

FINANCIAL TIMES

August 1, 2019

How Oxbridge distorts British life

The UK's two elite universities are a disaster for social mobility. Luckily there's a simple way to solve the problem

Simon Kuper

Imagine that it's 2020, Boris Johnson is gone, and you are the new British prime minister Jeremy Corbyn — or perhaps his more electable Labour successor. You are leading a coalition. Your mission is to make the UK fairer. British social mobility is “stagnant”, and a person's background strongly predicts their future career, says the government's Social Mobility Commission. The country's elite passes down advantage from generation to generation: 64 per cent of Johnson's cabinet went to private schools. All this unfairness helped prompt the vote for Brexit.

What reform would make Britain fairer? Nothing is off the table. Well, says a radical aide, why not abolish Oxford and Cambridge, just as French president Emmanuel Macron has promised to scrap his elite alma mater, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration? Oxbridge recruits more pupils from eight schools (six of which are thought to be fee-paying) than from 2,900 British state schools combined, and spits them out at the other end as the proto-ruling class. But most of your ministers blanch at destroying two ancient national assets. Finally, you agree a solution: keep what's best about Oxbridge but stop it teaching undergrads. That removes Oxbridge's biggest distortion of British life.

So far, the British debate about fairness has focused more on private schools than on Oxbridge. Public appetite for abolishing these schools faded after the 1960s, which is why even privately educated Corbyn isn't proposing it. Still, Labour activists hope to put a motion before next month's party conference that would commit Labour to “integrating” these schools into the state system. The plan (hashtag: #AbolishEton) would remove their charitable status and tax privileges, redistribute their assets and ensure universities “admit the same proportion of private-school students as in the wider population (currently 7 per cent)”.

Some version of this would probably improve Britain. But private schools aren't the whole problem. You could keep them, and still make the country much fairer. After all, Canada, Australia and Sweden have private schools, but they also have above-average social mobility. Canada, in fact, is the most socially mobile developed country, says the OECD: nearly three-quarters of Canadians aged 25 to 64 were in a different social class than their parents between 2002 and 2014.

That's partly because private school in these countries doesn't lead to a world-beating university, since Canada, Australia and Sweden don't have world-beating universities. They just have lots of good ones, none of which confers a life-changing advantage. The writer Malcolm Gladwell describes applying to the University of Toronto in about 10 minutes, “one evening, after dinner, in the fall of my senior year in high school . . . there wasn't a sense that anything great was at stake in the choice of which college we attended.”

It's similar in Germany, the Netherlands and the other Nordic states. You get a decent education, then have to prove yourself on the job market.

Interestingly, all these countries are wealthier and almost all have better state schools than Britain. They also avoid many British nightmares: no doors closed at 17 to everyone who doesn't get the letter from Oxbridge. No bitterness as the excluded are slow-tracked through their careers, overseen by an Oxbridge Brahmin caste. No elite households pouring time, money and social capital into getting even undeserving children into Oxbridge. No hysterical private-school headmasters comparing criticisms of their pupils' privileges to Hitler's persecution of the Jews. No disproportionate slice of university funding taken by two institutions. No elite at risk of getting clubby, lazy and detached from everybody else because its members sealed themselves off age 18. And in countries without elite universities, it's rare for one class to capture the national heights: careers are decided more in adulthood, by which time people's trajectories depend slightly more on their achievements than on their parents.

Oxford and Cambridge might benefit from binning undergraduate teaching. They lose money on each undergraduate: the £9,250 in tuition fees doesn't nearly cover costs. They could focus entirely on doing research, teaching grad students, spawning tech companies and making even more money from corporate conferences and executive education. They could also educate more excluded Britons. What about expanding their summer schools for promising disadvantaged teenagers, or retraining gifted but underqualified adults? Oxbridge for all could raise lots of people's sights.

You might argue that a new set of elite universities — perhaps Imperial College and University College London — would simply replace Oxbridge. Well, it hasn't happened in Canada, Sweden or Australia. Other British universities lack Oxbridge's inherited prestige and wealth. Etonians could try to capture Oxbridge's graduate schools, but at least admission there would be from age 21 — ie not simply reflecting parental social class — and education would be more specialist than at undergrad. Doing a PhD in molecular biology or precolonial Indian history might not take you to Downing Street.

Or you could preserve Oxbridge unchanged, and just accept elite self-perpetuation as the intended outcome of British life.