

## **Knowing the 'unknowns': who are the full-time undergraduates whose social class is not known and what are the implications for widening participation policy?**

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*Abstract : This paper takes its cue from the National Audit Office's 2008 report into widening participation policy in the United Kingdom. The report found that while there appeared to be modest improvements in the proportion of students coming from lower socio-economic groups over the last ten years, reliable analysis was hampered by a high proportion of missing data. In the 2007/08 academic year, the proportion of entrants whose socio-economic status was defined as 'unknown' was 26%, up from just 10% a decade earlier.*

*This paper uses a sample of 1,000 such students, aged 18 or 19 on entry, to investigate why they have been designated as 'unknown' and what other information can be gleaned from their university application form. It was found that 46% of the sample could in fact be coded to a specific socio-economic grouping from the parental information provided by the student and it was difficult to see why this had not happened. The social profile of these students was comparable to the national picture. A further 23% provided information which was too vague to be coded.*

*The focus of the paper, however, were those 32% of students who either declined to provide parental information or who stated that their parents were not working. These students were strongly and disproportionately drawn from areas of high deprivation and low participation in higher education; the precise target of widening participation initiatives, yet they are effectively not acknowledged. This finding causes difficulties for the reliability of official statistics on social class.*

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## Context

Concern about low levels of working class participation in UK higher education is not new: it dates back to at least the 1960s, with the publication of the Robbins Report (Robbins 1963). At this point, only 8% of the young population participated in an elite system, of which only one in eight came from a household engaged in manual work. Following the Robbins report, an ambitious programme of university building was initiated to open the doors of higher education to a larger segment of the population. A second wave of growth of UK higher education occurred in the early 1990s, with universities expanding rapidly to meet demand and the participation rate rising to around 33%. Nevertheless, the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) found that, despite increases in the overall numbers of working class students entering universities, the social class mix had not shifted; students from lower socio-economic groups were still significantly under-represented.

Since Dearing, significant political will, expertise and resources have been invested to challenge the predominance of the middle classes in UK higher education. It has been the focus of a string of government White Papers, reports and policy initiatives (e.g. DFEE 2000; SCEE 2001; NAO 2002; DfES 2003; HEFCE 2005; HEFCE 2007; NAO 2008). Currently, £392 million of public funding is invested each year (NAO 2008) in encouraging and supporting students from under-represented groups to enter and remain in higher education. Arguably, 'widening participation' has become the policy initiative of UK higher education in the 2000s.

Despite this considerable investment, the National Audit Office's second report into widening participation (NAO 2008:6) concludes that "*socio-economic background remains a strong determinant of higher education participation*", given that "*people from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up around one half of the population of England, but represent just 29 per cent of young, full-time, first entrants to higher education*". The report does note some increase in the proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups, from 'low participation neighbourhoods',

from state schools and from the most deprived areas; however, despite ten years of attention and investment, there has been no overwhelming paradigm shift.

It is, however, hard to evaluate the success of widening participation policy when, as NAO (2008) also notes, the information about students' socio-economic grouping is missing in a high proportion of cases. Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website (UCAS 2008) shows that the social class of 26% of students accepted onto full-time courses in 2007/08 was unknown. Breaking this down by age, the figures range from 19% for those aged under 21 to 59% for those aged 40 and over. Furthermore, this proportion of 'unknowns' has been rising rapidly, from 10% in 1996/97 and 18% in 2002/03, precisely the period over which widening participation initiatives have been introduced.

**[Figure 1 here]**

**Figure 1 : % of accepted students in England<sup>1</sup> whose socio-economic status was deemed unclassifiable, by age group (UCAS 2008)**

For 2007/08, the proportion of unknowns was larger than that for any other social group and so this missing data has the potential to distort evidence on the social class composition of higher education entrants. This paper will focus on attempting to understand more about the backgrounds of this growing population of students whose social class is deemed to be unknown and what factors lead to this designation.

**How is socio-economic group decided for students?**

For the 2001 UK national census, a new method of socio-economic categorisation was developed, replacing the A/B/C1/C2/D/E system which had previously been used. The National Statistics

Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) assigns individuals into one of seven numbered groups based on their occupation, plus an eighth group for those who are long-term unemployed or who have never worked (ONS 2008).

**[Table 1 here]**

The accepted practice is to define Groups 1 to 3 as 'higher' and 4 to 7 as 'lower' socio-economic groups in the context of widening participation (e.g. HEFCE 2007; NAO 2008), being broadly commensurate with the split between A/B/C1 and C2/D/E in the previous system (NCIHE 1997). Group 8 is not generally used.

The social class data available to government and universities<sup>2</sup> are essentially drawn from a single source, namely the information provided by the prospective students when they complete their application form to enter higher education. The vast majority<sup>3</sup> of higher education applicants in the UK enter through the service provided by UCAS. Historically, the data were collected from paper application forms, but nearly all students now complete an online form. The relevant question reads,

*"If you are under 21, please give the occupation of your parent, step-parent or guardian who earns the most. If he or she is retired or unemployed, give their most recent occupation. If you are 21 or over, please give your own occupation."*

Given UCAS's position as the clearing house for UK higher education, this question provides the initial source of the information used by universities, government and other agencies to monitor students' socio-economic backgrounds and trends in the social mix over time. Despite formal requests, UCAS have not provided any detail about the precise process by which information from the application form is used to produce a socio-economic classification for an individual student.

Consequently some of the issues discussed in this paper would benefit from further exploration about the operational processes.

## **Background**

The issue of 'unknowns' has been recognised for some time (Rudd 1987), but has received little attention, perhaps as it was seen as a minority problem which had little impact on the broad sweep of policy. However, the growth of the unknown category to exceed one-quarter of full-time undergraduates presents a strong challenge to the validity of official statistics and hence to the evaluation of widening participation policy. The question is whether the 'unknowns' are from the same social groups as the rest of the applicants or whether they are drawn predominantly from particular social groups and hence their omission distorts the picture.

There are some clues from the literature as to who these 'unknowns' might be in terms of their social class. Using 1990s data from Wales, Gorard (2005) notes that the greatest increases in applications were among the 'unknowns' and that they were no less successful in securing university places than other students. Forsyth and Furlong's (2003) study of participation in Scotland analysed 'unknown' students as a separate category, finding that their educational pathways and outcomes resembled those of students from lower socio-economic groups. Similarly, Rudd (1987) discovered that those without social class data were disproportionately drawn from the lower socio-economic groups and the families of the long-term unemployed.

## **Research methodology**

In order to explore this issue with recent data, information on a randomised sample of 1,000 'unknowns' from the 2007/08 cohort of full-time England<sup>4</sup>-domiciled undergraduates aged 18 or 19

on entry was obtained from UCAS. This included the students' responses to the question on parental occupation, alongside information on their school, the participation rate and deprivation levels of their home postcode and the type of university or college to which they had been accepted. The total UK population of 'unknown' entrants aged under 21 in 2007/08 was 46,086 (UCAS 2008).

The student's statement of their parents' occupation was blind coded by two experienced widening participation practitioners using the standard NS-SEC occupational codings, especially those provided in HEFCE (2007). Occupations were coded to specific NS-SEC groups where possible, or to broad bandings ('1 to 3' = 'higher' or '4 to 7' = 'lower') where it was clear or likely that they fitted within those definitions, but it was not possible to assign their occupation to a specific group. Additional categories were also used where students gave information which could not be coded in this way (e.g. 'self-employed' or 'not working').

When the two sets of codings were compared 68% were identical and nearly all were agreed following discussion. Fewer than 1% represented significant differences of interpretation and these were finally coded as 'unclassifiable'. This consistency points towards the validity of the occupational codings used in this paper.

### **What can we learn about the socio-economic status of the 'unknowns'?**

From the codings, 456 of the 'unknowns' sample could be allocated to broad NS-SEC bandings with a reasonable degree of certainty, including 255 who could be assigned to a specific NS-SEC group. It was difficult to see why this latter group were listed as having an unknown social class in the first place. They had provided adequate information about well-defined occupations such as social worker, pub landlord or phlebotomist. In some instances, there were spelling errors which

may have confused a computerised matching process; it is difficult to see why these were not coded otherwise.

The other 201 of those that could be allocated were assigned to either 'higher' (1 to 3) or 'lower' (4 to 7) NS-SEC bandings with varying degrees of certainty, but not to a specific group as insufficient information had been provided for a secure coding. In some cases this was due to the student providing information that was too vague, but in others it was simply that the occupation described straddled at least two NS-SEC groups, depending on level of seniority or experience. An example of this included the various sales occupations, which can be found in NS-SEC Groups 1, 2, 3 or 6 depending on level of responsibility. In other cases, there appeared to be a degree of vagueness or 'inflation' in the job titles given.

**[Table 2 here]**

Including both those with definite and tentative codings, 331 of the 'unknowns' sample were from the higher socio-economic groups and 125 were from lower, giving a ratio of 73:27. Across the whole under 21 entry cohort, there were 139,129 students from the higher groups and 59,905 from lower groups, giving a ratio of 70:30 (UCAS 2008). Therefore, among those sample 'unknowns' who could be classified with a reasonable degree of certainty, their social class profile was broadly in line with the national picture. Little more need be said about this group as their omission from the national data does not distort the overall picture.

The remaining 544 of the 'unknown' sample were a mixed group. 131 gave their parental occupation as "self-employed" or similar, without explaining the nature of work undertaken, while 185 explained why their parents were not working (e.g. "unemployed", "housewife", "on benefits"), had never worked, were retired or were disabled. 131 students did not complete this question at all, or answered that it was not applicable or that they did not know their parents' occupations. Only 97 of the sample gave answers which were truly unclassifiable due to incomplete (e.g. giving



the name of their employer) or incorrect information (e.g. giving their parent's name) or occupations which could be classed in many different ways (e.g. "engineer" or "builder"). In particular, some students appeared to struggle to provide sufficient detail within the 22 characters permitted by the online application form, especially where their parent's occupation was complex or had a long title. Abbreviations were used in some cases, while others simply stopped midway through a word.

In order to better understand these groups, we must now turn to the other background data provided for the sample. Four pieces of background data were provided for each individual in the sample: (a) the type of school the student attended, (b) the type of university at which they had been accepted<sup>5</sup>, (c) the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the postcode of their home address, and (d) the five-point ordinal POLAR statistic representing the youth higher education participation rate for their home postcode, where a POLAR score of 1 or 2 is generally used by widening participation practitioners as a marker for a low higher education participation area (HEFCE 2005; HEFCE 2007).

**[Table 3 here]**

Table 3 shows the emergence of distinct patterns characterising each of these categories. Those who were self-employed or unclassifiable (a *'too little information'* group) were less likely to live in areas of high deprivation where university participation was low. Conversely, those who were from workless households were far more likely than the other three groups to live in areas of high deprivation and where participation was low, indicating that many would qualify as target groups for widening participation initiatives (HEFCE 2007). Those who provided no information displayed a similar pattern although slightly less marked than for those who were not working.

The *'too little information'* group had a mixed profile compared with the 'unknown' sample as a whole. They were drawn from broad range of areas in terms of deprivation and university

participation, but they were more notably likely to have attended private schools and to have secured places in higher status universities. This is slightly anomalous in that one might assume that this group would be more able to articulate their parental occupation than other students, but the data do not permit further investigation at this stage.

It is to the remaining students who stated that their parents were workless or who left the form blank to whom our attention turns in earnest. These two groups, comprising nearly a third of the 'unknowns' sample, were strikingly dissimilar to the *'too little information'* group. On every measure used in this study, those from workless families and those not completing the application form showed a greater level of deprivation. The statistical profile of these students was sufficient similar that it is hypothesised that they form a single and distinct *'workless/blank'* group. Even in comparison to those students in the 'unknowns' sample who could be allocated to NS-SEC Groups 4 to 7, the students the *'workless/blank'* group presented background data which shows substantially higher levels of disadvantage, as Table 4 shows.

**[Table 4 here]**

For example, 65% of the *'workless/blank'* group lived in the 40% most deprived areas in England, while 53% lived in neighbourhoods with a poor record of sending young people on to university. Just under 1% attended a private school. Interestingly, this group displays a profile that is consistent with the findings of Rudd (1987), who identified a similar pattern twenty years ago.

**Who are the *'workless/blank'* group students?**

To further elucidate the identity of the *'workless/blank'* group, it is useful to return to the question on the UCAS application form. In cases where the applicant's parents are unemployed or retired, the question specifically asks for the most recent employment. For some applicants, this question

appears to have posed a dilemma. Many of the students explained specifically that their parents had never worked, were benefit-dependent or were unable to work due to disability. Some had parents who were students, while others specified that their highest earning parent was a “housewife”, presumably indicating a single parent family where the mother was not working. Six students in the sample answered that their parental occupation was “not known”. These responses could represent those leaving the local authority care system or others who are otherwise estranged from their parents. It is hypothesised that many of the ‘*workless/blank*’ group had particular circumstances that made it difficult for them to respond to the question on the application form in the way that those posing it anticipated.

Remembering from Table 3 that the profiles of those stating that their parents are workless and those not answering the question are very similar, it is reasonable to suggest that many, or even most, of those leaving the form blank do so because they too are drawn from workless families. It has also been hypothesised (Rudd 1987; NAO 2008) that a major component in the presence of ‘unknowns’ in the university entrance cohort might be a deliberate refusal to answer the question about parental occupation. Rudd (1987) discusses that this may arise from fears about prejudice by admissions tutors against students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is also possible that some non-respondents come from the higher socio-economic groups, but this study suggests they must be very much in the minority. What could not be determined in this study is how many of those not answering are doing so because their families are workless and how many are seeking to hide their parents’ occupations due to fear of discrimination.

While the backgrounds of those whose parents were not working and those who did not answer the questions were generally very similar, there was one notable distinction. While both groups contained a similar proportion (99%) of state educated young people, 85% those who did not answer the question attended comprehensive schools. In comparison, just 36% of those whose parents were stated to not be working did the same, with 27% at sixth form colleges (compared with 3%) and 28% at further education colleges (compared with 6%). No explanation for this

disparity is immediately obvious, though it may be related to the provision of post-16 opportunities in their locale.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the sample strongly suggests that there is an appreciable proportion of younger applicants to higher education from families who are not working and may never have done so. As these students comprised just under a third of this 'unknown' sample, which is itself around a quarter of the total student body, it can therefore be estimated that around 8% of all English students aged under 21 fall into this category. The presence of such a large cohort of students from workless families is not generally acknowledged in governmental reports or scholarly literature. This in itself has ramifications for policy. The 2001 Census notes 1.9 million households in England as being workless (due to disability, unemployment or caring responsibilities), comprising around 11% of the total population.

The wording of the question on the application form makes it difficult for these students to respond. There is an implicit assumption in the question that the applicant's parents have worked at some point in the recent past, even if they are currently unemployed. This assumption may be unfounded, especially in areas of high deprivation. There is a well-documented (e.g. DWP 2008) rise in single parent families, many of whom are benefit-dependent, and in households where the adults are disabled and unable to work. The wording of the question ignores these social realities, leaving the applicant unable to describe their circumstances according to the terms of the question. This contributes directly to their status as an 'unknown'. It is also likely to bolster perceptions that higher education is "*not for people like us*" (Archer *et al* 2003; Crozier *et al* 2008). Furthermore, the similarity of backgrounds between those not answering the questions and those whose parents were not working suggests that the main motivation for not answering may be that they too come from workless families, rather than due to a principled opposition to answering the question or a

general inability to complete forms correctly (NAO 2008). As the question specifically precludes an answer that their parents are workless, many simply leave the answer blank and the information is lost.

Since the *'workless/blank'* group are overwhelmingly drawn from areas of deprivation and low participation in higher education, this point is significant. It is possible, though not testable with the current dataset, that the growth in the proportion of 'unknowns' in the student entry cohort reflects a real growth in the propensity of young people from groups under-represented in higher education to attend university; the very people targeted by widening participation initiatives. The growth from around 10% of 'unknowns' in 1996/97 to 26% in 2007/08 could represent a real, but hidden, success for universities, Aimhigher<sup>6</sup> and others engaged in the widening participation agenda.

Looking forwards, Aimhigher and other practitioners are now tasked by government with targeting areas of ingrained, inter-generational and multifaceted deprivation (Raphael Reed, Gates and Last 2007; HEFCE 2007; Harrison and Hatt, forthcoming). It is very likely that these areas will contain a significantly higher than average proportion of workless families who, under the current system, will be apparently inevitably categorised as 'unknowns'. In other words, even if the sector is successful in recruiting from these areas, a proportion, and possibly a very high proportion, of these recruits will not feature in the government's statistics and the social class gap will appear not to narrow. This presents a challenge to the targeting strategy and to the measures of success which the government has set (HEFCE 2008). Above all, the lack of reliable data on social class is impeding the ability to evaluate the extent to which the widening participation initiatives of the past decade have succeeded.

NAO (2008:17) notes that *"the gaps in the data make it difficult to say with confidence whether small variations in the participation rates of particular groups (either between each other or over time) represent real changes in participation"* and goes on to list a number of statistical approaches which have been implemented to mitigate against missing data on socio-economic classification.

However, this study suggests that there are simple, but important, steps which could be taken to significantly reduce the volume of missing data at source.

## **Conclusion**

This study has provided a snapshot of the younger students whose socio-economic status is defined as 'unknown'. It does not shed light on how the proportion of such students has grown from less than one-in-ten in the early 1990s to over one-in-four at present. Nor are these findings necessarily directly applicable to older students, for whom over half have no recorded data about socio-economic background and further research is required to explore this older group in more detail. However, there are clear ramifications for the data collection and coding processes. A detailed examination of these processes is beyond the scope of this paper, but the analysis of their output must question the validity of the official statistics by which widening participation efforts are tacitly judged.

The first recommendation is that the method of collecting data from applicants about socio-economic status needs to be reviewed with some urgency. A question which generates answers over a quarter of which are unusable may not be fit-for-purpose. The wording of the question also fails to respect the diversity of family circumstances and may present yet another barrier to progression for those from workless families. In particular, it effectively prevents the collection of useful data about a notable component of the student community, and one which is of particular importance to practitioners and policy-makers. This paper has also suggested that the coding process once data have been collected may be flawed, although it has not been possible to examine this further.

The government has recently revealed that it is developing a statistical methodology for modelling socio-economic status to compensate for the missing data and in which it appears to have

complete confidence (PAC 2009). However, this begs the question of why the processes producing the incomplete data are not being looked into in more detail. It is difficult to have confidence about official pronouncements on the social class gap (e.g. NAO 2008) when they are based on such questionable foundations. This paper suggests obvious practical avenues for significantly reducing the proportion of 'unknowns' at the data collection and data coding stages.

The second recommendation derived from this paper is that more research is needed on this topic. No significant work has been undertaken since Rudd (1987) and it is clear that the phenomenon has grown and changed in the intervening years. This paper has not sought to look back in time, nor has it been possible to compare the 'unknown' sample or the '*workless/blank*' group of students to the wider student body in any detailed way. The dataset available to the authors was also missing information about ethnicity which may prove to be an important factor. Further research might focus in more detail on interviewing students about their circumstances, their use of the application form and the information that they provided, especially those from the workless families discussed above. This would help policy-makers and practitioners to better understand the diversity of backgrounds from which modern higher education students are being drawn and their experiences of the admissions process.

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**Table 1 : The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) system**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Definition</b>
1	Higher managerial and professional occupations
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations
3	Intermediate occupations
4	Small employers and own account workers
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6	Semi-routine occupations
7	Routine occupations
8	Never worked and long-term unemployed

**Table 2 : Breakdown of ‘unknowns’ sample by authors’ coding**

<b>Coding</b>	<b>Individuals (n = 1,000)</b>
Allocated to a specific group within NS-SEC Group 1 to 3	185
Allocated to a specific group within NS-SEC Group 4 to 7	70
Allocated within ‘higher’ banding of NS-SEC Groups 1 to 3	146
Allocated within ‘lower’ banding of NS-SEC Groups 4 to 7	55
<b>Group that could be allocated</b>	<b>456</b>
Self-employed	131
Unclassifiable (e.g. too vague - “builder”, parent's name or “works”)	97
<b>Group with too little information</b>	<b>228</b>
Not working (e.g. “unemployed”, “student”, “retired” or “disabled”)	185
No information (e.g. blank, “n/a”, “not known” or “0”)	131
<b>Group who were workless or blank</b>	<b>316</b>

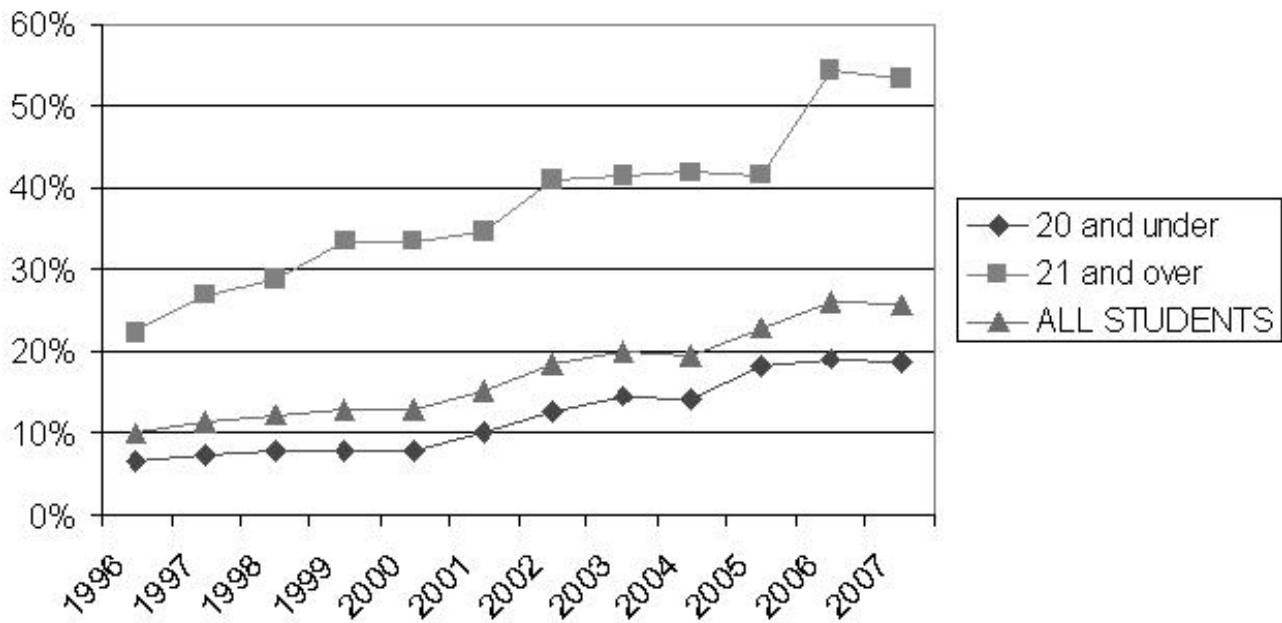
**Table 3 : key background statistics for students who couldn't be allocated**

	<b>'Too little information' group</b>		<b>'Workless/blank' group</b>		<b>All Unknowns (n = 1,000)</b>
	<b>Self-employed (n = 131)</b>	<b>Unclassifiable (n = 97)</b>	<b>No information (n = 131)</b>	<b>Not working (n = 185)</b>	
<b>% from bottom 20% of most deprived areas</b>	16.0%	20.6%	28.9%	54.1%	23.5%
<b>% from bottom 40% of most deprived areas</b>	34.3%	38.1%	50.0%	75.7%	42.1%
<b>% who attended independent schools</b>	11.5%	8.2%	0.8%	1.1%	6.6%
<b>% going to lower status institutions</b>	51.9%	62.9%	81.7%	70.8%	65.1%
<b>% from low participation areas</b>	27.0%	36.4%	47.6%	57.1%	37.0%

**Table 4 : key background statistics comparing 'workless/blank' group with those who could be allocated to NS-SEC Groups 4 to 7**

	<b>'Workless/blank' group (n = 316)</b>	<b>'Unknowns' classed in NS-SEC Groups 4 to 7 (n = 125)</b>
<b>% from bottom 20% of most deprived areas</b>	43.8%	23.2%
<b>% from bottom 40% of most deprived areas</b>	65.2%	44.0%
<b>% who attended independent schools</b>	0.9%	4.8%
<b>% going to lower status institutions</b>	75.4%	72.0%
<b>% from low participation areas</b>	53.2%	46.3%

Figure 1



<sup>1</sup> All UK data prior to 2002 – England-only data not available.

<sup>2</sup> We will use the word 'university' in this paper to mean any institution delivering higher education to avoid clumsy wording throughout.

<sup>3</sup> A small proportion enter through specialist admissions systems (e.g. for some healthcare courses) or via universities or colleges directly. The latter group are nearly all mature students entering through local arrangements of various types.

<sup>4</sup> England was used for the sample as this allowed information on deprivation of home postcode to be obtained which wasn't available for other parts of the UK.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'lower status' in this paper is used to refer to post-1992 universities and higher and further education colleges.

<sup>6</sup> Aimhigher is the government agency charged with operating a range of widening participation initiatives to encourage young people from lower socio-economic households to consider, and then attend, higher education.