



**The Personal Statement:  
A fair way to assess university applicants?**

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A summary of research<sup>1</sup> produced for the Sutton Trust

by

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<sup>1</sup> Full academic paper to appear in the *Comparative Education Review*.

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## **Foreword**

The Sutton Trust has published considerable research on the university admissions process. We have shown how 3,000 state school students each year gain good enough grades for one of the 30,000 places at one of our 13 leading universities, but don't get a place. We have also argued for fairer admissions procedures which would recognise the true potential of bright young people from less privileged backgrounds.

The programmes we fund, including summer schools, mentoring and work experience are designed to give less privileged young people the opportunities that are taken for granted by their better off contemporaries. But while these programmes make a difference, it is vital that these young people are not further disadvantaged by an admissions process which gives an extra edge to those who already seem to enjoy all the advantages.

Dr Steven Jones of the University of Manchester has looked at one particular aspect of the admissions process that appears to fit into that category: the personal statement. By highlighting the stark differences in the quality of statements and in the life experiences that young people from different school backgrounds have enjoyed, his important research suggests that this is a source of disadvantage for state school applicants.

Good state schools and colleges already do a lot to help their most able students apply for places at leading universities. This should become the norm, and there is certainly room for groups of schools to arrange such support locally.

But admissions processes also need to change. Personal statements should be more than an excuse to highlight past advantages. Applicants should outline how they might contribute to campus life, and universities should make it clear that applicants are not penalised for having lacked opportunities in the past due to family circumstances.

We also need plenty more opportunities for young people to gain relevant work experience and internships, not just after they graduate, but before applying to university. The legal profession has taken a lead here, working with the Sutton Trust on the Prime programme and Pathways to Law. We need every profession to play its part too.

I am very grateful to Dr Jones for this important piece of research, which I hope will encourage a closer look at the how personal statements are used in the interview process.

**Sir Peter Lampl,  
Chair of the Sutton Trust  
Chair of the Education Endowment Foundation**

## Executive Summary

- The UCAS personal statement is an important non-academic indicator that many UK universities use as an integral part of their admissions processes. Up to half a million personal statements are written every year.<sup>2</sup> This report is the first to consider how they are shaped by applicants' educational background. 309 personal statements were analysed, all of which were submitted to the same department of the same Russell Group university by students with the same A-level results.
- Academic indicators, such as A-level grades, correlate closely with students' school type and socio-economic status. However, non-academic indicators, such as the personal statement, are often assumed to bring greater fairness to university admissions processes. This research challenges that assumption, finding that independent school applicants are more likely to submit statements that are carefully crafted, written in an academically appropriate way, and filled with high status, relevant activities. By contrast, state school applicants appear to receive less help composing their statement, often struggling to draw on suitable work and life experience.
- There are big differences in presentation. Clear writing errors are three times more common in the personal statements of applicants from sixth form colleges as those from independent schools.
- Independent school applicants not only list the highest number of work-related activities, they also draw on the most prestigious experiences, often involving high-level placements and professionalised work-shadowing. One 18-year-old applicant's experience includes working *"for a designer in London, as a model ... on the trading floor of a London broker's firm ... with my local BBC radio station ... events planning with a corporate 5 star country hotel ... in the marketing team of a leading City law firm ... and most recently managing a small gastro pub."* For state school applicants, work-related activity is more likely to be a Saturday job or a school visit to a business.
- School type is therefore an accurate predictor of key features that may affect admission tutors' decisions. In the sample, these advantages translate into improved outcomes: 70% of applicants from independent schools ended up at one of the highest ranked universities in the UK but only 50% of those from comprehensives and colleges reached a similar destination. This could be a factor in explaining the under-representation of some school types at highly selective universities.
- "Ensure you stand out from the crowd" is UCAS's advice to applicants when they compose their personal statement.<sup>3</sup> This research suggests that even among applicants with identical A-level results, some are much better equipped to do so than others.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/public/documents/icof-report-ucas-analysis-final.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/>

## Recommendations

1. UCAS should consider whether the personal statement, in its current form, is an appropriate and fair indicator of applicants' potential.
2. The personal statement should be restructured. Instead of inviting a 'free response', a limit should be placed on the number of different activities and experiences that applicants may cite.
3. Universities should be more transparent about how they use personal statements. Young people's educational background should be taken into account, and applicants judged according to the academic and extracurricular opportunities available to them.
4. Schools and colleges individually or collectively should provide practical support to students to help them through the university admissions process. Good advice, information and guidance are particularly needed in state schools, and from a much earlier stage.
5. Applicants should be asked to reflect on which attributes they would bring to a course or university, rather than simply listing their previous achievements.
6. With concerns being raised that pre-written personal statements are now 'for sale' to UK applicants, universities should carefully monitor the extent to which the increase in private sector consultants distorts the HE admissions process.
7. Opportunities for state school students to gain appropriate internships and work experience – such as those offered by the Pathways to Law and the PRIME programmes, both of which the Sutton Trust supports - should be more common. All the professions should introduce programmes provide systematic support for young people from non-privileged backgrounds to access internships and high quality work experience

## Introduction

According to the Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, it is right that universities “look beyond headline A-level grades to what that individual’s potential might be.”<sup>4</sup> Among the list of non-academic indicators cited by Mr Willetts is the UCAS personal statement. This report examines whether placing greater emphasis on the personal statement is an effective way to enhance fairness in the higher education admissions process.

Initially, the arguments in favour of non-academic indicators appear persuasive. Independent schools in the UK enjoy a “performance advantage” over state schools that is double the OECD average.<sup>5</sup> Academic attainment is therefore not always a reliable measure of students’ ability. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that undergraduates from less advantaged educational backgrounds, once at university, out-perform peers from more advantaged backgrounds who achieved the same grades.<sup>6</sup> A key government paper has also noted that “exam grades alone are not the best predictor of potential to succeed.”<sup>7</sup> Because the personal statement allows applicants to outline their non-academic qualities, such as workplace experience and extra-curricular activity, it should enable admission tutors to assess applicants more holistically, and thus make better informed selection decisions.

Indeed, the use of personal statements may seem increasingly advantageous in the new higher fees environment of the UK higher education sector. The Sutton Trust estimates that 3,000 state school students fail to gain one of 30,000 places at the top 13 universities every year despite having the grades to do so.<sup>8</sup> With other research suggesting that the prospect of increased debt disproportionately deters students of low socio-economic status,<sup>9</sup> the personal statement could be seen as a means to recognise and reward potential among students whose grades do not benefit from advantages of school type.

However, the use of personal statements in the admissions process is not without risk. In the USA, the “coaching question” is often raised, particularly in relation to the ‘diversity essay’, an indicator used by over 400 colleges and universities. One study suggests “middle- and upper-class parents resort to anything they think will get their child an edge, including essay coaching or even writing their child’s essay themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Such behaviour was earlier noted in the 2004 Schwartz Report, commissioned by the UK government: “anecdotal evidence suggests that some staff and parents advise to the extent that the personal statement cannot be seen as the applicant’s own work.”<sup>11</sup> In the USA, fears are compounded by growth in the college admissions consultancy sector, private companies offering “to guide students to write first-rate personal statements.”<sup>12</sup> Published testimonies often feature alarming claims: “if it weren’t for [*consultant’s name*], my chances of

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<sup>4</sup> “Universities should select by ‘potential’, says David Willetts”. *The Telegraph*. August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/46624007.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Hoare and Ron Johnston. 2011. “Widening participation through admissions policy – a British case study of school and university performance”. *Studies in Higher Education* 36.

<sup>7</sup> “Students at the Heart of the System”, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. June 2011, page 58.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/research/state-school-admissions-to-our-leading-universities/>

<sup>9</sup> Kristin Voigt, 2007. “Individual Choice and Unequal Participation in Higher Education”. *Theory and Research in Education* 5(1).

<sup>10</sup> Kirkland, Anna and Ben Hansen. 2011. “‘How Do I Bring Diversity?’: Race and Class in the College Admissions Essay”. *Law & Society Review* 45(1), page 118.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ivyselect.com/essay.html>

getting into [top US business school] would have been hazardously slim.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, recent newspaper reports suggest that such agencies<sup>14</sup> are also becoming commonplace in the UK, with one claiming that it “employs only Oxbridge graduates and offers fully customised personal statements.”<sup>15</sup>

Such comments raise the possibility that, rather than being an instrument of fairness, the personal statement may actually extend existing school-based inequities into higher education. Despite its ubiquity, the personal statement remains “a genre virtually ignored,”<sup>16</sup> and, for many applicants, the admissions process is “mystified and occluded.”<sup>17</sup> Recent literature in the area is scant, and focused mostly on medical school applicants. Its aim has generally been to gauge how accurately the personal statement predicts future performance (with results tending to suggest that it is a “highly dubious”<sup>18</sup> method of selection), not to consider issues of fairness. In contrast, this paper reports on how personal statements differ according to the applicant’s school type, and whether these differences correlate with the final higher education destinations attended.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ivyselect.com/testimonials.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.edmissionuk.co.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/oct/13/sixth-formers-cheat-university-admissions>

<sup>16</sup> Robert M. Brown, 2004. “Self-Composed: Rhetoric in Psychology personal statements”. *Written Communication* 21(3), page 242.

<sup>17</sup> Huiling Ding, 2007. “Genre analysis of personal statements: analysis of moves in application essays to medical and dental schools”. *English for Specific Purposes* 26, page 387.

<sup>18</sup> Geoff Norman, 2004. “The Morality of Medical School Admission”. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 9 (2), page 81.

## Method

According to UCAS, the personal statement is “your opportunity to tell universities and colleges about your suitability for the course(s) that you hope to study.”<sup>19</sup> Each applicant is allowed a ‘free response’ of up to 4,000 characters. The UCAS website offers several pages of advice, including a list of dos and don’ts, a how-to video and a ‘mind map’. However, applicants are not invited to write about a particular topic, as is regular practice among other nations’ admissions agencies. For example, in the USA, the Common Application gives students the opportunity to “describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.”<sup>20</sup>

Personal statements were obtained from all 5,276 applicants to one school within one UK Russell Group university for 2010 entry. All overseas applicants were discarded, as were all applications from mature students. To control for academic achievement, only the 327 applicants who subsequently achieved grades of BBB at A-level were investigated. Statements were tagged according to the applicant’s school type: 87 from comprehensive schools; 83 from sixth form colleges; 45 from grammar schools; 93 from independent schools and 18 from elsewhere. Though the sample size is not large, it compares favourable to previous qualitative studies of the personal statement.

In the absence of an established methodology for analysing personal statements, the study borrows other researchers’ criteria where possible<sup>21</sup> and introduces new indicators as needed. The three key indicators examined are:

- Fluency of Expression
- Work-Related Activity
- Extra-Curricular Activity

Applicants are prompted about the importance of all three areas on the UCAS website and, though relatively little work has been undertaken into how admission tutors read and interpret personal statements, it is reasonable to assume that each area may contribute towards shaping opinions about an applicant’s suitability for a course. The methods used here share similarities with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998) investigation of applications to elite French schools.<sup>22</sup> Fluency of expression is a form of cultural capital, while work-related activities are often facilitated through social capital in the form of family networks or school alumni. Extra-curricular activity draws on many forms of symbolic capital, as applicants attempt to signal their “dispositions to be, and above all to become, ‘one of us.’”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/Docs/DownloadForms/>

<sup>21</sup> Linnea GlenMaye and Margaret Oakes, 2002. “Assessing suitability of MSW applicants through objective scoring of personal statements”. *Journal of Social Work Education* 38(1).

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 1996. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Translated by Lauretta C. Clough. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, page 100.

## Fluency of Expression

UCAS note that the personal statement “may be your only written work that the course tutor sees before making a decision,” warning applicants to “get the grammar, spelling and punctuation right.”<sup>24</sup> This section examines the extent to which students from different school types follow UCAS’s advice.

Writing fluency is here gauged by the avoidance of clear errors,<sup>25</sup> such as spelling mistakes (“*alongside the skills I have already aquired at AS level*”; “*my school is renowned for its sporting competiveness*”) and apostrophe misuse (“*I am re-sitting two modular's*”; “*the countries oldest working Catholic convent*”). The analysis is non-judgemental, identifying unambiguous, meaning-impairing errors only. Prescriptive ‘rules’ of grammar (split infinitives, etc.) are not applied, even though some admissions tutors may dislike such nuances being overlooked.

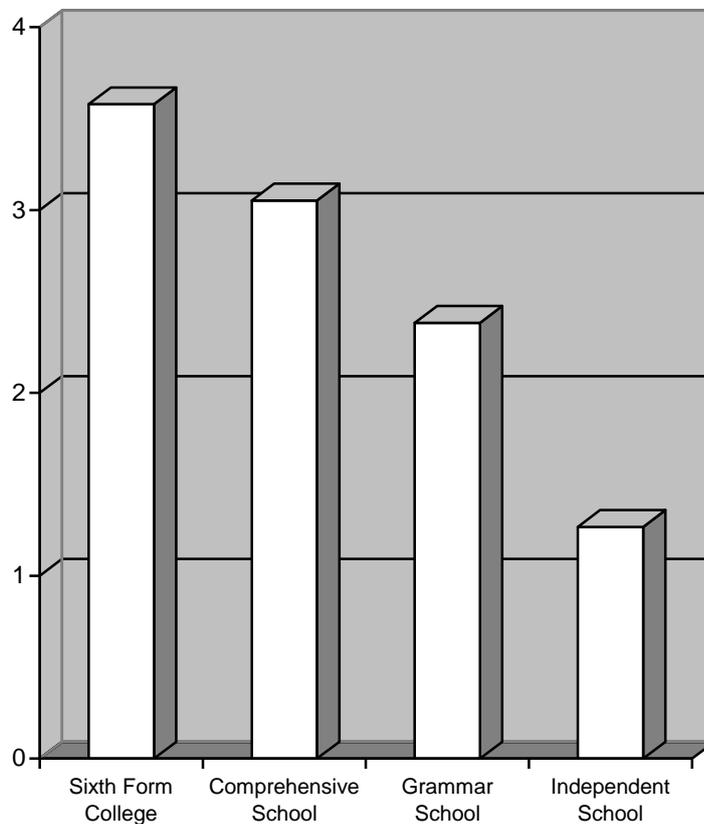


Figure 1: clear writing errors per 1,000 words of personal statement

As Figure 1 shows, even though the personal statements were submitted by students who would go on to receive identical grades at A-level, a striking pattern emerges in the distribution of errors. Applicants from sixth form colleges make, on average, three times as many writing mistakes as those from independent schools. Note that this is not the result of a small number of poorly proofread

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/keypoints>

<sup>25</sup> All coding undertaken by the author and, independently, by a second coder.

statements skewing the distribution. If all 309 personal statements were ranked in descending order of writing errors, none of the 20 worst offenders would be from an independent school applicant.

One explanation may be the different levels of advice, information and guidance received: whereas some applicants have the importance of the personal statement emphasised by their teachers, family and friends, and even benefit from direct input, other applicants may be left to compose 4,000 characters of text unaided.

It should also be noted that though Figure 1 relates to quantifiable errors only, many examples were found of state school applicants struggling to maintain an appropriate tone in their personal statement. For example, some applicants are inappropriately over-formal (*“hence in light of the aforementioned points all advocate my academic and enthusiasm for this course”*) and others inappropriately under-formal (*“I am not really sure what makes me so interested in the subject; I don't have an exact reason to be truthful. I love it as a whole. Most of all I love getting to the bottom of a puzzle”*).

If differences between personal statements were restricted to superficial elements of the text, one could argue that admissions tutors, especially those with access to ‘contextual data’, could discount for disadvantages associated with school type. However, it would appear that applicants from privileged educational backgrounds also enjoy more substantial benefits, as the next section shows.

## Work-Related Activity

Applicants are advised to “include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it's relevant to your chosen course(s)”.<sup>26</sup> This section assesses the quantity and the quality of the work-related activity that applicants from different educational backgrounds draw upon, and looks at how it is described and conceptualised in the personal statement.

Throughout the database, work-related activity was found to be a major area of difference in personal statements, with some independent school applicants able to list up to nine prestigious placements, internships and shadowing activities while other applicants were left describing school outings and part-time jobs. The two extremes of the spectrum are exemplified below:

<b>Work-related activity: Independent school applicant</b>	<b>Work-related activity: State school applicants</b>
<p>“As an 18 year old, I have had a variety of short periods of experience in the workings of businesses in today's financial world. I first became aware of the workings of businesses when, to supplement my savings, I worked for [company name], a designer in London, as a model. I have also worked on the trading floor of a London brokers firm, [company name] ... My other experience thus far includes work with my local BBC radio station, events planning with a corporate 5 star country hotel, and working in the marketing team of a leading City law firm. I have since had a variety of jobs, most recently managing a small gastro pub.”</p>	<p>“In Year 11 we were taken on a school trip to Cadbury World to analyse the aspects of the business. During the day we were given a presentation by the workers at Cadbury World who explained how they advertise, produce and promote their new and existing products. I felt this was particularly valuable to my understanding of the business world.”</p> <p>“In the final GCSE year there was an opportunity for a group of us to manage the school lockers.”</p>

Family networks were found to make a big difference. The father of one independent school applicant is described as “an entrepreneur who has created and sold a number of successive businesses”; the applicant has “therefore experienced the multi-faceted world of business first hand.” Another independent school applicant regularly visits an uncle in Japan, “observing his aircraft brokerage and marketing company”. Even if admission tutors are not impressed by such connections, those applicants with high-prestige, professionalised experiences are better placed to make meaningful connections with the course on which they hope to study.

Placing an exact figure on the number of individual, work-related activities in each statement is difficult because applicants report everything from full-time jobs (“I now currently work as a cleaner

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/whattoinclude>

Mon-Fri and have done for 7 months”) to one-off duties (“I assisted teachers with a school open day”). However, in total, the volume of work-related activities listed by applicants was not found to vary greatly according to school type. Applicants from independent and grammar schools list approximately 3.63 activities per personal statement, while those from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges mention about 2.97.

This global similarity, however, masks significant disparities in the nature of work undertaken. When each activity was sub-coded as either a ‘job’ (low-skill, low-prestige and usually paid) or an ‘experience’ (higher skill, higher prestige and usually unpaid), a different picture emerged. Below are examples of ‘experiences’ taken from personal statements submitted by independent school applicants, and ‘jobs’ cited by state school applicants. Counts were made for each school type, the totals of which are shown in Figure 2.

<b>Work-related activity ‘experiences’ (Independent school applicants)</b>	<b>Work-related activity ‘jobs’ (State school applicants)</b>
“I work-shadowed a stockbroker at the London office of Union Bank of Switzerland.”	“I have a part time job as a drinks waitress working at the KC stadium. Even though it's my job I look forward to my shifts.”
“Next summer I have been offered a work experience placement to shadow the Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, in New York.”	“Last year I worked in Aldi and in a local bakery, which gave me experience of dealing with a variety of customers' demands.”
“My extensive involvement and success in assisting my father in his international company shows my ability to handle situations in the real world.”	“I have a part time job in a local pub where I work as a waitress and a barmaid.”
“My fervour for economics has led to work placements in a leading bank in India and accountancy firm in New York.”	“I have two part time jobs in the hotel and catering industry.”

Figure 2’s differing ratios show that although the total amount of work-related activity reported by applicants is not greatly different, the nature of the activity is. Furthermore, the unpaid ‘experiences’ upon which applicants from state schools draw are much more likely to be facilitated (and therefore limited) by their place of education, rather than the product of their family ties and social capital.

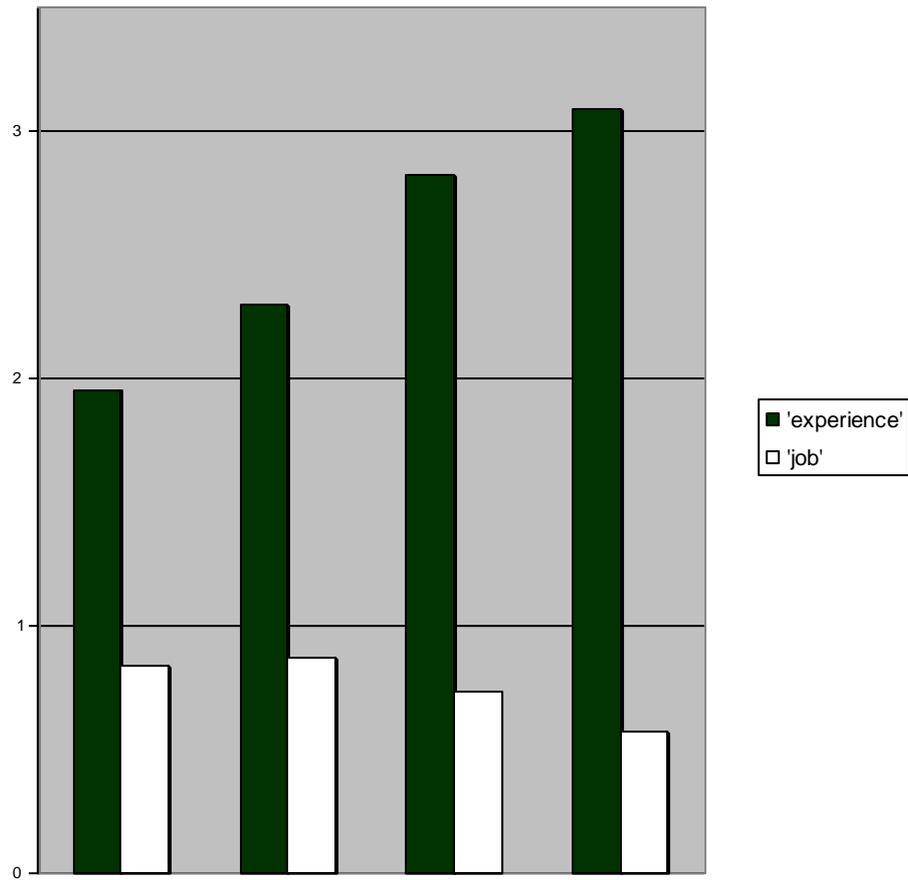


Figure 2: average number of work-related activities per personal statement, coded as either a 'job' or an 'experience'

## Extra-Curricular Activity

Almost all personal statements contain some description of extra-curricular activities and, once again, differences arise in the nature of these activities and the way in which they are expressed. Many of the activities described by state school applicants carry little weight in the admissions process, and some responses signify a lack of ambition as well as inappropriate forms of cultural capital.

Independent school applicants	State school applicants
<p>"I did a Cordon Bleu cookery course at the Anton Mossiman School, in London ... During my gap year I plan to do a ski season in Meribel."</p>	<p>"I try to follow Manchester United Football Club as much as I possibly can as I have a keen interest in football. I regularly watch Match of the Day and I enjoy the diversity of the Champions League."</p>
<p>"[school name] provided me with many opportunities outside class: I joined the Combined Cadet Force and, after completing the Cadre programme, became a Platoon Commander with 25 cadets under my supervision."</p>	<p>"My main interests include spending time with friends, watching films, going to the gym, reading up on the latest fashion and attending gigs. I attend a lot of gigs and the experience and thrill of the atmosphere puts me on a complete high."</p>
<p>"I have played the piano since I was 6 years old and the violin since I was 9 years old. I have been a part of orchestras and ensembles in both schools I have attended. As a member of orchestras I have had the privilege of touring abroad where I enjoyed the performances and found the opportunity for sight seeing exciting. I have recently passed my grade 8 on the piano and grade 6 on the violin."</p>	<p>"I love to listen to music; sometimes I just go on walks and listen to my iPod which gives me time to think and reflect on my day. I am truly enjoying studying at college and I have made some great friends along the way who have made me the person I am today. Without them I don't think I would have achieved as much."</p>
<p>"I witnessed first hand the effect that poverty has on children; through this I have been moved to sponsor a young child in Croatia."</p>	<p>"Another hobby of mine is computing. My subscription to "Custom PC" keeps me informed of the latest technological advances."</p>

The personal statement has been described as “an indicator of disciplinary socialization”<sup>27</sup> and the examples above show how applicants from independent schools characterise themselves in ways that explicitly demonstrate their suitability for academic life. Other applicants, especially those from comprehensive school and sixth form college, follow UCAS directions more literally, and tend towards unsubstantiated, over-personalised claims.

A further tendency arises for state school applicants to close their personal statement as though it were a letter (“*I look forward to you reading my application*”; “*I would like to humbly request a place on the course*”). Also common are unsupported claims (“*I can guarantee I'll be an excellent Sociology student*”; “*I feel I'm charismatic*”) and unfortunate wordplay (“*I want to succeed in business and I mean business*”).

Finally, whereas independent school applicants often express ambitious goals (“*I wish to fulfill my goal of being at the forefront of the financial world*”), State school applicants can be over-honest in their self-assessment (“*I have no firm ideas of what I really want to do in the future*”). This can result in heartfelt appeals (“*I am certain it is in accounting where my heart truly belongs*”), but not the sense of entitlement that results from an accumulation of relevant social, cultural and economic capital.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert M. Brown, 2004. “Self-Composed: Rhetoric in Psychology personal statements”. *Written Communication* 21(3), page 242.

## Final Higher Education Destinations of Applicants

Though the sample size is not large enough to allow for statistically meaningful conclusions to be drawn, it is interesting to note that whereas over 70% of this study's independent school applicants ended up at a high-ranking 'Sutton Trust 30' university, only 50-55% of the state-educated applicants reached a similar destination. This distribution is consistent with those reported in larger-scale comparisons of identically qualified UCAS applicants.<sup>28</sup>

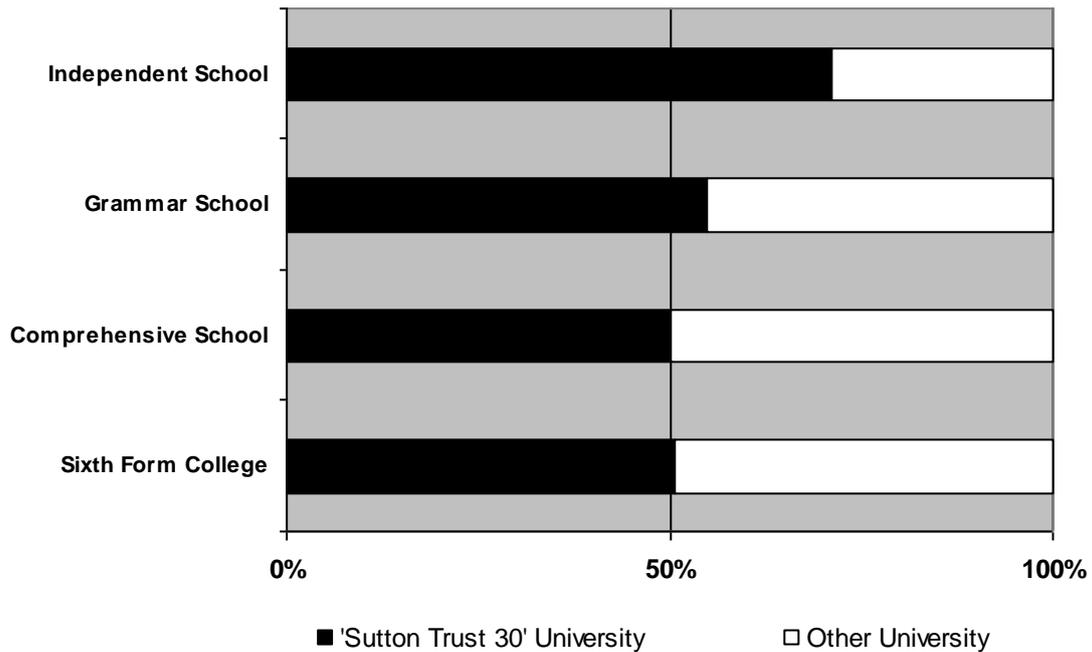


Figure 3: final Higher Education destination, where known, for all applicants investigated

Naturally, the correlation shown in Figure 3 cannot be attributed to differences in the personal statement alone.<sup>29</sup> However, as every applicant subsequently achieved the same A-level grades, neither is the correlation explicable in terms of academic ability. What can be inferred is that different levels of information, advice and guidance are at play, and that this uneven distribution affects all non-academic indicators, the personal statement included.

<sup>28</sup> Vikki Boliver. 2013. "How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?" *British Journal of Sociology*.

<sup>29</sup> Note that the proportions presented in Figure 3 cover those students for whom final destination data is known. Some applicants either withdrew from UCAS or else were rejected by all of their chosen universities. For independent school applicants, the proportion for whom destination data is unavailable is 25.8%; for grammar school applicants, 33.3%; for comprehensive school applicants, 11.4%; for sixth form college applicants, 16.9%. One reason for this variation may be that applicants from some school types are more likely to retake A-levels in order to enter Universities that are more prestigious at a later time. This could mean that the true destination picture is more polarised than Figure 3 allows.

## Conclusion

In relation to the personal statement, it has been noted that applicants “may feel themselves to be composing in a rhetorical void in which they must write in an unfamiliar genre for an audience that they do not know nor will likely ever meet.”<sup>30</sup> For some UK students, this is undoubtedly true. However, for others, the personal statement appears to be a welcome opportunity to exchange privileged forms of cultural capital (interesting, relevant hobbies) and social capital (helpful family networks), as well as to further exploit school type advantages arising from economic capital.

Though it is tempting to see non-academic indicators as a proxy for fairness in the higher education admissions system, this research finds that they must be treated with caution. Work experience “tends to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of social class inequality,”<sup>31</sup> and this is amply evident in applicants’ personal statements. Unless opportunities emerge for state school children to receive more meaningful work-related activity, to recognise the value of that experience and to express it appropriately, a fairer structure for the personal statement might be one that allows one activity only to be listed.

UK institutions might also follow in the footsteps of their US counterparts by explicitly stating that applicants will not be disadvantaged because of an opportunities deficit. For example, Yale University invites details of additional courses that may have been taken, but reassures applicants that “we only expect you to take advantage of such courses if your high school provides them.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Harvard University asks: “if a candidate has not had much time in high school for extracurricular pursuits due to familial, work, or other obligations, what does she hope to explore with her additional free time?”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the principles underpinning the ‘diversity essay’ – that applicants should outline what they bring to the mix of campus life – may be more equitable than those underpinning the ‘free response’ approach currently favoured in the UK.

However, the risk with all personal statements, regardless of how sensitively they are designed and explained, is that they mirror educational and socio-economic background, with those applicants already benefiting most from the system given opportunity to edge themselves further ahead of those who benefitted least. Though some individual exceptions arise, this research has identified a clear pattern: independent school applicants make fewer writing errors than state school peers of the same academic ability, and are able to draw on work-related and extra-curricular activity that is more relevant and more prestigious. Because information, advice and guidance are not evenly distributed among applicants, the personal statement cannot be assumed to level the higher education admissions playing field. If anything, it tilts it further in the other direction.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert M. Brown, 2004. “Self-Composed: Rhetoric in Psychology personal statements”. *Written Communication* 21(3), page 243.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Hatcher and Tricia Le Gallais. 2008. “The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality?” London: Education and Employers Taskforce, page 77.

<sup>32</sup> <http://admissions.yale.edu/what-yale-looks-for>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.admissions.college.harvard.edu/apply/tips/decisions.html>