

Schwartz Review of HE Admissions

Executive Summary

1. Background

1.1 The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group was asked to develop a statement of high-level principles about admissions that all English institutions providing Higher Education (HE) could adopt. Its terms of reference, and details of its membership, are available at Appendix 1.

1.2 The Steering Group consulted on the issues relating to fair admissions in autumn 2003 and produced a series of draft recommendations for consultation in spring 2004. This is the final report.

2. Why are admissions important?

2.1 A fair and transparent admissions system is essential for all applicants. Higher education is a valuable commodity: it can affect salary, job security and power to influence society. The number of people in England who seek an HE qualification has grown enormously, with over 934,000 full-time undergraduate students and an additional 521,000 studying part-time. Overall, the benefits of HE are strong. But they also vary considerably from course to course and between institutions, in terms of both the learning experience and graduate outcomes. The sector is diverse and choice of course and institution matters. In this context, it is vital that all stakeholders in the admissions process – applicants, parents, schools, colleges, teaching and admissions staff – believe the system is fair.

3. What are the issues?

3.1 The student population studying HE is diverse, but certain groups are still under-represented. A large number of factors can affect who participates in HE, of which admissions is one. The remit of the Steering Group is not to make recommendations on all these factors, but to focus solely on admissions. Within that context the Group accepts the evidence that admissions processes are generally fair. However, it also believes there is room for improvement and it has identified a number of issues that need to be addressed as we move towards our goal of an admissions system that is both fair and seen to be fair:

- There are differing interpretations of merit and fairness;
- It can be difficult for applicants to know how they will be assessed;

- The information used in assessing applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent;
- Some courses have high drop-out rates, which may be related to admissions processes;
- For courses that are over-subscribed, it can be difficult for admissions staff to select from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants;
- Some applicants face a burden of additional assessment;
- There is uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into higher education;
- Most offers depend on predicted grades, not confirmed examination results;
- The legislation applicable to admissions is complex and there is uneven understanding of what it means for admissions policies and processes.

These issues are addressed in a) the Group's high-level principles for fair admissions; b) the implementation guidelines developed by the Group to support individual institutions in implementing the principles; and c) a set of wider recommendations for the sector as a whole and for key organisations involved in admissions. All of these are summarised below.

4. What is a fair admissions system?

4.1 The Steering Group believes a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations. Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant's achievements and potential.

4.2 Prior educational attainment data remains the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level, and continues to be central to the admissions process. However, the evidence the Group has considered suggests that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. The effect of social background on attainment begins to appear by the age of two. Many applicants have responsibilities at home or at work, or interrupted schooling, that can affect their educational achievement. And recent research shows that, all other things being equal, students from state schools and colleges tend to perform better at undergraduate level than students from independent schools and colleges.

4.3 It is not the task of higher education admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage. But identifying latent talent and potential, which may not fully be demonstrated by examination results, is a legitimate aim for universities and colleges which seek to recruit the best possible students regardless of background. Eighty-six per cent of respondents to the Group's first consultation agreed that universities and colleges should consider the obstacles an applicant might have had to overcome, and 65% thought they should take account of an applicant's educational context.

4.4 The Steering Group does not want to bias admissions in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools. The Group does, however, believe that it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances. The Group also wants to ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate achievements and potential. This is facilitated by 'holistic assessment,' or taking into account all relevant factors, including the context of applicants' achievements, backgrounds and relevant skills. 'Broad brush' approaches are generally not appropriate; applicants must be assessed as individuals.

4.5 The Group recognises that there are practical limitations in the short term on such a comprehensive approach and recommends that, initially at least, institutions apply holistic assessment to borderline applicants and applicants for over-subscribed courses. The Group believes that it is desirable for even the first sift to consider contextual factors in some way, but this will require the standardised provision of agreed information on application forms.

4.6 The Group believes it is justifiable for an institution to consider an applicant's contribution to the learning environment; and that institutions and courses which confer particular benefits upon their graduates have an obligation to make reasonable efforts to recruit a diverse student community. The presence of a range of experiences in the laboratory or the seminar room enriches the learning environment for all students. A diverse student community is likely to enhance all students' skills of critical reasoning, teamwork and communication and produce graduates better able to contribute to a diverse society. The Group is aware of a recent decision by the US Supreme Court upholding a university's 'compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body'.

4.7 Fairness does not mean that the Government should choose students. The Steering Group wishes to affirm its belief in the autonomy of institutions over admissions policies and decisions. Moreover, it should be clearly recognised that it is perfectly legitimate for admissions staff to seek out the most academically excellent students.

5. Recommended principles

5.1 The Steering Group recommends that all universities and colleges should adopt the following principles of fair admissions:

Principle 1: A fair admissions system should be transparent

Universities and colleges should provide, consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make an informed choice. This should include the institution's admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes. It should include a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means.

The latest available information should also be provided about the entry qualifications of applicants accepted on each course, and procedures for complaints and appeals. Institutions should conduct and publish a periodic analysis of admissions data, and provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants.

Principle 2: A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential

Ability to complete the course must be an essential criterion for admission. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, institutions may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including: the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability (such as the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews, or non-academic experiences and relevant skills); and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment.

However, applicants should be assessed as individuals: it is not appropriate to treat one applicant automatically more or less favourably by virtue of his or her background, school or college. At any stage in the admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills. Admissions criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit: for example, institutions should not give preference to the relatives of graduates or benefactors. Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential and therefore to vary the offer that they make to applicants, providing this is done in a way which is consistent with the principles of fair admissions.

Principle 3: A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid

Assessment can legitimately include a broad range of factors. Some of these factors are amenable to 'hard' quantifiable measures, while others rely on qualitative judgements. This should continue: both legal and lay opinion place value on the use of discretion and the assessment of applicants as individuals.

Admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. Where possible, universities and colleges using quantifiable measures should use tests and approaches that have already been shown to predict undergraduate success. Where existing tests are

unsuited to a course's entry requirements, institutions may develop alternatives, but should be able to demonstrate that their methods are relevant, reliable and valid. Where qualitative judgements are used, contextual criteria against which applicants are judged should accord with the Group's guidelines. Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified.

Principle 4: A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants

Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. vocational or academic).

Principle 5: A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

An institution's structures and processes should be designed to facilitate a high-quality, efficient admissions system and a professional service to applicants. Structures and processes should feature clear lines of responsibility across the institution to ensure consistency; allocation of resources appropriate to the task; and clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions. The Steering Group suggests that institutions would find it simpler and cheaper to implement these guidelines if at least part of the admissions process were conducted by centrally located staff.

6. Wider recommendations

6.1 The Group welcomes the commitment by the Quality Assurance Agency to review their code in light of its work. The Group also notes that the admissions process would benefit from a more consistent implementation of the code of practice by institutions.

6.2 There are also some wider recommendations designed to produce a high-quality admissions process and facilitate holistic assessment while minimising any increase in the overall cost to the HE sector. Many of these recommendations will involve a range of partners in addition to universities and colleges. They are set out in the following paragraphs

Making applications

6.3 The Steering Group asks the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to set up a high-level implementation group as soon as possible to achieve post-qualification applications (PQA). The current system, relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair. It does not meet the Steering Group's recommended principles of fair admissions, since it is based on data which are not reliable, it is not transparent for applicants or institutions, and may present barriers to applicants who lack self-confidence.

4. The Steering Group welcomes UCAS's decision to extend its electronic services to all applicants for 2006 entry. This has the potential to produce a more integrated service for applicants and effect major improvements to the admissions process.

6.5 The Group notes that discrepancies between application systems for full-time and part-time study will make it difficult to implement the Schwartz principles for applications for part-time courses. It therefore recommends that UCAS, in partnership with UUK, SCOP, AoC and other relevant bodies, should seek views on the issues involved for part-time applicants and make recommendations to a centre of expertise on admissions proposed by the Steering Group

Assessing applicants

6.6 The Steering Group recommends that UCAS and other admissions services review the design of application forms in partnership with higher education admissions staff, schools and colleges. This review should specifically consider the provision of summarised information to help admissions staff to assess contextual factors, such as educational context.

6.7 As well as providing greater flexibility and choice for learners, the Steering Group understands that the Tomlinson review of the 14-19 curriculum will provide opportunities to stretch the most able, and that it will allow for more fine-grained, contextual judgements about learners' achievements. This will address the issue many admissions officers currently face, when courses are over-subscribed, in selecting from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants. The Steering Group welcomes recognition of the need to move towards this greater differentiation as quickly as possible.

6.8 The Steering Group also welcomes the Quality Assurance Agency's review of Access courses. The recommendations relating to consistency of academic standards and description of student achievement are likely to be helpful to admissions staff. Similarly, the Steering Group welcomes the aim of the QCA-led programme on vocational qualifications to develop a unit-based national system of qualifications and credit.

6.9 Additional assessment should be kept to a minimum and institutions using it should consider its purpose carefully. However, assessing an applicant's potential for HE study, or recognising ability which may not be reflected fully in Level 3 examination results, is a key issue for fair admissions. It relates directly to the Government's commitment to widen participation. A test that is able to predict performance in HE may help to uncover hidden talent. The Steering Group therefore recommends that a national research study is commissioned from an independent body to assess the idea of a national test of potential. The Group notes that US-style SATs are one test worth exploring, alongside other possibilities. If this study concludes that an additional test can help assess potential for HE, and if such a test is to contribute to fair admissions and help widen participation, then equal access is essential. The Group believes that any such test must sit within the new 14-19 framework, and that the structure of the proposed new diploma offers an opportunity for the inclusion of such a test. If the proposed research

concludes that a national test of potential would offer significant benefits, the Steering Group urges the Government to grasp this opportunity as it takes forward the Tomlinson proposals.

6.10 In the meantime, the Group recommends that the proposed centre of expertise on admissions should lead an investigation, in partnership with Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals and member institutions, into the scope for greater co-ordination of common tests.

Collaboration to achieve an applicant-centred approach

11. The Steering Group asks admissions staff and relevant bodies to consider the desirability and feasibility of common interviews.
12. The Steering Group also believes there may be scope for a more applicant-centred approach to the many forms related to admissions (for example, for financial aid, health checks, and Criminal Records Bureau checks).

Equality of opportunity within the legal framework

6.13 Universities and colleges should review their admissions policies and, together with relevant partners, any special admissions arrangements, with the aim of ensuring equality of opportunity within the legal framework.

6.14 The Steering Group believes it is timely for the HE sector as a whole to review special admissions arrangements (for example, compact schemes). Such a review should aim to ensure that there is equality of opportunity across the country for people in similar circumstances to participate in schemes giving preferential treatment or to be considered under special measures.

6.15 Universities and colleges should make reasonable efforts to treat EU and EEA nationals and UK nationals not resident in the UK in ways that are as equivalent as possible to the way in which they treat UK-resident applicants. The principles of fair admissions should also be extended to applicants from outside the EU and EEA as far as is practically possible. The proposed centre of expertise on admissions should investigate the issues relating to applicants from outside the EU and EEA, with the aim of establishing guidelines for English institutions in assessing applications.

Advice and professional development

6.16 The Group recommends the creation of central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues, perhaps situated within the HE Academy. Its purpose would be to act as a resource for institutions who wish to maintain and enhance excellence in admissions. The Group recommends that HEFCE initiates discussions on taking this proposal forward, in liaison with UUK, SCOP and UCAS.

6.17 The Department for Education and Skills should act to ensure that consistent levels of advice and guidance are available to all applicants. The Steering Group welcomes the role to be taken by UCAS in

coordinating the information, advice and guidance services that it provides to schools and colleges.

6.18 The Group notes and supports efforts made by professional bodies in adult guidance to ensure an appropriate qualifications framework and appropriate training for their members. The Steering Group urges them to continue this work and to review it in light of this report.

6.19 Where other professional staff (for example, National Health Service staff or teachers) are involved in the admissions process, for example in interviews, they should receive appropriate training from the university or college, and should also receive support and recognition within their own organisations to enable them to carry out this role properly.

7. Options for assessing merit

7.1 The Steering Group lists methods for assessing merit from which institutions may choose and stresses that these methods should be implemented in accordance with the principles of fair admissions.

8. Reviewing progress towards fair admissions

8.1 Universities and colleges must retain autonomy over their own admissions policies, and the right to make their own judgements in assessing applicants. However, the Steering Group believes that there is a need for some mechanism to review progress in implementing the recommendations on fair admissions. In consultation, 73% agreed that this was necessary, although there were mixed views on what the mechanism should be. The Group asks the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to commission a review of the admissions system after three years, with the aim of assessing progress in implementing the recommendations of this report.

Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group

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