

Bridging the Gap: Why the North East sends the fewest students to top universities

By Elodie Clements

In 2023, only 282 students from the North East applied to Cambridge University. It is common knowledge that North Eastern students' higher education rates fall below the national average: what is less widely known is that the North East consistently records the lowest application rates in the country to prestigious institutions. This stark disparity is not a reflection of potential, but of a complex web of entrenched barriers.

This gap is driven by various factors, from socioeconomic pressures and financial anxieties to a shortage of accessible and specialised support. StateElevate aims to change the narrative, proving that with the right guidance, academic excellence from the North East can and does compete on the national stage.

In the 2023/24 academic year, the North East had the lowest overall progression rate to higher education in England at 40.8%, a staggering 20.4 percentage points behind London. In England, there is a clear divide in progression to high-tariff universities: while 14.3% of non-Free School Meal (FSM) pupils access top universities, this figure plummets to just 4.9% for FSM pupils. The North East, home to an average of 31.2% FSM students (rising to above 40% in areas like Newcastle and Middlesbrough), faces a significant structural disadvantage. By age 19, only 50.7% of FSM pupils in the region progress to any university, compared to 63.6% of their non-FSM peers. In a region that dwarfs the FSM national average, progression to high-tariff universities is not only daunting, but in some cases financially out of the question.

Famously expensive, university degrees pose a financial risk to those who have no 'safety net' from family income or savings to fall back on. Financial anxieties and lack of accessible education about loans and grants de-incentivise university degrees, which rack up high short-term costs in exchange for a non-guaranteed potential of higher future earnings. Additionally, the academic demands of elite high-tariff universities often reduce time for paid work alongside the degree, giving students from a low-income background very little financial independence or control.

Contrastingly, apprenticeships or working-class jobs which offer immediate pay with a lower ceiling for earning provide a safer, more stable way to build a future. Being the path that many in the North East will have followed for generations, aspiring top-level undergraduates may face pressure from family members to pursue a trade which grants consistency and predictability to the family's income.

Should a student from the North East decide to pursue a top-tier degree anyway, information about how to apply, create a strong application, pass admissions tests (if necessary), and successfully interview is commonly gatekept behind a paywall reserved for those with a generous disposable income. The vast majority of leading

British schools employ specialised Oxbridge consultants to offer tailored advice and training to their students: in a region which is already struggling to employ quality teachers for core subjects, specialised Oxbridge tutors are far out of reach.

One of the most prestigious and widely-used Oxbridge preparation services is Oxbridge Applications, a consultancy firm offering a wide range of help to both individuals and schools, from application strategy, personal statement help, admissions tests tutelage, and mock interview sessions. Their services alone are used by roughly 20% of all Oxbridge applicants, and their website boasts of increasing the application success rate by 5x and 4x to Oxford and Cambridge respectively.

For those considering enlisting the help of Oxbridge Applications, mock interviews start at £345 for two, costing up to £845 for a pack of four interviews and feedback led by a former Oxbridge admissions tutor. Regarding the success of this company, and others alike, it is clear that the need for tailored, specialised help to successfully apply to high-tariff universities is imperative. Unfortunately for students in the North East, this kind of support is not widely accessible at low-cost.

A lack of resources to use when applying to university not only makes the task practically harder; it inhibits a student's confidence in their own abilities to achieve what they could set out to. For many, a degree from the likes of Oxford and Cambridge (or other highly competitive universities) seems too infeasible to even attempt applying. In 2021-2023, only 2.2% of Oxford's home-domiciled applicants came from the North East. Whilst these universities use outreach schemes designed to offer extra help to disadvantaged students, this help is limited compared to what could be bought privately.

StateElevate is currently the only exclusively North Eastern organisation offering free, student-led application support to aspiring undergraduates.

It aims to break down access barriers by offering mentoring from current undergraduates who are currently studying the mentee's top choice of degree and university. This mentoring entails personal statement help, admissions test preparation, and mock interviews, from students who have successfully undergone the same experiences. Through this model, mentees are able to build a connection with students who can pass on their first-hand experience. The connections mentees make with their mentors are built to last; the organisation's long-term aim being to curate a network of young professionals who can help each other in the future.

As well as offering practical support, the organisation acts as a representation of academic success in the North East, with its founders, Grace Wilson and Lennon Airey, both being state-educated in the region. The organisation defies regional boundaries by helping aspiring undergraduates to take the first steps in paving their way to a successful future without cultural and financial barriers. As StateElevate's first year in practice draws to a close, over 15 of its students were offered Oxbridge interviews, and are currently awaiting their results. Should

they secure a place at Oxbridge, they will spearhead the movement of increasing North Eastern presence in elite universities that StateElevate hopes to facilitate.