

# A Bullingdon<sup>1</sup> in reverse: how working-class student club is taking on elitism



Sophie Pender started the 93% Club when she was at Bristol University for students who felt discriminated against for not being rich and from private schools. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/the Guardian

*The 93% Club, begun at Bristol University by a state-educated student, is snowballing nationally, with big firms now taking note*

**Robert Verkaik**, The Guardian, 6 March 2021

Sophie Pender was the first in her family to go to university and believed what her mother had always told her – in a meritocracy<sup>2</sup> you can use education to rise above your family circumstances.

5 For Pender, this was perhaps more important than for most students leaving home for university. Her childhood had been deeply affected by her father's addiction to drugs and alcohol. "We lived on a council estate in Borehamwood and had very little money. My mum did her best. But Dad was violent, and things had become so bad there were panic buttons in the house connected to the police station to protect us should he try to visit."

10 When Pender, now 24, was in her second year of secondary school her father died from substance abuse. She decided to throw herself into her schoolwork: "Education was something that I felt I could control and was a way of alleviating my circumstances. By working hard at school, I could achieve anything."

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<sup>1</sup> The **Bullingdon Club** is a private all-male dining club for Oxford University students. It is known for its wealthy members, grand banquets, and bad behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> A society or social system in which people get status or rewards because of what they achieve, rather than because of their wealth or social status.

15 At her school, only about 30% of her year achieved a C grade or above at GCSE<sup>3</sup>.  
Nevertheless, she managed to attain three A grades at A-level, the first person in her school  
to do so.

Remembering how inspired she was, Pender says: “I wanted to go to Bristol University,  
and I wanted to be a lawyer, and it was all going to be great.”

20 But at university she was in for a nasty shock. “When I got to Bristol, I thought not having  
a dad and growing up on a council estate wouldn’t matter because after all I had these  
grades. I didn’t think people would care about my background.”

Instead, she found that to her peers, her background and her class mattered more than her  
academic achievements. Private school students mocked her accent and for the first time  
she encountered “chav parties”, where undergraduates dressed up in clothes that parodied  
their perception of working-class people.

25 “I remember going to a flat where we were having drinks and a boy told my friend that his  
tweed jacket was worth more than her house. When I heard a girl talking about her  
‘allowance’ for going on holiday I asked how much it was. But she just shut me down and  
said people didn’t discuss family money. At my school we didn’t discuss it because none of  
30 us had any money. These were new social rules that I didn’t understand. I started to feel  
ashamed of my background. Very quickly my dream of my exciting new life at university  
was turning into a nightmare.”

35 Roughly 7% of pupils in the UK attend a private school but at Bristol University, they make  
up nearly a third of the graduate intake. Most of the so-called elite universities have  
disproportionately high numbers of private school students, including Oxford and  
Cambridge, which respectively have 31% and 32% representation from independent  
schools. At Bristol in 2016, the year Pender began her English degree, the proportion was  
closer to 40%.

40 After those early damaging encounters with privately educated students, Pender decided to  
make a stand. “I wanted to even things out a bit, so that those who didn’t come from  
privileged backgrounds could help each other get on in life. And I didn’t see why people  
from working-class families should feel ashamed of their upbringing.”

The result was the establishment of the first 93% Club.

45 Pender describes the club as a kind of old boys’ network in reverse: “It’s artificially creating  
a movement against the idea that a small number of people get all the good jobs. It’s  
bringing people together who simply don’t have those connections. The question of ‘what  
school did you go to?’, which private school people are always asking each other, is being  
replaced with ‘which 93% Club are you a member of?’” [...]

50 The rapid spread of the club has met some hostility. There has been a rash of abusive  
messages on social media, and online networking events have been disrupted by  
gatecrashers. An event arranged by Edinburgh University’s 93% Club in September was

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<sup>3</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education. Equivalent to Folkeskolens Afgangseksamen.

almost abandoned, say members, when anonymous zoomers started heckling the organisers and hurling obscene abuse at the invited speakers.



At Bristol in 2016, the year Sophie Pender began her degree, the proportion of private school pupils was close to 40%. Photograph: Alamy

55 More moderate voices accuse the clubs of being divisive, even elitist themselves. One private school student posted a message asking them to imagine the uproar if he decided to set up a 7% club.

60 Pender dismisses this as public-school sophistry<sup>4</sup>: “What they forget,” she says, “is that every university already has its own 7% club where membership is determined by how much money parents spent on their child’s education. They don’t need to set up a 7% club because they already benefit from privileged networks. The difference is our club is transparent – out in the open for all to see.”

And she points out there are already elitist societies run for the benefit of very privileged students. The most famous is Oxford University’s Bullingdon club, whose membership is exclusively public school and whose principal purpose is the riotous celebration of class war. [...]

65 Thousands of state school students feel that they have had to seize the moment because universities have not done enough to advance social mobility<sup>5</sup> through more progressive admissions systems. [...]

70 At Bristol, students believe only radical measures will even up the numbers. On 2 March, the student union proposed a motion to cap private school graduate admissions at 7%, following criticism of the university for its low levels of social inclusivity. Other student unions are expected to hold their own votes.

Pender has now been taken on as a trainee solicitor by the City law firm Herbert Smith Freehills. Her success shows it is still possible to go from a disadvantaged background to a top job in the professions, but it may be harder work and more of a challenge.

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<sup>4</sup> Reasoning and arguments that are false.

<sup>5</sup> The shift in an individual’s social status and ability to advance within a society.

75 Some tackle this by disguising their accent or hiding their family circumstances, says  
Pender. “There’s a problem when people from working-class backgrounds start  
assimilating into professions and don’t talk about where they have come from. Because I  
work at a law firm, I have been trying very hard to be honest about my background.  
80 Otherwise, you are just perpetuating the perception that people from ordinary  
backgrounds can’t succeed.”

Which is why, despite her personal success, Pender says the 93% Club is the achievement  
of which she is still the most proud.