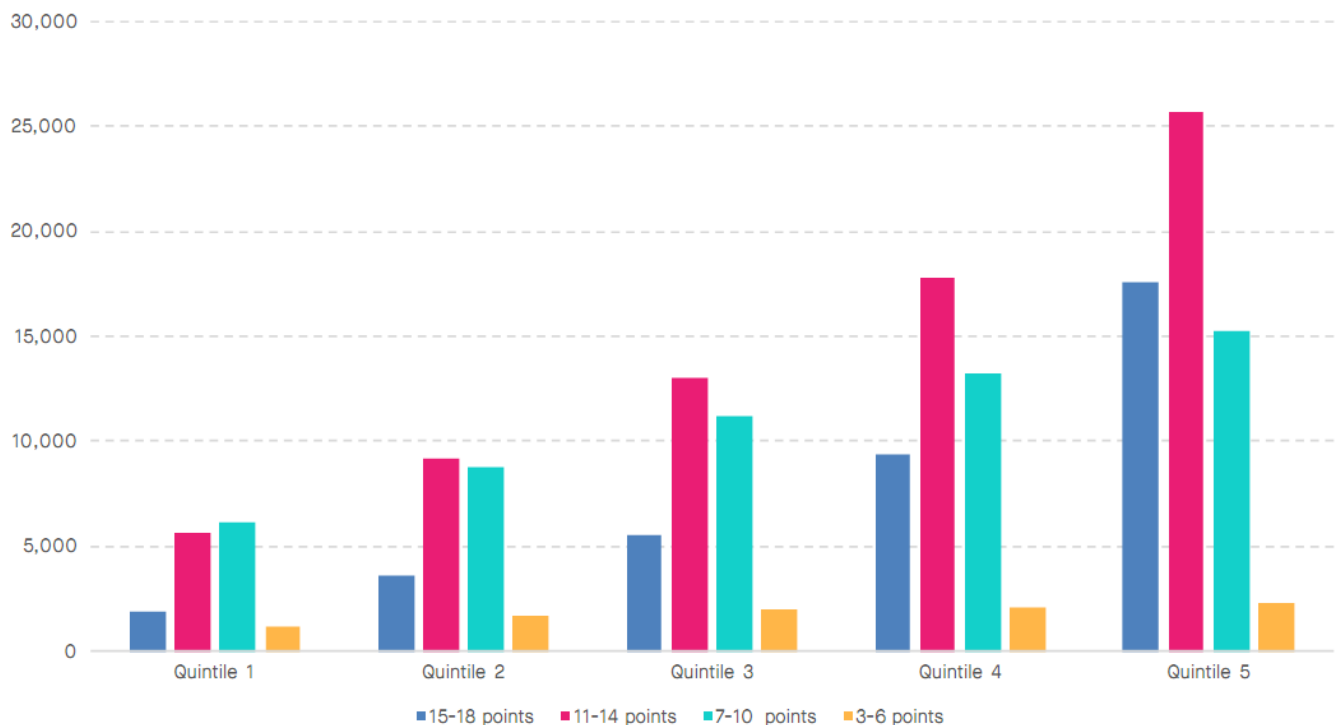
Sources: HESA, Widening Participation of Under-represented Groups, Table T1a, young full-time first degree entrants; THE World University Rankings 2014/15

Source: [Widening Participation Social Market Foundation](#)

Does that matter? Well, as the [Social Mobility and Child Poverty](#) commission has [noted](#), the top professions tend to be dominated by alumni of the highest ranking universities. And according to the [Sutton Trust](#), graduates from such universities enjoy the more substantial earnings premium. The risk is that the sector's uneven distribution of WP students allows [social hierarchies](#) to be reproduced and causes [social mobility](#) to stall.

The response of selective universities invariably involves locating the problem further down the food chain by arguing the “real” barrier to access is the attainment gap: the difference in the grades with which young people from different socio-economic backgrounds leave school or college. This position is starkly reinforced by UCAS data reported in the SMF report: in 2015, the total number of young people from society’s most disadvantaged quintile holding entry qualifications that placed them in the top attainment bracket was 1,880; however, the total number of young people from the least disadvantaged backgrounds was 17,560. As the graph below shows, the ratio of high-attaining applicants to low-attaining applicants increases exponentially with socio-economic advantage.

**Number of applicants by POLAR3 quintile and number of UCAS points (2015)**



Source: UCAS, Applicants and acceptances by groups of applicants, 2015

Source: Widening Participation Social Market Foundation

One option suggested by the SMF is that “institutions themselves get much more involved in raising prior attainment.” Clearly, there are important ways in which universities could and should work more closely with lower-attaining state schools and colleges. We can ‘inspire’; we can do more to smooth school-to-university transitions; we can ensure that pupils apply to appropriate course and that our admissions processes treat them justly. Research continues to indicate that young people from low-participation backgrounds conceptualise higher-prestige universities as **beyond their reach** and worry about **not fitting in**. Selection practices may also **disfavour** them.

However, it’s another matter entirely to suggest that university staff have the expertise needed to close attainment differentials. The SMF suggests we offer tuition, provide summer courses and “directly take on responsibility for running schools”. However, the pedagogies favoured in higher education – those that develop critical thinking, independent scholarship and research-driven enquiry – are a far cry from the teach-to-the-test model to which schools are increasingly forced to submit.

If the problem is that the highest prestige universities are not pulling their weight in terms of progress with WP, an alternative approach would be for them to become more **sensitive** to the educational background in which applicants’ grades were achieved and more explicit about how this information is used in admissions processes. **Contextual**

[data](#) is not a new idea, but the sector lacks a consistent, transparent policy on how, when and why it is applied. We even have the absurd situation of league tables using entry tariffs as an indicator of institutional quality, thereby incentivising the more elite end of the sector to continue fishing in familiar waters.

Some colleagues express concern that students admitted on the basis of contextual data might not have the skills needed to cope with higher education. But let's not forget that state school applicants [outperform](#) their independent school peers at university on a like-for-like basis. It's not so much social engineering as rational investment in talent that hasn't yet had the opportunity to manifest as attainment.

The SMF doesn't mention admissions. Instead, it turns to market-based solutions, speculating that some new providers may provide a boost to WP. However, as Andrew McGettigan and others [remind](#) us, newly-created private colleges have so far been associated more with empty classrooms and suspect business practices than with driving forward the nation's social mobility agenda.

The job of improving attainment levels among society's least advantaged groups is deeply specialised, and one that may be better left to trained, time-served professionals than to well-meaning university staff. However, the sector could seek to address social mobility in other ways. Our rankings could reward diversity and inclusivity, not penalise the use of contextual data. Our admissions processes could become more transparent and less gameable. Our teaching could compensate for previous educational shortcomings by offering targeted, sustained support. And we could fixate a little less on prior attainment and the league tables that peddle it.

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