

# Elitist Britain

2019

The educational backgrounds  
of Britain's leading people

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**Summary Report**

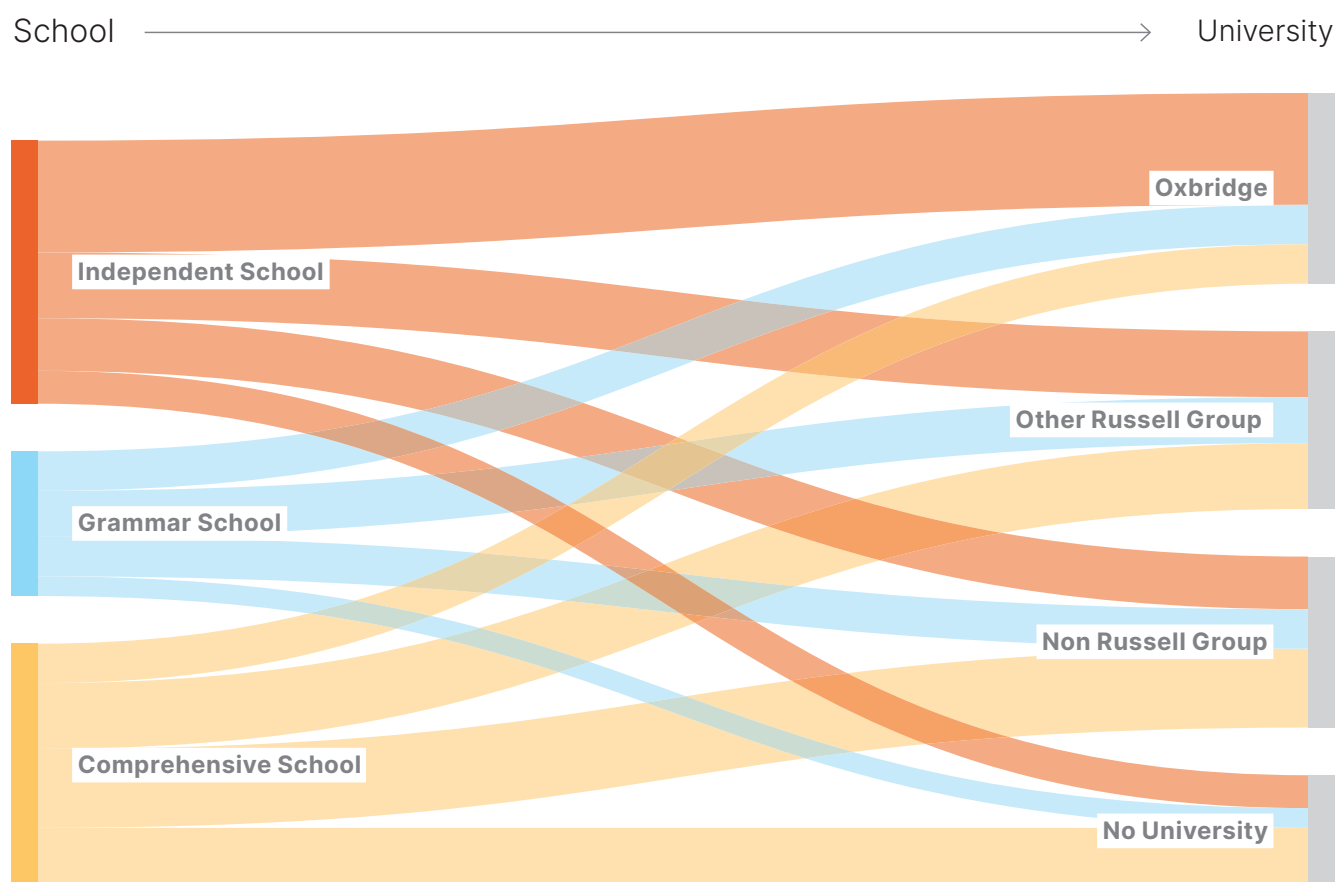


Social Mobility  
Commission

# The Educational Pathways of Britain's Elite

Throughout *Elitist Britain 2019* we examine the pathways that individuals have taken, from the type of school they attended to where they went to university. Looking at these pathways allows us to explore the routes taken by Britain's elites, for example from an independent school to a top university like Oxford or Cambridge.

The following figure displays pathways taken by those who reached the positions in the elite grouping examined by this report as a whole, with the size of the 'flow' representing the size of the group.\* On the left side of the graph we see which schools they attended. The flows from left to right then represent the pathways taken from those in each type of school to university.



Independent and comprehensive schools represent about equal numbers (around two fifths each) of this elite group, despite the fact that almost nine in every ten students in the general population currently attend comprehensives. Oxbridge graduates make up around a quarter of the elites, compared to less than 1% of the population. Russell Group graduates as a whole make up almost half of the elite group, compared to just 6% of the working population.

The most common pathway into the elite is **attending independent school followed by Oxford or Cambridge, making up 17% of the whole group**, and forming a strong 'pipeline' into the highest status jobs. Those who attended **independent school and any Russell Group university comprise over one in four of the elite as a whole (27%)**.

Those who went to a **comprehensive followed by a non-Russell Group university (12%) form a significant proportion**, though of course this represents a much larger group in the population as a whole. The **comprehensive to Oxbridge pathway represents just 6% of the whole elite group**.

\*This figure includes just those educated domestically, and those for whom we have information on both school and university. It also excludes the sport section, as the dynamics of educational pathways there differ substantially from those in the rest of the report.

# Elitist Britain 2019: Overview

→ **The United Kingdom in 2019 is an increasingly divided nation.** 2016's vote to leave the European Union both reflected and accentuated deep social divisions across the country. Britain's 'elite' is higher in the national consciousness than ever, with strained trust between significant sections of the population and those at the highest levels of politics, business and the media. Social mobility across the UK is low and not improving, depriving large parts of the country of opportunity, and contributing to this sense of distance. This study, conducted for the first time by both the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, looks at the backgrounds of over 5,000 individuals in high ranking positions across a broad range of British society, and provides a definitive document of who gets to the top in Britain in 2019.



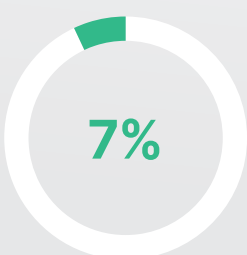
→ **The report paints a picture of a country whose power structures are dominated by a narrow section of the population:** the 7% who attend independent schools, and the roughly 1% who graduate from just two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. In fact two fifths (39%) of the elite group as a whole were privately educated, more than five times as many as the population at large, while a quarter (24%) had graduated from Oxbridge.

→ **Politics, the media, and public service all show high proportions of privately educated in their number,** including 65% of senior judges, 59% of civil service permanent secretaries and 57% of the House of Lords. One third of regular newspaper columnists attended both private school and Oxbridge. Sport (particularly football), the arts and local government were areas with the lowest numbers of those coming from elite educational institutions. Numbers of Oxbridge graduates reached as high as 71% of senior judges and 57% of Theresa May's cabinet.



of the elite are **privately educated**

→ **Looking at the five years since 2014, *Elitist Britain 2019* shows isolated pockets of positive change, but a picture characterised by persistent inequality.** The proportion of the elite who are privately educated appears to be decreasing, but change is happening slowly, with half of the sectors examined here showing modest falls.



of the population are **privately educated**

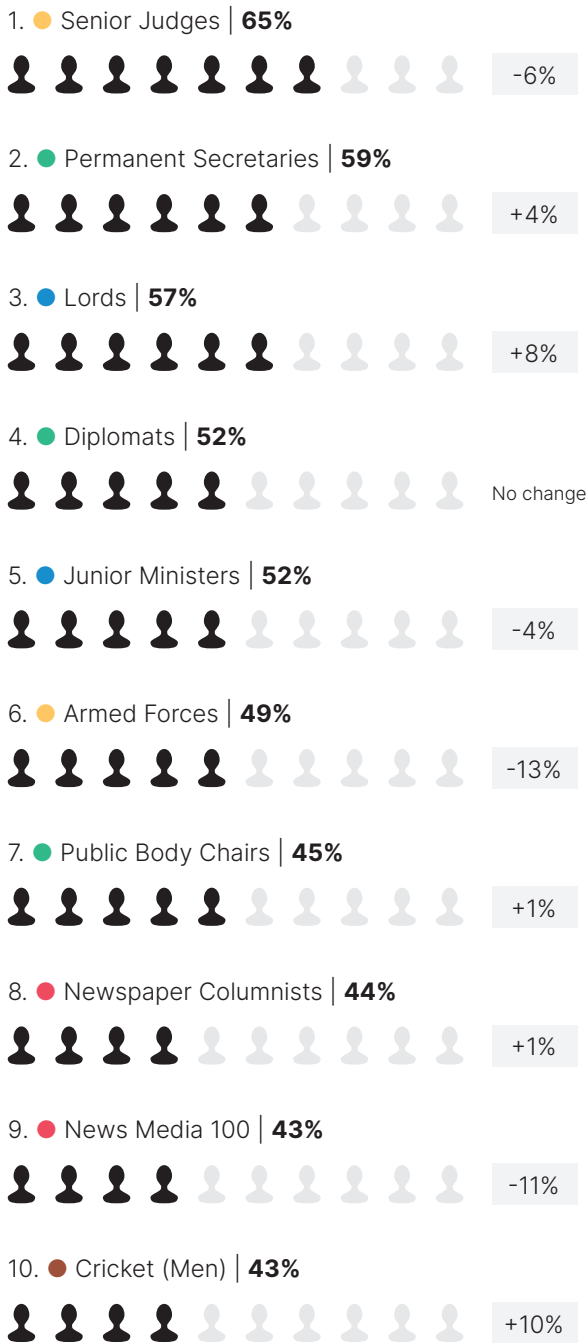
→ **More significant is in the decline of grammar school alumni among the elite,** at 20%, and down about 7 percentage points in five years, coupled with a consequent rise in those educated at comprehensives (40%, up 9%). This reflects the abolition of the selective system in most of England during the 1960s and 70s, and the rise of the comprehensively educated generation to positions of power.

# In numbers

## Independent School Attendance

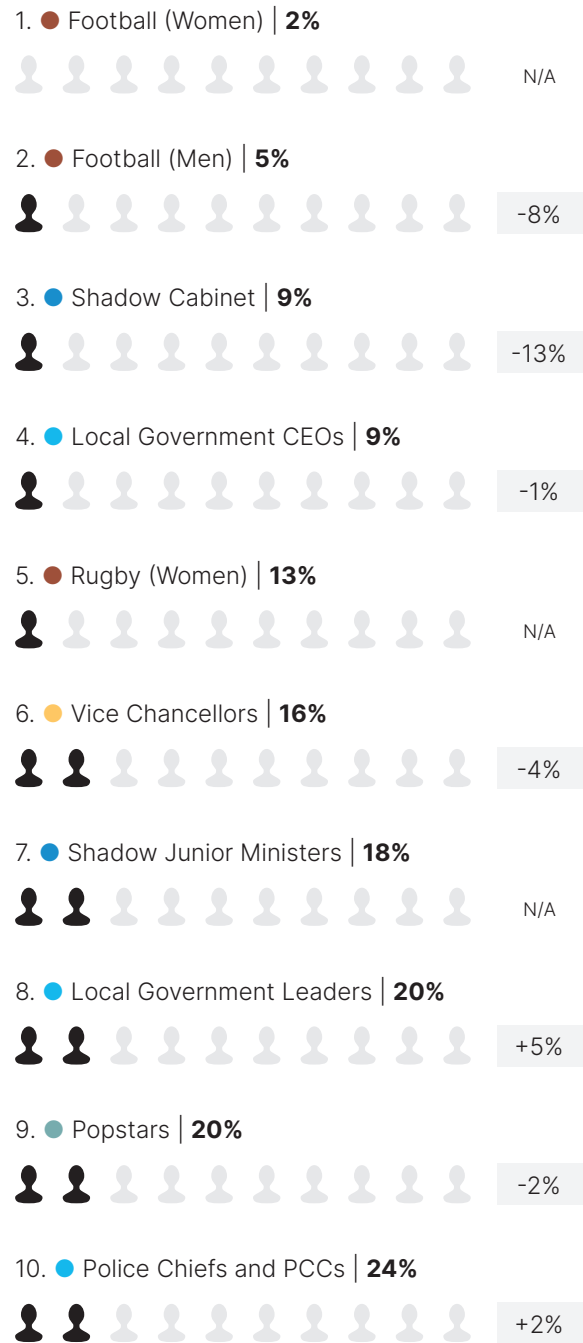
### The 10 professions with the **highest** independent school attendance

Indicates change since 2014



### The 10 professions with the **lowest** independent school attendance

Indicates change since 2014

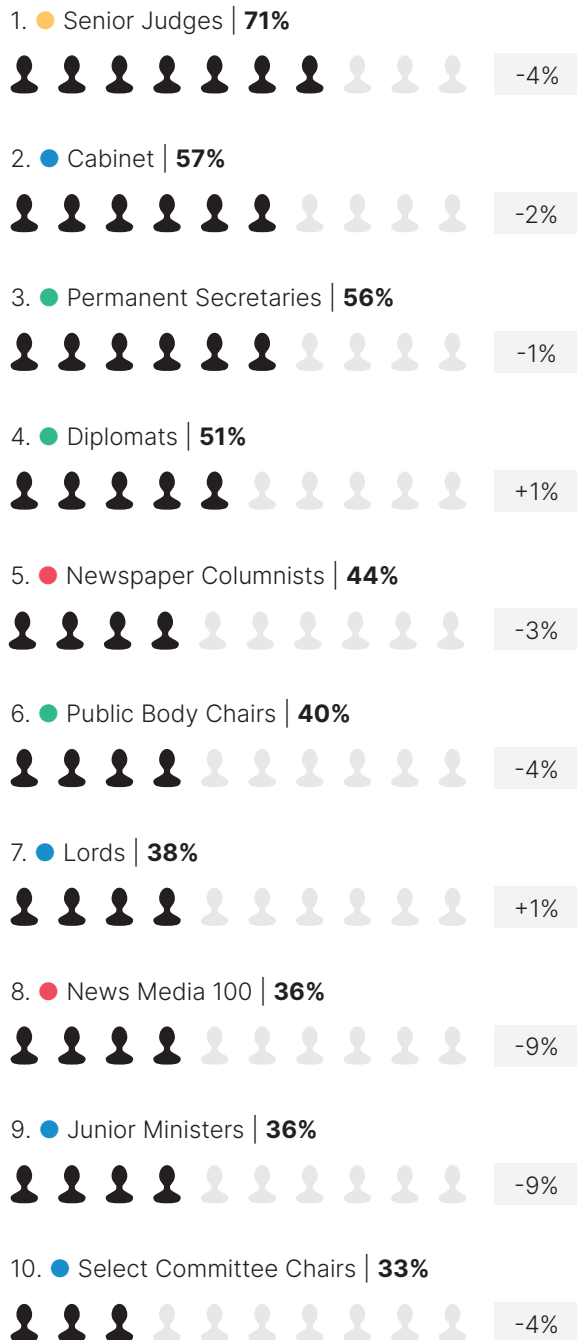


Whole UK population: **7%**

# Oxbridge Attendance

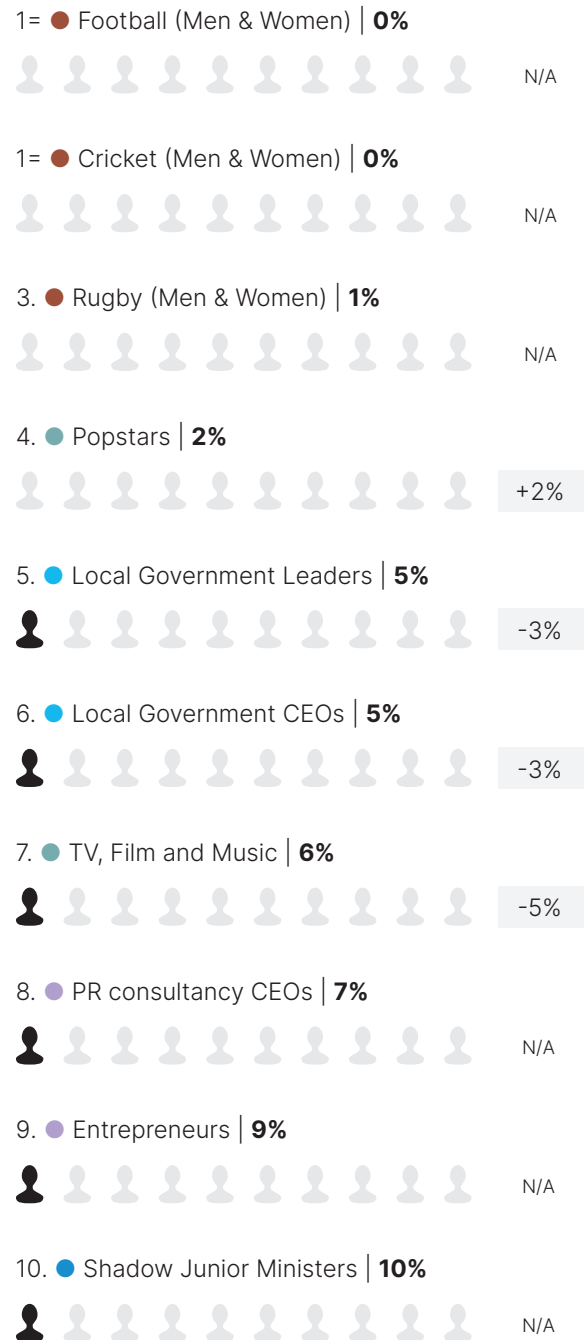
## The 10 professions with the highest Oxbridge attendance

Indicates change since 2014



## The 10 professions with the lowest Oxbridge attendance

Indicates change since 2014



Whole UK population: **less than 1%**

# Policy recommendations

- 1 Social diversity should be a key mission across the whole of British society to ensure we make use of the talents of people from all backgrounds. Enacting the 'socio-economic duty' clause of the Equality Act 2010 should form the centrepiece of this.** Obligating public bodies to give due regard to how they can reduce the impact of socio-economic disadvantage would send a powerful signal.
- 2 Data on the socio-economic background of employees should be collected and monitored by employers in the same way as gender or ethnicity.** Employers should follow Cabinet Office advice on the best measurements to use, including parental qualifications, occupation, type of school attended, and eligibility for free school meals.
- 3 Financial barriers to entry to leading industries and professions must be tackled, including unpaid internships of significant length.** Employers should comply with National Minimum Wage Regulations. But given the confusion among employers and interns around the law on this, there should be specific legislation which clarifies and tightens the rules around internships.
- 4 Recruitment practices should be open and transparent.** Internships and entry level jobs in particular should be openly advertised to help young people from under-represented groups get a foot on the ladder.
- 5 Employers should adopt contextual recruitment practices** that place attainment and successes achieved in the context of disadvantage, including underperforming schools and less advantaged neighbourhoods.
- 6 Class pay gaps, and differences in retention and promotion rates should also be addressed.** Better access to jobs is only the beginning; progression within an organisation is also key to real social mobility. Employers should look at barriers to progression and send a message to staff that fostering an inclusive culture is paramount.
- 7 Leading social mobility employers should take a sector leadership role and share best practice.** For a culture of equal opportunities to spread more widely, sector leaders should take a role in sharing and promoting best practice within their sector.
- 8 Universities should revolutionise their practice in relation to disadvantage, by contextualising admissions and reforming their approach to outreach and partnership.** Highly selective universities in particular should recognise the differing circumstances faced by applicants.
- 9 School admissions processes need to tackle social segregation in schools.** High performing comprehensives, grammar schools and independent schools should all do more to increase the numbers of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- 10 High quality careers advice needs to be available to young people from all backgrounds.** All pupils should receive a guaranteed level of careers advice from professional impartial advisers. For those facing disadvantage there should be further support available.

# 1. ● Politics

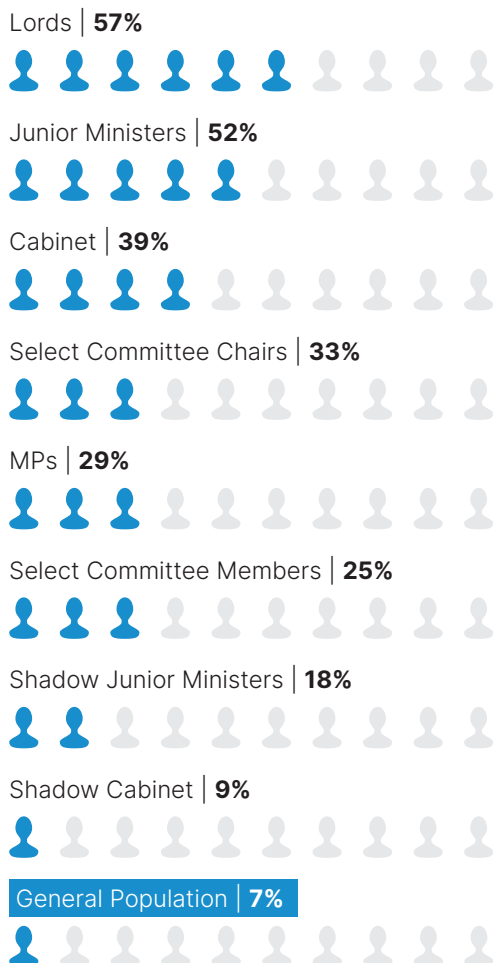
- The 2017 General Election returned a parliament with the highest level of comprehensively educated MPs on record at 52%. Nonetheless, 29% of MPs still come from a private school background, four times higher than the electorate they represent. Increasing numbers of MPs have university degrees (up 5 percentage points), with the numbers graduating from Oxbridge (24%) quite consistent over time.
- The House of Lords is even less representative, with 57% of its members having been educated privately. This figure is actually 8 percentage points higher than 2014, potentially owing to the profile of

new Lords appointed by David Cameron and Theresa May in the interim. A quarter of Lords and Baronesses came through the independent school to Oxbridge 'pipeline'.

- The cabinet, at the time of analysis in spring 2019, was composed of 39% independently educated members. This is in stark contrast with the shadow cabinet, with just 9% - the lowest level of the privately educated in Britain's elite outside professional football.
- Select committees have shown the most substantial changes, with the number of comprehensively educated chairs more than doubling since 2014 (from 23% to 55%).

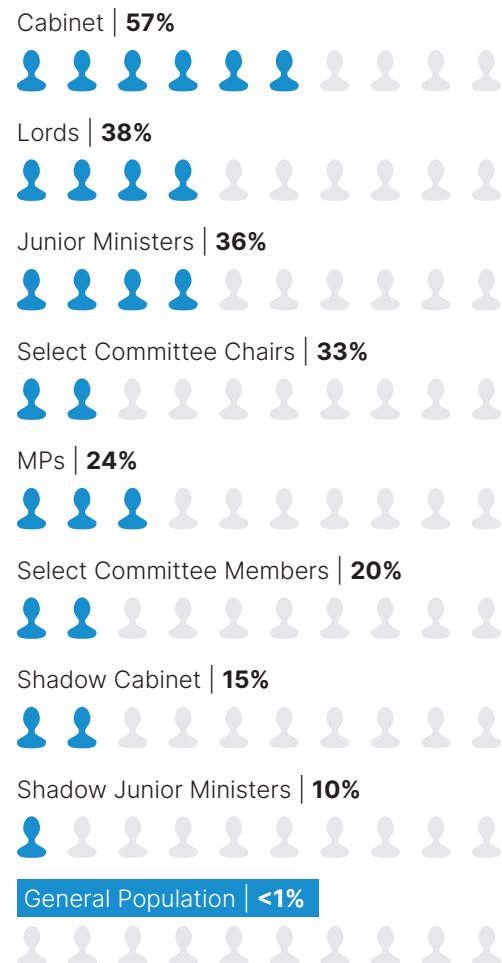
## Attended Independent School

On average **44%** of politicians attended independent schools



## Attended Oxbridge

On average **31%** of politicians attended Oxbridge



## 2. ● Business

- Business had some of the highest rates of those educated abroad among the elite, with 43% of FTSE 350 CEOs and over half (51%) of the Sunday Times Rich List top 100 schooled internationally, reflecting the nature of many of the business listed in the FTSE 350.
- Looking specifically at those educated in the UK however, there were large numbers

who were privately educated – 57% of the Rich List and 48% of FTSE 350 CEOs.

- Tech firm CEOs and entrepreneurs, a source of business innovation, also had large numbers of privately schooled members, but at 44%, entrepreneurs had the highest rate of non-university graduates outside sport and the creative industries.

### Attended Independent School

On average **31%** attended independent schools

FTSE 350 chairs | **34%**



Entrepreneurs | **34%**



PR consultancy CEOs | **34%**



Sunday Times Rich List | **28%**



FTSE 350 CEOs | **27%**



Tech firm CEOs | **26%**



General Population | **7%**



### Attended Oxbridge

On average **17%** attended Oxbridge

FTSE 350 chairs | **27%**



FTSE 350 CEOs | **15%**



Sunday Times Rich List | **14%**



Tech firm CEOs | **12%**



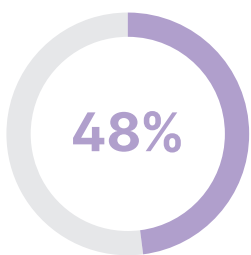
Entrepreneurs | **9%**



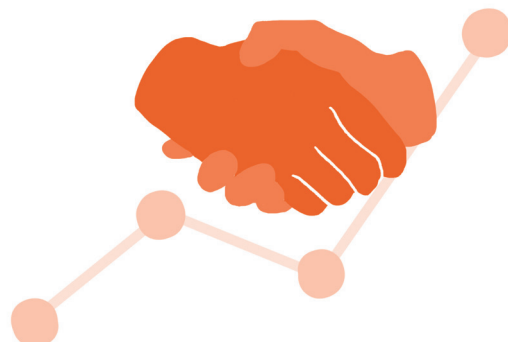
PR consultancy CEOs | **7%**



General Population | **<1%**



of FTSE 350 CEOs educated in the UK attended **independent school**





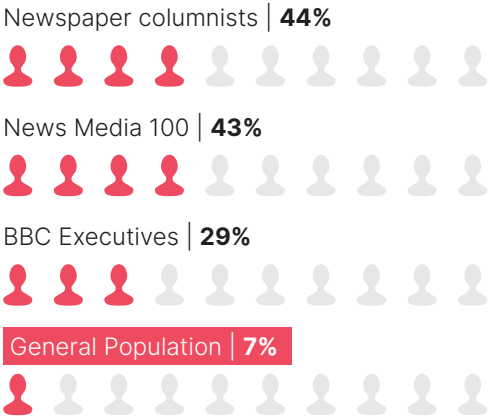
# 3. ● Media

- Britain’s media, including newspaper columnists, and high-profile editors and broadcasters, had some of the highest rates of attendance at independent schools and elite higher education institutions.
- Newspaper columnists, who play a significant role in shaping the national conversation, draw from a particularly small pool, with 44% attending independent school and 33% coming through the independent school to Oxbridge pipeline alone.

- Our ‘News Media 100’ list, including influential editors and broadcasters, shows a similar picture, with 43% having been privately educated and 36% graduating from Oxbridge.
- Much attention on representation in the media focuses on the BBC. 45% of executives at the corporation attended comprehensives, higher than columnists and the News Media 100, and up 8 percentage points since 2014.

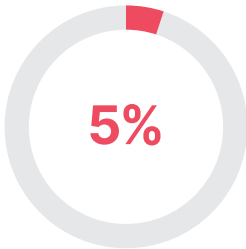
### Attended Independent School

On average **40%** attended independent schools



### Attended Oxbridge

On average **39%** attended Oxbridge



of newspaper columnists attended a **non-Russell Group university**

## 4. ● Whitehall and Public Bodies

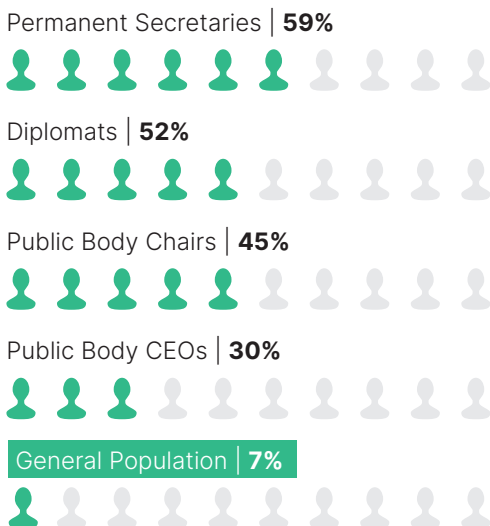
→ The Civil Service, along with “arm’s length” public bodies, are responsible for enacting government policy and overseeing a wide range of sectors across British society. Here there is a consistent picture of over-representation of those from elite educational backgrounds. Civil service permanent secretaries (59%), Foreign Office diplomats (52%), and Public Body Chairs (45%) have among the highest rates of independently educated in their ranks.

→ Despite recent efforts to overhaul entry into the Civil Service, its highest levels remain highly exclusive, with 56% of permanent secretaries having graduated from Oxford or Cambridge, and 39% having attended both a private school and Oxbridge.

→ The chairs of public bodies were more likely than their CEOs to have come from exclusive educational institutions; 45% from independent schools compared to 30%. This may reflect the age of such post-holders as well as their social class background.

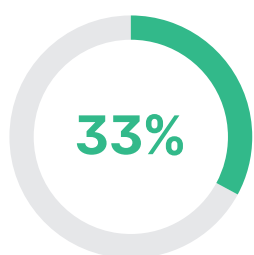
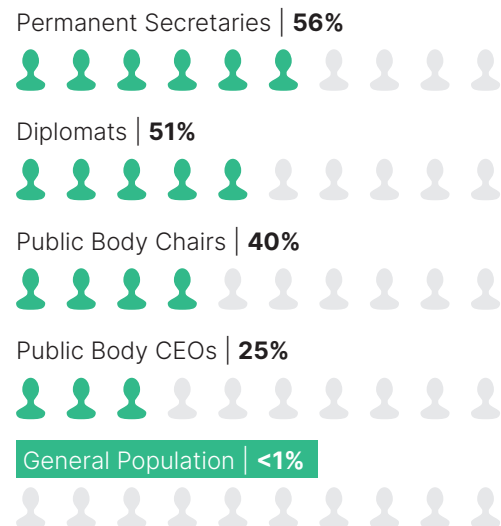
### Attended Independent School

On average **44%** attended independent schools

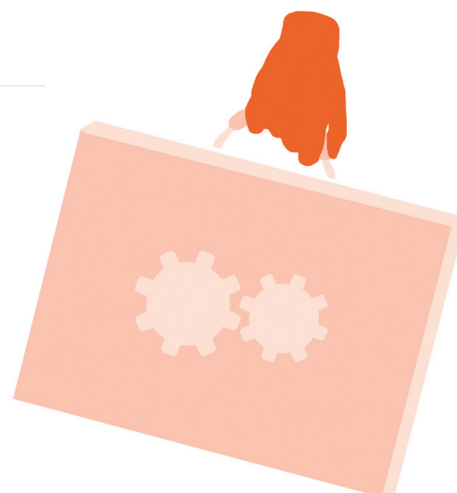


### Attended Oxbridge

On average **39%** attended Oxbridge



of diplomats went to **independent school and then Oxbridge**



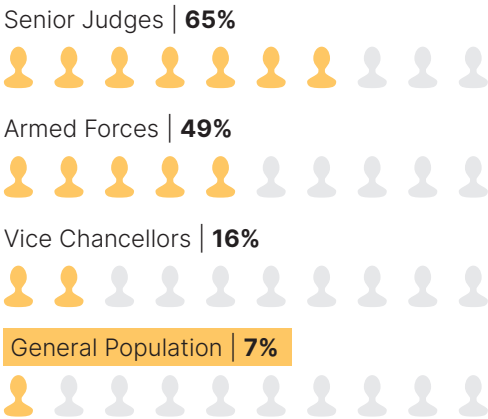
# 5. ● Public Servants

→ Law, defence and the academic world showed some of the highest rates of elitism. Senior judges were the most rarefied group, with two thirds attending private schools and 71% graduating from Oxbridge. In fact over half (52%) of senior judges took the same pathway from independent school to Oxbridge and then into the judiciary. While these figures are slightly lower than in 2014, they are far removed from even many fellow members of the elite.

→ The armed forces also had high proportions of privately educated in their highest ranks (49%), although this is down by 13 percentage points on 2014, one of the biggest shifts in the report.  
→ University Vice Chancellors in contrast had relatively low levels of private school and Oxbridge educated members among their number.

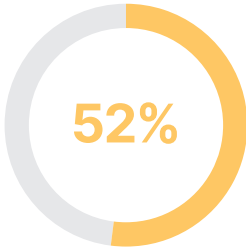
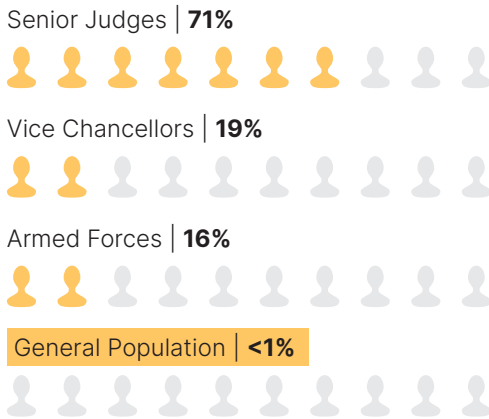
### Attended Independent School

On average **45%** attended independent schools



### Attended Oxbridge

On average **41%** attended Oxbridge



of senior judges went to **private school and then on to Oxbridge**

## 6. ● Local Government

- The picture of politics at local level is substantially different from the national level. Local government leaders in England have a lower proportion of those educated independently (20%) compared to MPs (29%).
- Police and Crime Commissioners were more likely than those elected at local council level to have attended independent school, 29%, the same as MPs.

- Local government CEOs are among the least likely to have been privately educated, at 9%, a significant contrast with their counterparts in the civil service in Whitehall, who sit at the other end of the spectrum. Oxbridge attendance in local government (5%) is also one of the lowest outside sport.
- Given the spread of these roles across the country, it is perhaps unsurprising that they reflect a substantially different background than the rest of the political establishment, largely centred in London.

### Attended Independent School

On average **16%** attended independent schools

Police Chiefs and PCCs | **24%**



Local Government Leaders | **20%**



Local Government CEOs | **9%**



General Population | **7%**



### Attended Oxbridge

On average **6%** attended Oxbridge

Police Chiefs and PCCs | **13%**



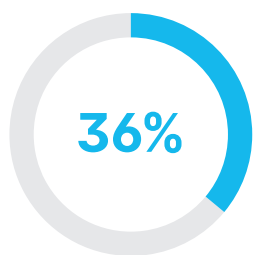
Local Government CEOs | **5%**



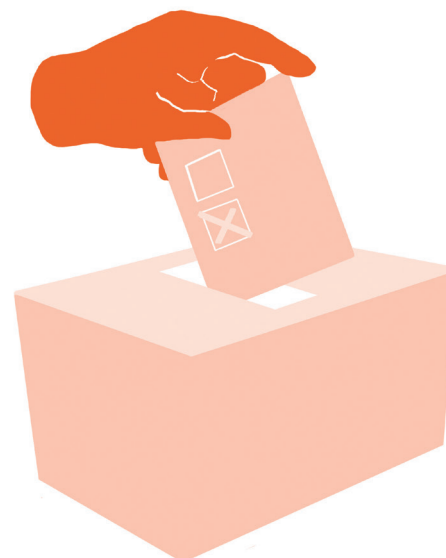
Local Government Leaders | **5%**



General Population | **<1%**



of council leaders **did not go to university**



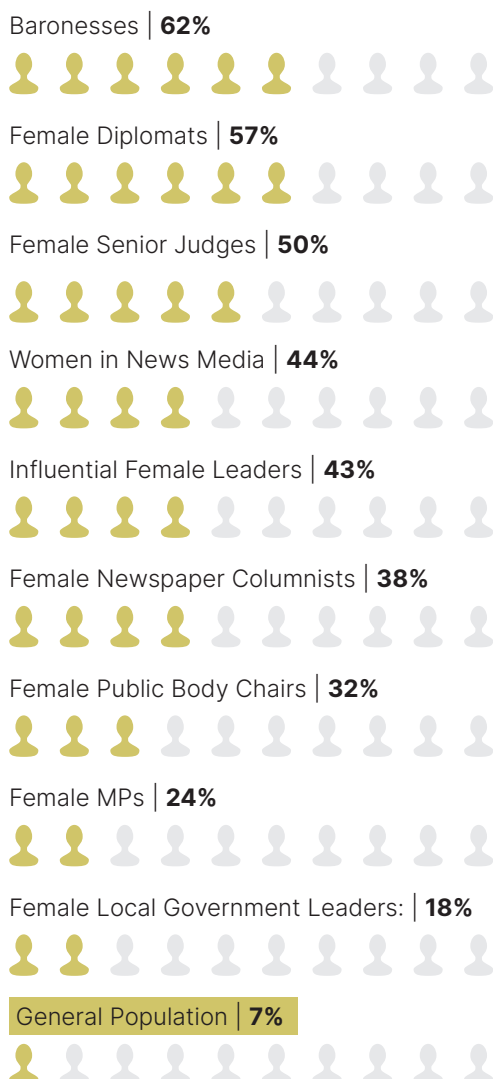
# 7. ● Influential Women

- Women are under-represented across the top professions, making up just 5% of FTSE 350 CEOs, 16% of local government leaders, 24% of senior judges, 26% of permanent secretaries and 35% of top diplomats. Socio-economic class and gender can often combine to create a 'double disadvantage', with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds less likely to be socially mobile.
- For women who do make it to the top, their journeys do not always look the same as those of their male peers. In a variety of sectors, women at the top are less likely to have attended Oxbridge than their male

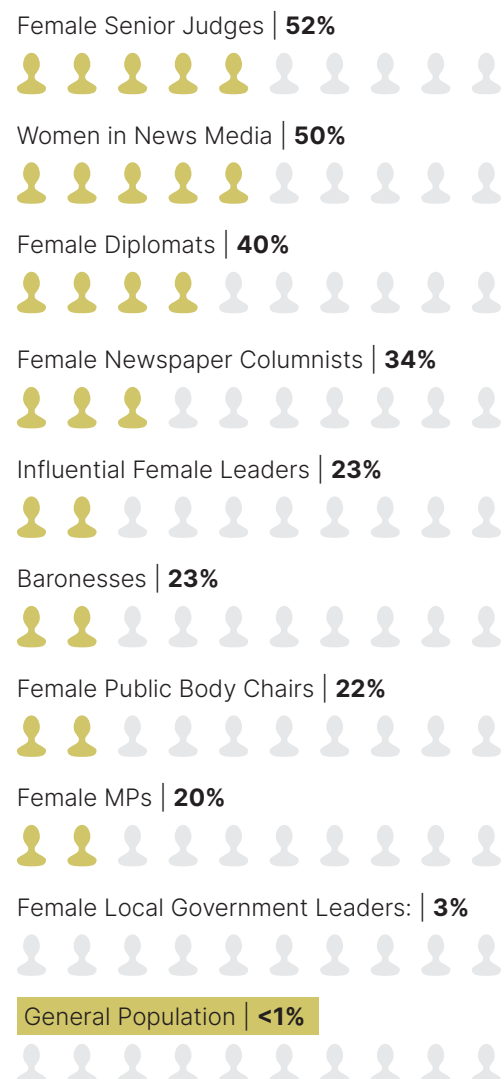
counterparts, including the judiciary (where they are 25 percentage points less likely), the House of Lords (21 percentage points), and those working as newspaper columnists or diplomats (both 17 percentage points less).

- In terms of schooling, there were fewer differences between men and women. Nonetheless, looking at a group of influential female leaders in Britain (43% of whom attended private school), they are much more likely to have attended an independent school than women in the population overall, and are similar to other parts of the elite.

## Attended Independent School



## Attended Oxbridge



# 8. ● Creative Industries

- The arts sector saw some of the lowest proportions of Oxbridge graduates, with just 2% of top selling pop music artists attending the two universities, and over 70% not attending university at all.
- Among the wealthiest members of the TV, film and music industries, university attendance was somewhat higher, at 42%, with about a quarter attending Russell Group institutions. They also had substantial numbers of independent school attendees, at 38%, though the number attending comprehensives has risen by 18 percentage points since 2014.

- Popular music appears more diverse than those at the top of the acting profession (30% of the most successful musicians were independently educated compared to 44% of actors).
- There are nonetheless substantial barriers to success in the arts from those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These include access to facilities, equipment and training; very high levels of unpaid work, including a culture of unpaid internships; and often class-based assumptions – conscious or unconscious – particularly in acting.

## Attended Independent School

On average **29%** attended independent schools

Richest in TV, Film and Music | **38%**



Popular Music | **20%**



General Population | **7%**



## Attended Oxbridge

On average **4%** attended Oxbridge

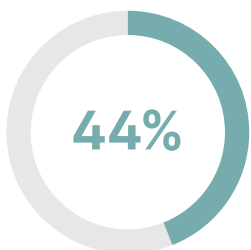
Richest in TV, Film and Music | **6%**



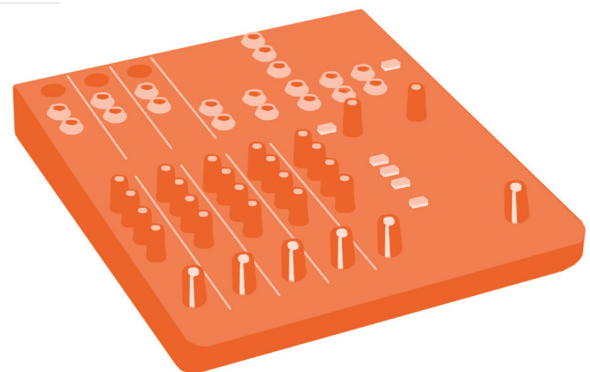
Popular Music | **2%**



General Population | **<1%**



of the wealthiest actors were educated at **private schools**



# 9. ● Sport

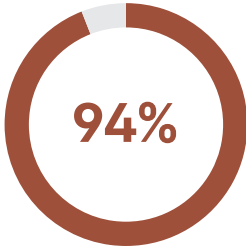
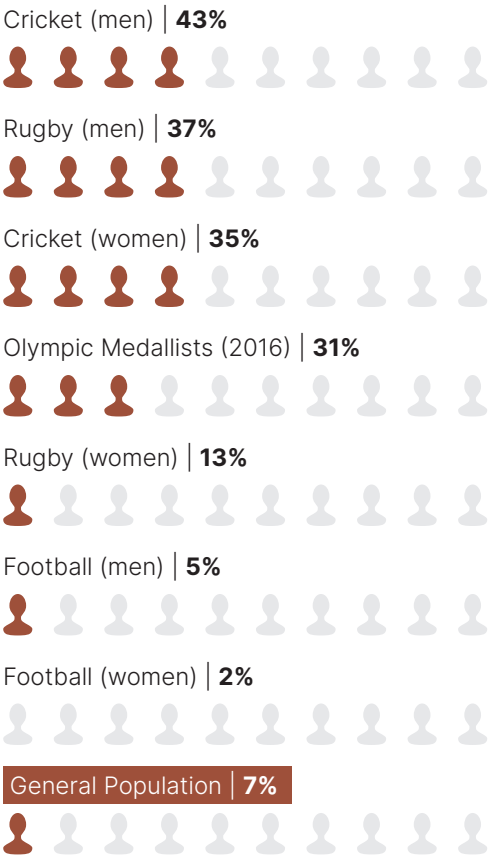
- The educational dynamics in sport are different to other sectors, but also characterised by a lot of diversity within sport. There were big differences seen across different sports, and between men’s and women’s teams. While 5% of men’s football international players attended independent schools, 37% of rugby internationals and 43% of the England cricket team had done so.
- Football, both for men and women, was the only profession in the report where the privately educated were under-represented.
- Women’s teams showed similar patterns to their male counterparts in terms of school background, but around 80% of women’s

internationals across football, cricket and rugby had attended university, compared to small numbers of men. This reflects generally lower levels of financial remuneration and career opportunities in the women’s game.

- Men’s rugby showed big differences across the nations: 25% of England internationals attended comprehensives, compared to 81% of 2019 Six Nations champions Wales.
- Britain’s Olympians continue to include large numbers of the privately educated among their ranks, with access to high quality facilities and specialised equipment in a variety of sports, including rowing and equestrian, playing a role.

### Attended Independent School

On average **24%** attended independent schools



of women’s football internationals went to **comprehensives**





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