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Let's put British youngsters in the Ivy League

Students from all backgrounds deserve the all-round university education America offers

Peter Lampl



A few years ago I visited the admissions offices of most Ivy League universities in the US. At the world's top-ranked university, Harvard, I sat in on an admissions committee meeting at which the personal and school background of almost every candidate was discussed.

After half a day of deliberation, the committee offered a place to an inner-city student with much lower qualifications than others they turned down. When I asked why, the reply was: "We're in the value-added business." The committee believed that this candidate could go on to be the mayor of a large city or a senior partner in a law firm. What mattered most to Harvard was what its students would do in later life. But in Britain it remains highly controversial to take students' backgrounds into account when offering university places.

This is one issue at the heart of the row over the appointment of Professor Les Ebdon as director of the access regulator Ofqa. He represents the Million+ Group of recruiting universities, while Sir Martin Harris, the current boss, represents the Russell Group of selecting universities. Each has its drawbacks. It is why my own and others' preference would have been to appoint someone from outside higher education. There was an outstanding candidate who was not selected.

The students that Ofqa is trying to help face a system based on an entirely different premise from the leading US universities. Top universities in the UK still tend to assume that their primary role is to produce future academics, a legacy from their origins as ancient centres of learning. This manifests itself not only in a selection policy that presumes that students

with the highest grades are most likely to get the best degrees, but also in a narrow diet of education.

Students specialise in a few subjects at 16 and generally study one main subject at university, even though the vast majority go on to work in areas completely unrelated to their degree. By contrast, US universities, where students spend the first year and a half doing a range of subjects before

specialising for the last two and a half years, provide a far better grounding for the reality of life after graduation.

Harvard's modern view of the role of the university enables it and other elite institutions to maintain the highest academic standards, but also to ensure that clever students from less privileged backgrounds get a chance.

A second glaring difference in the treatment of students is over the charging of fees. In England our system is based on the assumption that

schools. At the Sutton Trust we want to expand that option to bright state-school children. After the success of our UK summer schools, which now place 1,000 students at seven leading UK universities, we are launching today a US summer school programme. Hosted by Yale and supported by the Fulbright Commission, it will adopt what Americans call a "soup to nuts" approach — offering support from start to finish.

If successful we intend to establish many more US summer schools next year and beyond — opening a pipeline for UK students to reap the benefits of some of the best education on offer in the world.

Sir Peter Lampl is chairman of the Sutton Trust and chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

The US system gives a far better grounding for life after graduation

all 18-year-olds are in the same position. So the child from a wealthy family and the child from a council estate are essentially charged the same fees despite the chasm in their circumstances.

At top US universities students are means-tested to ensure that if they are good enough to get in, they can, irrespective of ability to pay. At Harvard students don't pay anything if their annual family income is less than about £40,000. But it is also assumed

that those who can pay should pay, so students pay full costs if their family income is more than £150,000.

All of this makes a US university education increasingly attractive for UK students. Not surprisingly, the numbers applying have gone up substantially. Harvard alone saw a 45 per cent rise in applications from 2009-10 to 2010-11.

But the vast majority of students applying to the US come from private