



Social mobility in the UK

Where you go to school determines your career

Großbritanniens private Schulen und Universitäten sind ein Eintrittsticket für die Top-Jobs des Landes – und verstärken die soziale Spaltung. Dagegen regt sich Widerstand.

Von MELITA CAMERON-WOOD

ADVANCED

Where did you go to school? This may sound like friendly small talk but, in Britain, it's often a loaded question. In Britain's education system, there are state schools and fee-paying schools (which are also known as "private", "independent" or "public" schools). When people ask about school, they're often less interested in the school's location than in the type of school it was. It's a way of pigeonholing people and separating the alumni of prestigious schools from the rest of the population.

This divide is clear in British society. A government report on social mobility found that just seven per cent of the population were privately educated, but those people hold almost 40 per cent of the top jobs in government, business and academia. About 50 per cent of doctors and 74 per cent of judges in the UK were privately educated, for example. And Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, has criticized the fact that people from working-class backgrounds were underrepresented in the media industry.

There has been some improvement. The number of lawyers with a state-school education rose from 59 per cent in 2015 to 64 per cent in 2023. There is still significant room for greater equality, however, says Sophie Pender, the founder of The 93% Club — a members-only club for the 93 per cent of the population who did not attend a fee-paying school.

Social struggles

Growing up in a council flat, Pender suffered the untimely death of her father from alcohol and drug abuse. She attended a state school and was not always confident that her future would amount to much. It was only when her application to study law at university was accepted that she saw a glimmer of hope. On campus at the University of Bristol, however, Pender felt out of place. Many of her fellow students had been to private schools and enjoyed privileged upbringings that felt very different from her own. "It was the feeling of being too common to be at university and too posh to be at home," she wrote on LinkedIn.

Social mobility is typically associated with moving up and leaving one's original circumstances behind, but does it have to be that way? Pender thought it was more important to create a network of people who understood and supported each other. This is the idea behind The 93% Club. The name is intended as a contrast to the elitist, members-only (often male-only) societies found at many British schools and universities, such as The Bullingdon Club, at Oxford, whose former members include Boris Johnson and David Cameron.

Started in 2016 as a Facebook group for Bristol University students who had been to state schools, the organization is now a nationwide charity and social enterprise. It organizes events, such as The Social Mobility Factory, that allow members to network, listen to talks by industry experts, polish their CVs, practise job interviews and get professional photos at no cost.

The 93% Club has been criticized by private-school students, who cannot join, but Pender has replied to those critics. "What they forget is that every university already has its own seven per cent club where membership is determined by how much money parents spent on their child's education," she told *The Guardian*. "They don't need to set up a seven per cent club because they already benefit from privileged networks." Her efforts haven't gone unnoticed. In 2022, she was part of *Forbes* "30 Under 30" for social impact and, in 2024, she received The Diana Award's Legacy Award.

KEY VOCABULARY

state school: A government-funded school that can be attended at no cost to pupils' parents.

private school/independent school: Both terms refer to fee-paying schools in the UK.

public school: A selective fee-paying school in the UK. Eton and Harrow are the most famous examples. In other English-speaking countries, "public school" refers to a state-funded school.

funded ▶ finanziert

pupil ▶ Schüler(in)

fee-paying

▶ hier: gebührenpflichtig, Schulgebühren erhebend

loaded question

▶ Fangfrage

fee-paying

▶ hier: gebührenpflichtig, Schulgebühren erhebend

pigeonhole sb.

[ˈpiːdʒənhəʊl]
▶ jmdn. in eine Schublade stecken

alumni [əˈlʌmniː]

▶ Absolventen/
Absolventinnen (Plural von
"alumnus" [əˈlʌmnəs])

prestigious [preˈstɪdʒəs]

▶ renommiert

divide

▶ Spaltung, Kluft

academia [ˌækəˈdiːmiə]

▶ die akademische Welt

communications regulator

▶ Medienaufsichts-
behörde

council flat (UK)

▶ Sozialwohnung

untimely

▶ verfrüht, vorzeitig

amount to much

▶ hier: viel Positives
bereithalten

glimmer of hope

▶ Hoffnungsschimmer

fellow student

▶ Kommilitone/
Kommilitonin

upbringing

▶ Erziehung

common

▶ hier: aus einem
einfachen Milieu kommend

posh (UK ifml.)

▶ vornehm;
hier: abgehoben

circumstances

▶ Umstände,
hier: soziales Milieu

elitist [iˈliːtɪst]

▶ elitär

talk

▶ hier: Vortrag

polish sth.

▶ etw. polieren;
hier: optimieren

CV (curriculum vitae)

▶ Lebenslauf

job interview

▶ Bewerbungsgespräch

legacy [ˈlegəsi]

▶ Vermächtnis