

Mixed panel lauds benefits of social mobility

The debate, 'Widening access to highly selective universities', brought together experts and education leaders from both the state and independent sectors

Attendees included representatives from Eton College and Oxford and Cambridge universities



The benefits of social mobility were widely extolled at a recent panel debate, 'Widening access to highly selective universities', which brought together experts and education leaders from both the state and independent sectors. "Schools have never been more important as powerful agents of change and aspiration," said Charles Fillingham, headmaster of independent girls' school, Francis



Holland, which initiated the event, in partnership with three state institutions: All Saints Catholic College, King Solomon Academy and the St Marylebone CE School. Other attendees at the February 26 gathering included the headmaster of Eton College, Simon Henderson; the pro-vice chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge universities, respectively Professor Martin Williams and Professor Graham Virgo; and Dame Esther Rantzen.

"Widening access lifts the grades of all the children within the school"



Dame Esther Rantzen was among the panellists

One of the areas of agreement between panellists was the need to raise the low percentage of state school admissions to Oxford – while 10% of students there are eligible for free school meals, nearly 30% of those went to private schools. Part of the solution, it was argued, lay with improving social mobility at a younger age, such as by state and independent schools partnering to help develop soft skills, be it offering mentorship or high-quality interview experience. “If [students have] not grown up surrounded by the polish and confidence exuded by those from more privileged backgrounds, it’s a question of how we, as schools, help them to demonstrate their insight and potential,” said St Marylebone head, Kat Pugh.

“Widening access doesn’t just have a positive impact on individuals – it lifts the grades of all the children within the school,” added Andrew O’Neill, headteacher of All Saints. Max Haimendorf, principal of King Solomon Academy, meanwhile, spoke of “creating a normality of excellence”. “Widening access doesn’t just have a positive impact on individuals – it lifts the grades of all the children within the school,” said Fillingham, citing his school’s decision to offer four 100% sixth form bursaries to All Saints students. “These particular students are highly-talented and deserve the opportunity to not only access an outstanding education but an unrivalled alumni network, which has the potential to rapidly accelerate their social mobility.”