

OPENING DOORS

A debate on why and how ethnic-minority students are under-represented at highly-selective universities gave **Charles Fillingham** real pause for thought



Dame Esther Rantzen chaired the panel debate on improving university access

In 1979, Sir Michael Rutter, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the Institute of Psychiatry in London examined the difference that a good secondary school can have on a child in his celebrated book, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*. Rutter, the first person to be appointed professor of child psychiatry in the UK, asked whether schools can help their pupils overcome the adverse effects of economic disadvantage. Some educational commentators, even more than 40 years later, would suggest that the answer may be in the negative. Rutter, however, contradicted the pessimism of the time to reveal the possibilities of education – schools can make a difference. To settle for schools that simply act as institutions of containment seemed to Rutter to be a strategy of despair. As a 21st century educationalist, his work remains a key motivation for me.

Inequality matters at Francis Holland, Regent's Park, every bit as much as it matters elsewhere. Schools such as ours confer advantage on our pupils, not least because the parental body is rich in cultural capital and because the school offers an unparalleled range of opportunities, both academic and social. I want the pupils at Francis Holland to always remain mindful of their privilege and to go out into the world as a force for good. To that end, I was delighted to be able to organise a recent conference to highlight modern-day issues of unfairness.

On 26 February, some 150 headteachers, academics and journalists came to St Cyprian's church in Marylebone for a debate chaired by

Dame Esther Rantzen on *Widening Access to Highly-Selective Universities*. The topic under consideration was race and, in particular, how young people with black or mixed-race heritage continue to be under-represented at our top universities.

Professor David Gillborn, from Birmingham University's Department of Education, highlighted evidence from his research which shows institutional racism in the British education system. For example, he told us that: black pupils are less likely to be entered for higher-tier GCSEs; they're less likely to be encouraged to apply to selective universities; they're more likely to be in lower sets for maths; they're more likely to be excluded from school and their parents are more likely to be branded as troublemakers than white parents.

Naomi Kellman, who also spoke, leads Target Oxbridge. She's a PPE graduate and the co-chair of Oxford's Black Alumni Network. Her organisation supports up to 9,000, mainly black, young people each year to apply for the most selective universities and to see that Oxbridge are places where they can fit in. The work of Sponsors for Education Opportunity, London, led by Andrew Fairbairn, a Stanford graduate of mixed race, raised in Jamaica, fulfils a similar role in steering able candidates towards top courses. Interestingly, both of these founders in the third sector said that word of mouth is the most significant way in which young people hear about their work – suggesting that advisors in schools and sixth-form colleges recommend outside support from such organisations less than they could.

Encouragingly, both Oxford and Cambridge are acutely aware of the race issue, and the two Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education, Prof Graham Virgo and Prof Martin Williams were able to share with the audience the progress that has been made in recent years.

Independent schools are already more ethnically diverse than the education sector as a whole. Nevertheless, this symposium acted as a wake-up call for all of us to return to our schools with a renewed determination to be agents for positive change in our country. 🙏

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