READING III:

Unfair Education

In a country where government and families alike are tightening their belts and trying to make do with less, you could be pardoned for thinking that private education would be in a bit of a jam right now. And yet, although fees at independent schools in Britain have approximately doubled over the last two and a half decades, pupil numbers are the highest since records started in 1974.

Although there are numerous reasons why parents might choose to fork out an average of £12,500 per year on their child's education, there is one which stands out more than any other: their reputation for getting their students into elite universities, such as the American Ivy League colleges and Britain's most prestigious universities: Oxford and Cambridge.

Private schools with experience in these admissions processes run like well-oiled machines. Their informed careers advisers have in-depth tactical knowledge of which colleges would best suit each candidate, and help them to edit their personal statements to reflect the qualities that elite universities are looking for. Interview training sessions guide young applicants through an interview system which has been described as being 'more reminiscent of an old-boy network than justice for society'. Those with family members and teachers who have successfully gone through the admissions process are at a considerable advantage to those who are the first to apply among their social group.

Consequently, the social mix of students at the top universities remains sadly biased towards the rich and privately educated – although thanks to increasing numbers of bursaries providing free private school education to academically gifted youngsters, it is possible to be one without the other. Even so, the fact is that 7% of British children go to private schools, while more than 40% of the intake at Oxford and Cambridge is privately educated, and this statistic depicts a worryingly skewed trend.

The proportion matters because, although there are obviously plenty of other universities offering excellent study programmes, an Oxbridge or Ivy-League degree undoubtedly enhances employability in the ruling professions. According to recent studies by the UK educational charity The Sutton Trust, over 30% of leading professionals in the United Kingdom, including almost 80% of lawyers, 47% of highflyers in financial services and 41% of top journalists attended Oxford or Cambridge. Every university-educated Prime Minister since 1937 except one, Gordon Brown, is an alumnus of one or the other, as are approximately two-thirds of the current government cabinet.

This bias is bad news not only for the clever but underprivileged students who have to settle for a less renowned university; it is bad news for Britain, as decisions that affect the whole nation are made by a select group with a narrow pool of experience, rather than one that is representative of society as a whole.

This disproportion was brought to public attention in 2000, when politician Gordon Brown launched an attack on the selection processes at Oxford University. He publicised the story of Laura Spence, a gifted students who had the "best A-level qualifications you can have", but nevertheless was turned down by Magdalen College, Oxford. Later, Member of Parliament David Lammy used the freedom of information act to examine admissions data at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and found that almost 90% of the student body at both universities was drawn from the upper and middle classes, that in 2009 Oxford accepted only

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one British black Caribbean undergraduate, and it focused its attentions on admissions events at private schools such as Kate Middleton's school, Marlborough College, and Prince William's alma mater, Eton.

Since then, universities have been forced to up their game welcoming the less privileged among their students. Quotas have been put into place to ensure that the colleges admit a larger proportion of less privileged students. These targets are not often met, however, and they have brought about a new practice in which parents privately educate their children up to the age of 16, giving them a sound academic background, then put them in state education for their two final years, to better improve their chances of being accepted at a top university as part of their 'less privileged' quota.

Even so, Oxford now spends $4 million a year on student outreach, a $1.6 million increase since 2006–07. Much of this is spent on school visits and teacher-training programmes aimed at supporting poor and minority students who wish to apply to the university. The university has also launched a summer school, which allows around 500 academically talented, state-school students a chance to experience studying at Oxford for a week.

And yet these strategies depend on state schools being able to educate students to the same level as private schools; where stringent selection processes, partnered with high budgets, parental support.

Question 1-7: *Do the following statements agree with the views of the writer in Reading Passage 3?*

Write

YES *if the statement agrees with the views of the writer*

NO *if the statement contradicts the views of the writer*

NOT GIVEN *if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this*

1. Numbers of pupils at private schools have doubled since 1975. ……

2. On average, the cost of tuition at a private school in the UK is £12,500 per child, per year.

…….

3. The interview process at elite universities gives private and state-educated students an equal chance of success. …….

4. All students at private schools in Britain come from rich families. …….

5. Most leading politicians and judges in the UK were educated at Oxford or Cambridge University. ……

6. Former prime minister Gordon Brown was educated at to Oxford University. …….

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7. Both Kate Middleton and Prince William applied to Oxford University. ……

Question 8 – 13: Complete the spaces with up to 4 words from the text.

One study found that nearly nine tenths of students entering Oxford and Cambridge universities came from the **8.** ..... .

Universities must now adhere to **9.** ..... to ensure that they admit a socio-economic mix of students.

This has led to parents choosing to educate their children in **10.** ..... to increase their chances of getting into an elite university. Oxford's **11.** ..... programme has been expanded to attract the less privileged. However, private schools can educate students to a higher standard because they have more money and they employ strict **12.** ..... .

However, one commentator believes that state schools would do better if their head teachers were allowed more **13.** .....

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