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tester

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SO, WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO?

Have you ever been asked WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO? I was once asked this in a high-stakes job interview and my answer was a startled rabbit-in-the-headlights response shortly before becoming interview roadkill. Nobody has asked me that question before or since. It's a question that triggered a load more questions in my head rather than a coherent answer from my mouth:

- Why was the interviewer asking about my school when it was listed right at the top of my CV?
- How the hell was the school I attended relevant to my suitability for the post anyway?
- Was this a warm-up question, an innocent icebreaker or an inappropriate but tricky tiebreaker?
- Had I only been invited to interview in order to tick some box for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion #EDI?
- Maybe the interviewer would like to know where they could shove their stupid questions?

Years later, I still can't decide what to make of the WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO interview question. If you were asked this question in a high-stakes job interview what would your answer be?

This is my answer featuring the University of Oxford, The Royal Society, the Royal Family, the social mobility commission, Martina Milburn, Peter Lampl, the sutton trust, justine greening, the independent schools council, catrin nye and a club I've just joined as a founding member, called the 93 percent club.

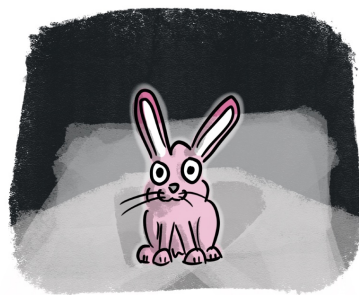
thanks to sophie pender, imogen carr, Lorna Culpin, ellie waldrope, viktor polyakov, st laurence school academy trust,

nice to meet you sarah mohamed, conor churchman, benjamin hobbs

cc. sheeree palmer, banji adewumi,

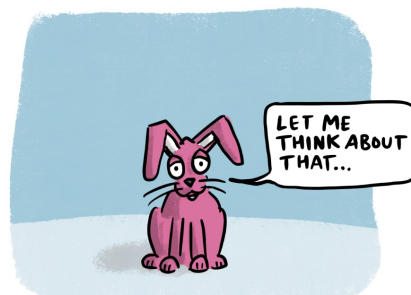
Beware of the heavy speeding juggernaut!

The heavily loaded question WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO is also a very personal, political and provocative one. It proved to be a fatal question in my PhD¹ interview at the University of Oxford because it was totally unexpected and I wasn't prepared for the snarky reply to my bewildered answer. As with many job interviews, there was a big power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee. The Professor interviewing me was a member of several exclusive clubs including the National Academy of Sciences of the UK, known as the royalsociety.org. Members, or *Fellows* as they are known, get to use the prestigious letters FRS after their name. The Professor was also appointed a Commander of the British Empire by the royal family. Members of this exclusive commanders club get to use the letters CBE after their name.



**RABBIT IN THE
HEADLIGHTS**

Q VISUAL THINKERY



**RABBIT TAKING A
BREATH**

cdyf.me

Figure 1: WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO? was a rabbit-in-the-headlights moment, shortly before I became interview roadkill. I'm not ascending the Stairway to Heaven I'd hoped for, (Page and Plant 1971) I'm on the Highway to Hell. (Scott, Young, and Young 1979) Rabbit sketch by Visual Thinkery is licensed under CC-BY-ND

RABBIT EMOJI

APPROX EQUALS

Now forget about membership of the 7% club, the percentage of the UK population who are privately educated, this Professor was a proud member of the

¹Its actually called a DPhil in Oxford but most people call it a PhD, so we'll stick with that

0.002% club² and 0.001% club³. The Professor was up there in career heaven with other Gods, who also had lots of letters after their names too.

Stairway to Heaven or Highway to Hell?

The only letters I had after my name were BSc. On being asked *the question*, these letters were shortly followed by a collection of other post-nominals including WTF? OMG and FFS! The only club I was a member of was the 93% club, a group for the overwhelming majority of the UK population educated in state schools. The club didn't actually exist back then but I'm glad it exists now.

While I ended up as yet more roadkill (see figure 1) on the interview highway to hell, just another casualty of the Oxford juggernaut, I learned a painful but important lesson about the value of what the 93% clubbers call State School Pride. (Nye 2021)

Education is paradoxical, it's both *very relevant* and *completely irrelevant* in job interviews. My state schooling, funded by the taxpayer, was the reason I'd been invited to interview because my teachers had done a good job. If it wasn't for the teachers who patiently taught me (and all my mates) during thirteen years of primary and secondary school education I wouldn't have been able to craft a CV and covering letter to convince decision makers to interview me. If it wasn't for my maths and science teachers, I would never have made it to University in the first place.

But at the same time, that very same education should not affect how I was treated, it should not have been an interview question because it was simultaneously irrelevant and relevant. The school I went to shouldn't be a factor in either being invited to interview or being made a job offer. With help from Viktor Polyakov and Ellie Wardrope, I recorded a video testimonial to that effect last week in the pop-up studio at the 93percent.club.

Thanks to Sophie Pender, Imogen Carr and Lorna Culpin for inviting me to (and hosting) the Founding Member's Reception at ey.com in Manchester. I had a blast, it was good to speak to you Conor Churchman from ada.ac.uk, the National College for Digital Skills, Sarah Mohammed Qureshi from the University of Law and Benjamin Hobbs from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Looking forward seeing you again and meeting more kindred spirits at future events online and in person.

²There are about ~8000 Fellows of the Royal Society. 80% of them are dead. That might sound grim but they have been going since 1660 only accept around 60 new fellows to join them each year. Think Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Stephen Hawking, Alan Turing etc, and yes the jolly good Fellows of the Royal Society are overwhelmingly male and pale, although they're not *all* stale. There's about ~1600 living fellows and about ~70 million inhabitants on the UK, so $1600 / 70,000,000 = 0.002\%$. It's a bit more complicated than that because there are foreign members too, but this is a back-of-the-envelope approximation

³There are 100 new CBE's awarded every year and around 600,000 people born each year in the UK, so let's say $100/600000 = 0.001\%$

So WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO? I don't really care and it's not really any of my business anyway. There's an argument for making your education another legally protected characteristic because it shouldn't be a factor in how you are treated. Just like your age, your race, your religion, your sexual orientation, your gender, your disabilities, your marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity shouldn't determine how you are treated either. Your education is your business, and you probably didn't have that much say in which school you went to anyway.

What I definitely care about 100%, is the school I went to, especially when someone asks me in a high-stakes job interview. I'm lucky to have been to the kind of state school that got me to wherever I wanted to go to. Thank you Fitzmaurice Primary School and St. Laurence School.

THANKS EMOJI

I'm proud to be a card-carrying, badge-wearing, word-spreading and founding member of the UK's *least* exclusive members club: 93percent.club

MUSCLE EMOJI

Join us tackling inequality in the UK

Not everyone educated in the state sector is as lucky as me. As former secretary of state for Education Justine Greening once put it, talent is evenly distributed but opportunities are not. (Greening 2017) Not everyone educated in the state sector gets the opportunities they need or deserve and that's just plain wrong. Unfortunately, the UK is still a country where the school you went to *definitely* counts, and the higher you go, the more it matters. Your education has a huge influence on how society treats you and our educational system is riddled with inequality. The Elitist Britain report by Martina Milburn and Peter Lampl at the Social Mobility Commission and Sutton Trust provides all the evidence you need. (Milburn and Lampl 2019)

Would you like to help us tackle inequality through the power of community? Would you like empower state-educated students by giving them access to more social capital, better opportunities, improved careers advice and marvellous mentoring? By bringing together thousands of like-minded individuals across the country, we are breaking down the structural barriers to social mobility and building a future that's fairer for the next generation. Find out how to join at 93percent.club/join

P.S. Sophie, speaking of word-spreading, when is the next episode of the #WHATSCHOOLDIDYOUGOTO podcast due? It's been a while... (Pender 2023)

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