

# Findings from the Oxford Admissions Study

Anthony Heath  
Anna Zimdars  
Alice Sullivan  
Tom Ogg



# Research questions

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1. Why do those privileged in terms of social background, ethnicity and secondary schooling dominate enrolment at Oxford?
  - How does this square with the 'meritocratic revolution' in education?
2. What is the role of admissions tutors in generating these outcomes?
  - Particularities of Oxford admissions process
3. Are there differences in degree attainment for students from different backgrounds?



# The Oxford admissions system

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- Earlier than other universities (a form of indirect discrimination?)
- Faculty led admission
- Admissions interviews
- Collegiate university
  - Different practices in different colleges and different academic departments

# Methods

## **December 2002**

Study of 1,929 applicants for admission to Oxford

## **2004-5**

Interviews with admissions tutors at Oxford (n = 25) and observation of actual admissions meetings (n = 8)

## **Summer 2006 and 2007**

Collection of degree results for those who enrolled at Oxford and at other universities



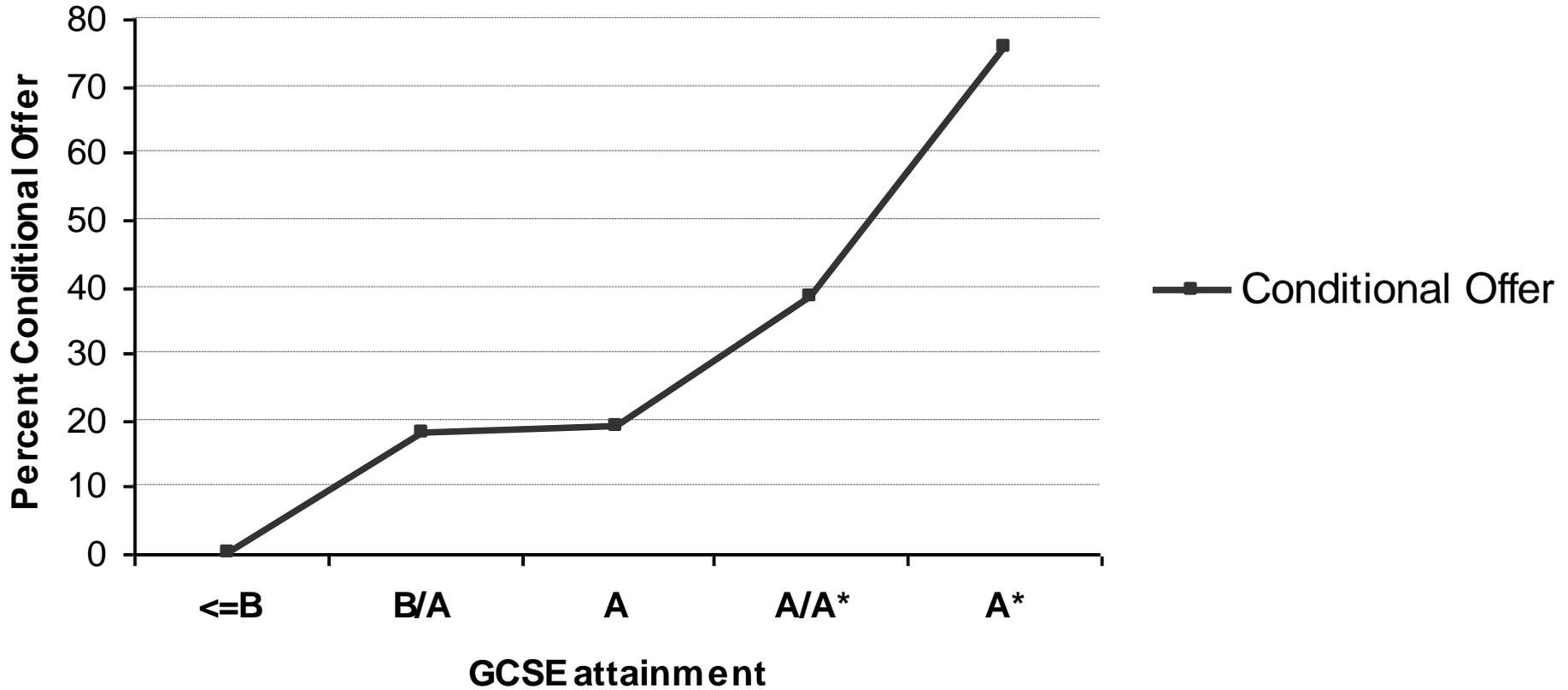
# General Findings 1:

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- GCSE strongest predictor of offer
- A-levels also important
- Attainment crucial
- Still differences by schooling, gender, race & socio-economic status
- Schooling effects not in expected direction

# Strongest predictor of gaining an offer is attainment at GCSE

## Conditional Offer by GCSE attainment



# Schooling information

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- *'With the UCAS forms, we get a lot of information about the schools. So, we ...have information on the grade average in the school. And the percentage of higher education entrance. We have a lot of information. We know whether it is easy or hard for someone to reach A-levels. And, especially with GCSEs we really take that into account. ... So, we had [an applicant] who within his school ...was really good but the school itself is so dramatically bad that he is bad within the national competition. ... So, we really consider this information.'*

# The role of risk: Admission as crystal ball glazing

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All these choices are risky in terms of whether they'll be able to cope, or whether they'll go into kind of autopilot once they get here and , and there's no point in denying the fact that mistakes are made all the time. And mistakes are made in relation to students from all kinds of social and academic and school backgrounds, I would say

'right kind of risk'

- → **predictability** of student valued
- → **homo-social reproduction** argument?



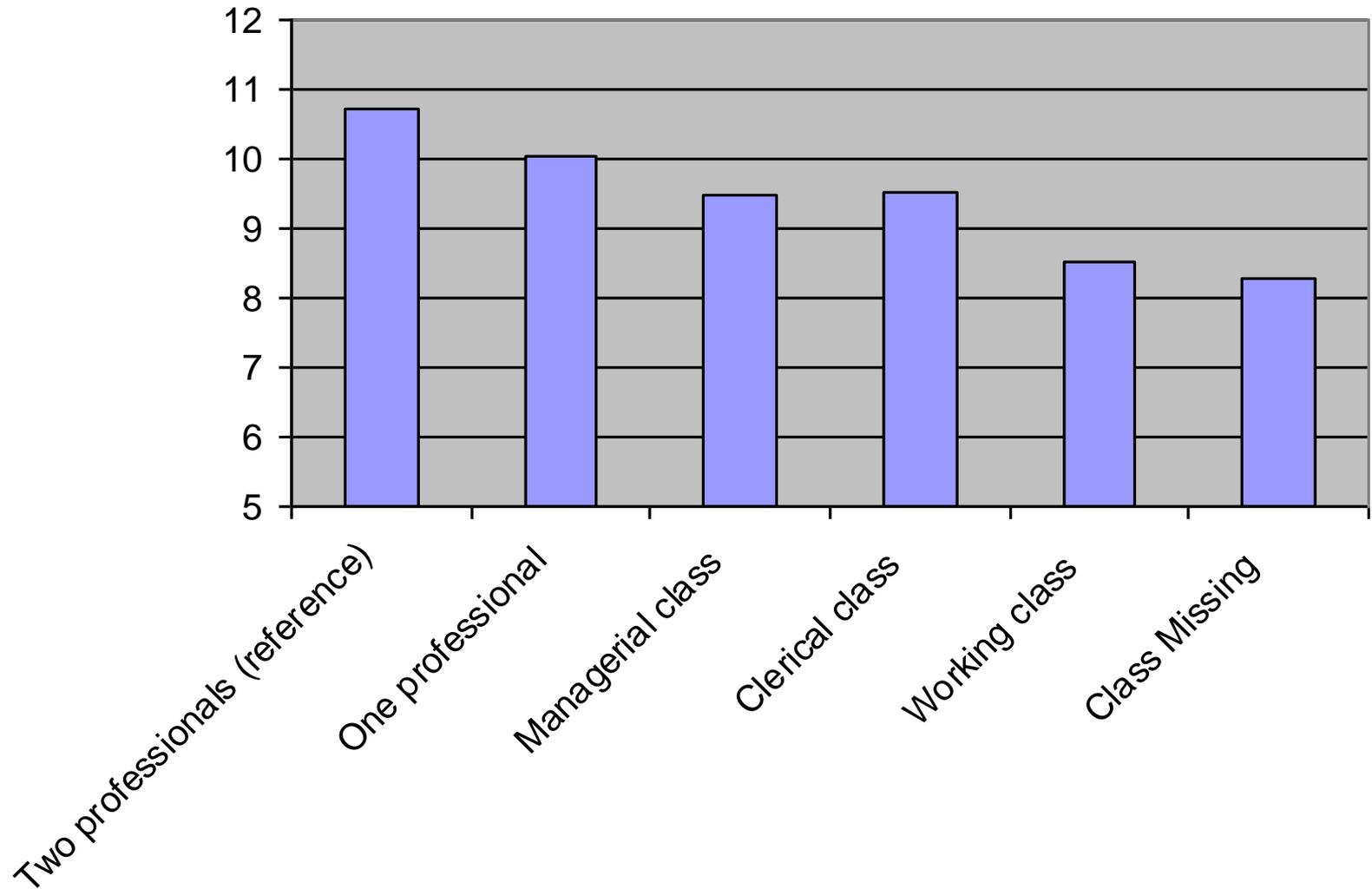
# Cultural capital and admissions

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- How is cultural capital (Beaux arts, reading, and knowledge) distributed according to class, race, sex.
- Does cultural capital increase chances of admission?
- Does it mediate the effects of background and schooling?



## Cultural Knowledge Score





# Distribution of cultural capital

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- Clear gradient according to social class, reflecting middle-class fractions, economic/cultural divide.
- Female advantage
- South-Asian disadvantage



# Role of cultural capital

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- Reading and especially cultural knowledge matter, not beaux arts
- Cultural knowledge most important in arts/humanities admissions
- Cultural capital measures partially mediate the role of class, but have only a slight mediating effect for ethnicity, and do not help us explain the gender gap.

# View of tutors

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*'Ability's not something that develops in utter independence of everything else you know... Yes, students who've come from educated backgrounds, who've been exposed more to in breadth literature or whatever have possibly a better chance of proving themselves more able for entry into a course where that's what they'll be doing. Not that that is necessarily a good indication of motivation, or indeed of ability, but certainly of a certain kind of acculturation or training, yes, for sure. And I think that's in a sense what is very difficult to assess in interviews - to see through the training.'*

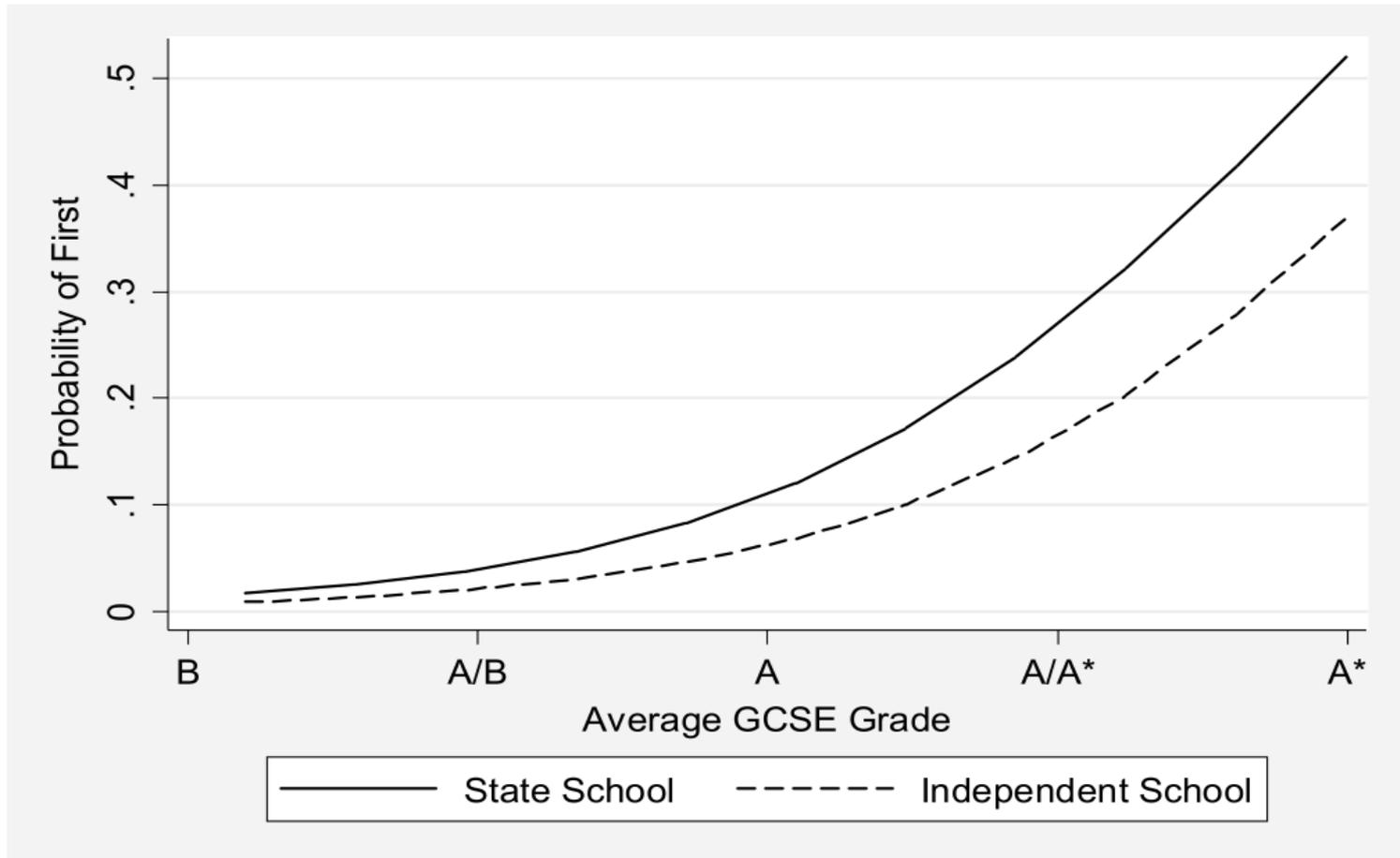


## Summary (cultural capital)

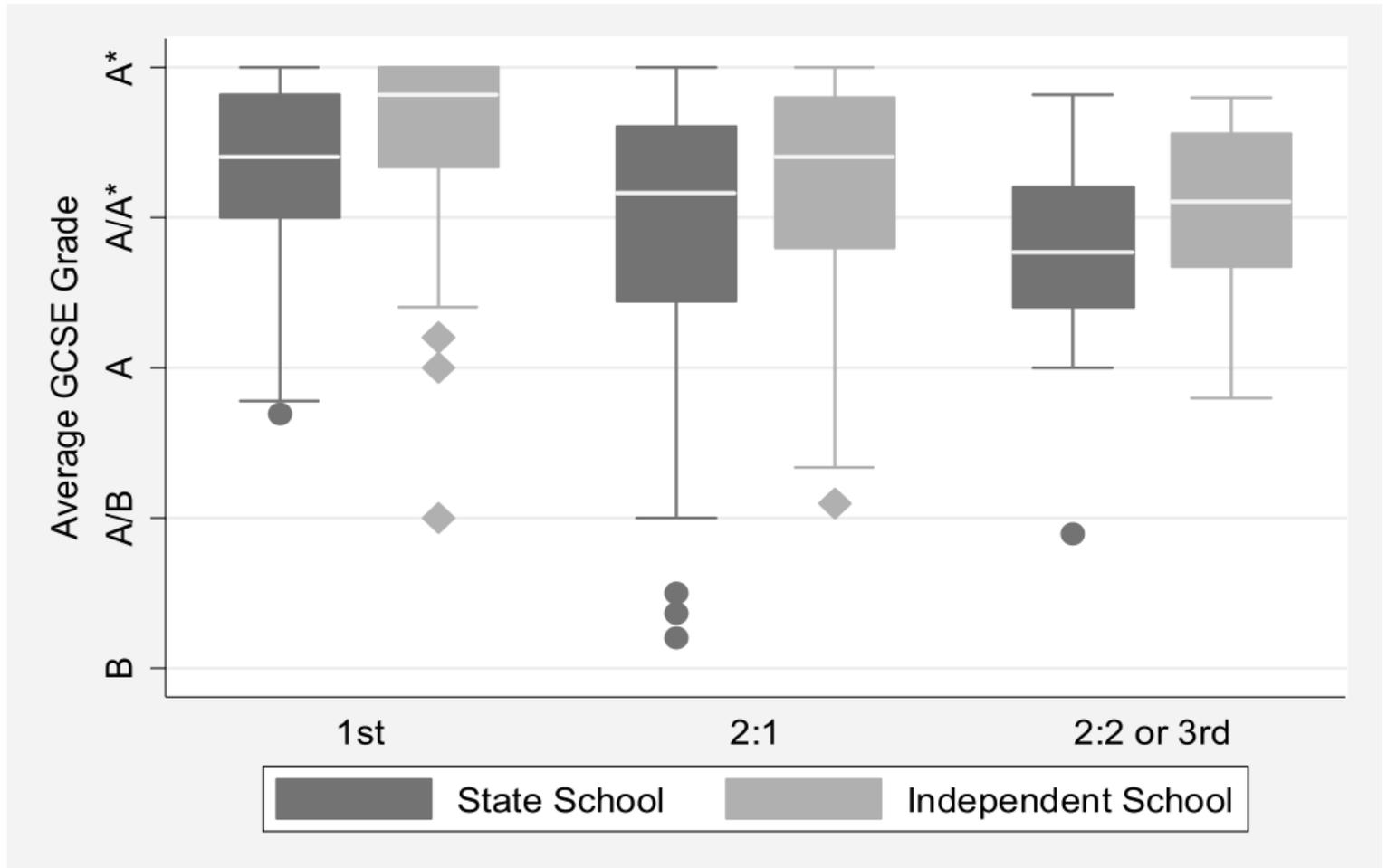
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- Cultural capital certainly plays a role, but we cannot discount the effect of tutors (who are 80% male and nearly all white, as well as being privileged in social class terms) simply recruiting in their own image.

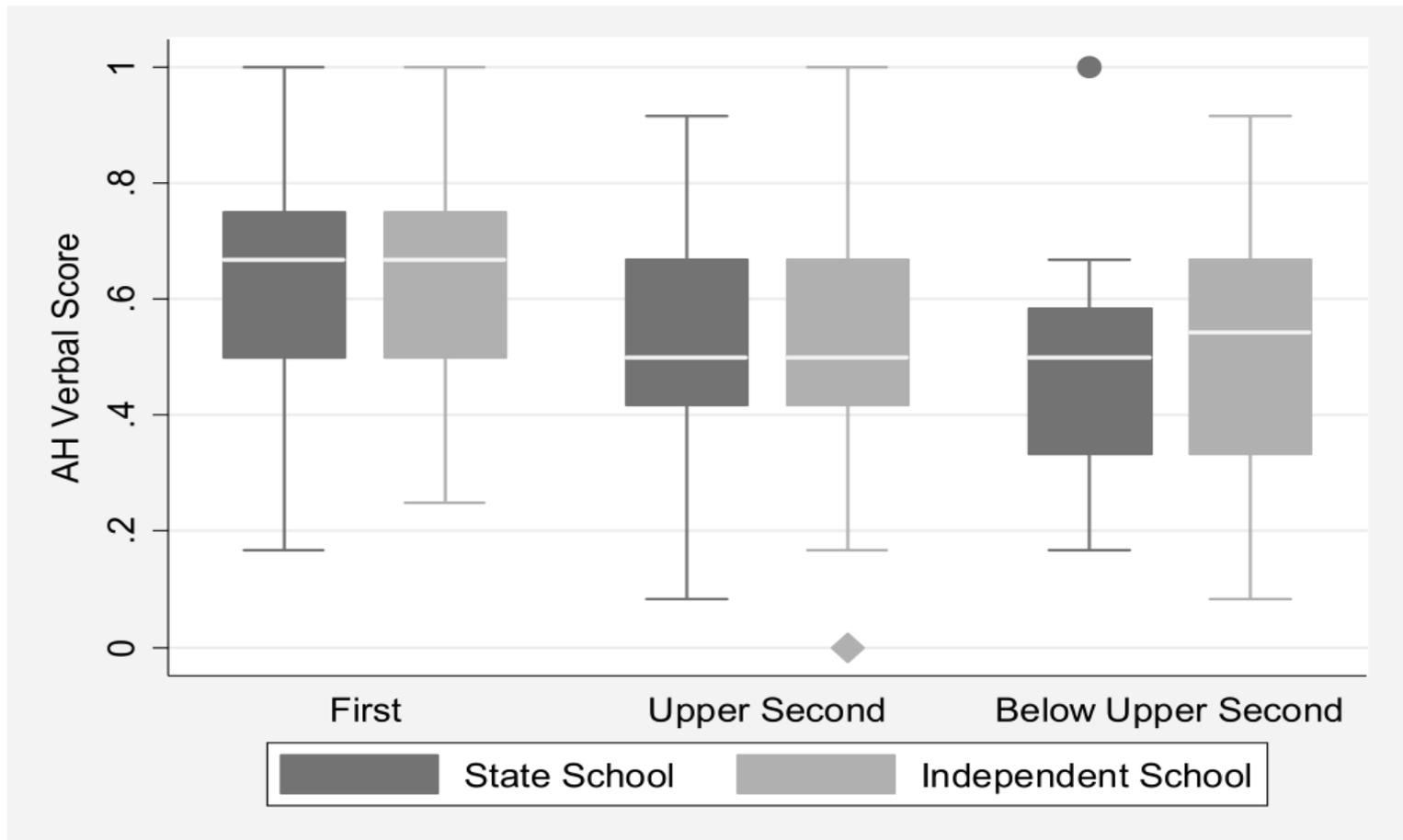
# Probability of First by Average GCSE Grade and School Type

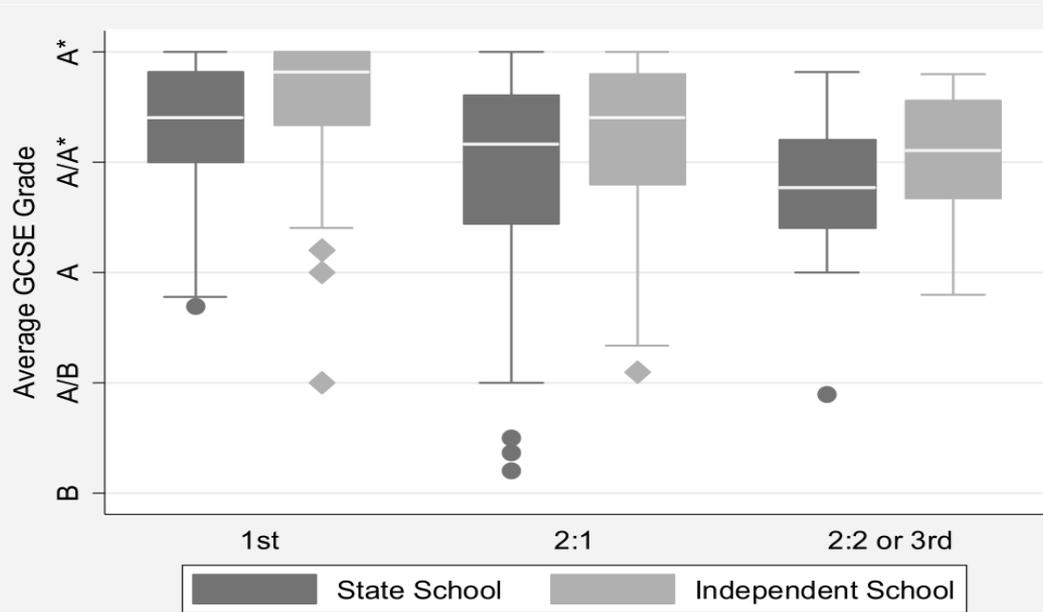
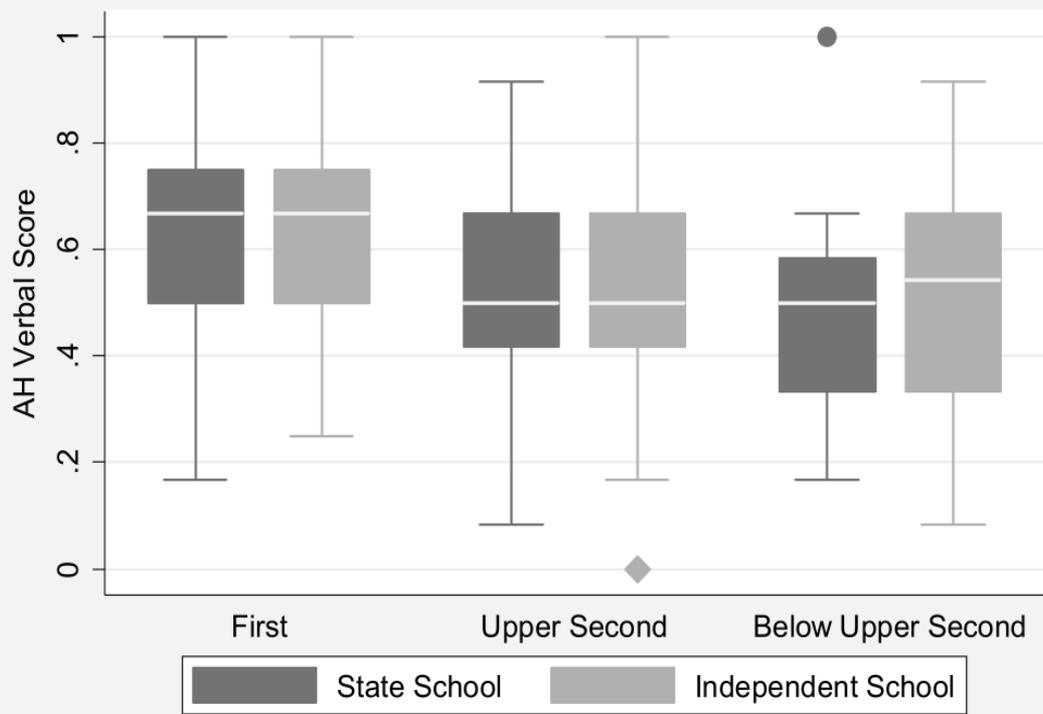


# Box Plot of Average GCSE Grade by School Type and Finals Mark



# Box Plot of AH Verbal Scores by School Type and Finals Mark





# Parliamentary shenanigans...

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- David Willets MP: our research “suggests that when children from less academic schools arrive at some of our leading universities, they then outperform and have a better chance of a top degree” (Dearing Lecture).
- James Clappison MP: “The authors of the report said that there was a slight difference between state and independent schools and it ought to be taken into account. However, it already was taken into account by academics in the admissions process” (HoC 8/3/11).

# Summary

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1. Attainment (GCSEs, A-levels) strongest predictor of admission – though attainment affected by prior schooling
2. Effects of gender, social class, race, and schooling on chances of admission that are not explained by attainment – theories of homo-social reproduction may explain these effects
3. Cultural capital influences admissions in the arts
4. Schooling related to final examination performance

# Discussion

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- Who applies not representative of all high-attaining students – major barriers to application
- (like Tom Espenshade): Fair admission for whom?
  - UK focus on fairness by type of school
  - What about race, class, gender, mature students?
- Great emphasis on apparently meritocratic principle of attainment: guarantees 'procedural fairness' but does it address fundamental questions about unequal schooling?
- How will changes in the funding and student support system in the UK from 2012 affect admission?
  - How will it affect self-selection into applications?
  - How will it affect retention rates?

# Main Publications

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1. Zimdars, A., A. Sullivan & A. Heath (2009) 'Elite Higher Education Admissions in the Arts and Sciences: Is Cultural Capital the Key?' *Sociology*, 43(4): 648-666.
2. Ogg, T., A. Zimdars & A. Heath (2009) 'Schooling effects on degree performance: a comparison of the predictive validity of aptitude testing and secondary school grades at Oxford University' *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(5): 781-807.
3. Zimdars, A (2010). Fairness and undergraduate admission: a qualitative exploration of admissions choices at the University of Oxford. *Oxford Review of Education*. 36 (3), 207-323.
4. Mellanby, J. and Zimdars, A. (2011) Trait anxiety and degree performance. *Higher Education*. 61 (4). 357-370.