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- [Jamie Doward](#)
  - [The Observer](#), Sunday 8 May 2011
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Most pupils currently apply to university before receiving their A-level results. Photograph: Rex Features

Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are being penalised by a university admissions system that unduly rewards early applicants, according to new research.

Three academics at Warwick University claim that the British system is unfair and inefficient when it comes to allocating places.

They say their research shows there is a "significantly lower probability of someone from a non-white ethnic background, or from a lower social-class background, or who attended a non-selective or a non-fee-paying secondary school, receiving an offer". Explanations for the bias have yet to be explored, but may be partly explained because the current system appears to be weighted against "late developers".

The research, which examined applications to study at medical schools across the UK, found that pupils who had relatively poor qualifications when they were 16, and had poorer predicted A-levels or similar qualifications, were less likely to be offered places than candidates whose final grades turned out the same but had better predicted results.

The academics found there were strong links between the speed of pupils' progress and their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that the current system fails to acknowledge that many pupils will continue to improve their prospects of getting better grades after the predictions have been made.

The academics, Wiji Arulampalam, Robin Naylor and Jeremy Smith, found disadvantaged pupils were penalised the most when it came to competing for places on oversubscribed courses and especially if they applied towards the end of the application process, when offers become ever more scarce.

Universities receive applications from October to January, many months before pupils receive their results. Offers are therefore based on schools' reference letters, applicants' personal statements, age-16 qualifications, and expected A-level results.

But if demand were higher than predicted, the standard "offer" would be raised for candidates applying in the later months of December and January.

The research found December applicants made up 30% of all university applications, but only 21% of those applicants receive at least one offer. The academics conclude: "There is a significant and substantial reduction in the likelihood of receiving an offer the later the application, and relatively disadvantaged groups suffer greater disadvantage the later the application."

To remove the bias, the economists suggest that the system should be changed so that students apply to university after receiving their grades, which was a key recommendation of the 2004 Schwartz Report commissioned under the previous government.

Naylor said that the benefits of switching to this system, which is employed in many other countries around the world, were manifold. "Everyone would get treated the same way with full information," Naylor said. "At the moment big decisions are being made on guesswork, and that's inefficient and unfair."

The research shines new light on the heated debate surrounding university fees. Concerns have been raised as to whether fees of up to £9,000 a year will discourage disadvantaged students from applying to the nation's leading universities, further exacerbating economic and social disparities. According to the Office for Fair Access (Offa) the number of disadvantaged young people at the top universities has not increased since the mid-1990s.

Under new plans, Offa would require universities charging more than £6,000 a year to encourage applications from students in under-represented groups. But the academics argue only by changing the current system can there be sufficient change: "Our work demonstrates with data what many in the higher education field long have believed: that current procedures make admission less likely for students who are poor, from non-white ethnic minorities, or who attend state schools."