

University of Cambridge's Response to the Consultation on Key Issues Relating to Fair Admissions to Higher Education (Schwartz Report), November 2003

Question 1

Should students be selected:

- a. On their potential to complete a course successfully?
- b. On their potential to excel academically and achieve the highest grades?
- c. On their potential to contribute subsequently to society?

By a combination of these factors - All these factors should be taken into account in any HE admissions system, but the weighting placed on each must inevitably vary according to the nature of the HE Institution and the course in question. No simple 'one size fits all' approach can conceivably be appropriate. Those responsible for admissions in HEIs need to be allowed the flexibility to decide the balance in these factors that is appropriate for the individual institution and its courses. In a fair and transparent admissions system it is, of course, important that HEIs make public, through publication of their selection criteria, the weightings placed on these factors, so that potential students can make appropriately informed choices of institution and course.

In the context of admissions to Cambridge, we would place considerable weight on both the first two factors. We will, of course, be selecting people who in different ways will 'contribute to society', but we feel this is an insufficiently well defined criterion to be widely useful in HE admissions. We would strongly oppose any implication that certain subjects meet this criterion better than others.

Question 2a

Do you think that it is important that universities and colleges have students from a wide range of backgrounds?

Yes - Diversity is a self-evident 'good'. In addition to the opportunity for advanced study in a chosen discipline, one of the most important benefits of a University education is the opportunity to broaden one's life experience through meeting and interacting with students and staff from other backgrounds. But this question is, in our view, too simplistic. Please see our comments on this matter in our answer to Question 9.

Question 2b

If so, should universities and colleges choose students partly in order to achieve such a mix?

No - The principal aim of the admissions policy of the University of Cambridge and its Colleges is: To admit students of the highest intellectual potential irrespective of social, racial, religious and (for UK/EU students only) financial considerations.

Two further aims are:

- To encourage applications from groups that are, at present, under-represented in Cambridge; and
- To ensure that each applicant is individually assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with the policy on Equal Opportunities, and to ensure that, as far as

possible, an applicant's chance of admission to Cambridge does not depend on choice of College.

Thus, while we fully endorse the ideas of equality of opportunity and value diversity in our student body, we believe that applicants for admission must be considered as individuals on their own merits, and would strongly oppose any move to achieve diversity through the imposition of quotas or other mechanisms of affirmative action.

Question 3a

Is it fair for universities and colleges, when they look at an applicant's examination grades, to consider any obstacles that he or she might have had to overcome, such as illness, attending a low-achieving school, or having family problems?

Yes - This is already routine practice at the University of Cambridge. The Cambridge Special Access Scheme (CSAS) is designed to enable the details of such obstacles to be drawn to our attention.

Students are eligible for the CSAS if either of the following apply:

- Very few people from their school/college proceed to higher education and their family has little or no tradition of studying for a degree.
- Their education has been disrupted or disadvantaged through health or personal problems, disability or difficulties with schooling.

CSAS asks schools/colleges to provide additional information and a much fuller reference than usual. This enables the Cambridge Colleges to assess applicants more fairly, especially in deciding on appropriate levels for conditional offers.

Question 3b

Is it fair for a university or college to offer a place to an applicant which requires lower examination results than those required of other applicants, for these reasons?

Yes - This is already practised to a limited extent by Cambridge Colleges. The difficulty we face is that our room for manoeuvre in doing this is severely constrained by the lack of discrimination amongst the top achieving students provided by the current public examination system. With so many of our applicants achieving three, four, even five, A grades at A level, it is very hard to make conditional offers lower than AAA except to applicants who have been faced with the most extreme obstacles.

In conditional offers for Mathematics, where the vast majority of Colleges include the more discriminating Sixth Term Examination Papers (STEP) as part of their offers, more flexibility in setting offer levels is possible and practised.

It is, of course, vital that such decisions are made on an individual basis, following careful guidelines, and that the information upon which a decision to lower an offer is based is reliable, rigorous and well quantified.

Question 4a

Should an applicant's educational context, for example, type and nature of the school or college attended, be considered in admissions?

Yes - Again, this is already practised at Cambridge. Any such contextualisation must, however, be done carefully. Simplistic considerations, such as 'independent vs. maintained',

are not appropriate. If this is to be done fairly, then it is important that the information needed is made available to HEI admissions staff on a consistent basis for ALL UK schools and colleges.

It is also important to recognise that, even if they can fully compensate for educational disadvantage in recognising potential in applicants, universities cannot always reasonably be expected to compensate, through the provision of 'remedial' teaching, for applicants' lack of the basic skills and knowledge required to undertake some HE courses. This is where Access and Foundation courses have a vital role to play.

Question 4b

Is so, should this extend to offering a place to an applicant which requires lower examination results than those required of other applicants, based on consideration of these factors?

Yes - There is some justification for lowering standard offers in such circumstances, but our comments to Question 3b apply with equal validity here.

Question 5a

Is it desirable or necessary to consider additional measures of assessment in admissions (outside of subject-specific measures such as portfolios for creative arts courses or auditions for performing arts courses), as discussed in paragraph C7 of the consultation document?

Yes - Under current circumstances this is essential for two different reasons:

1. In order to try to identify potential in applicants whose education to date may have been disadvantaged in some way.
2. In the absence of more discriminating public examinations, in order to identify the most able from amongst the large numbers of well qualified young people who apply to Cambridge, and other HEIs.

Question 5b

If so, should the following be included as additional methods of assessment?

- i. Interviews - Yes
- ii. Compact arrangements - Yes
- iii. Taking school performance into account - Yes
- iv. Taking personal and contextual factors into account (eg family background) - Yes
- v. Earning credit through additional preparatory programmes - Yes
- vi. Aptitude testing - Yes
- vii. Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) - Yes

All these additional means of assessment are potentially useful to HEIs, although which are most useful will depend on the nature of the HEI and its courses. For instance, it is not clear how useful compact arrangements could be to a university such as Cambridge which has a national recruitment agenda, but we recognise the potential benefit of such arrangements to other HEIs.

In the context only of the Cambridge admissions process we would regard (i), (iii), (iv) and (vi) as potentially useful to all Colleges and (vii) as potentially useful to our Colleges for mature students. Our positive answer to (iv) however needs clarification. As the Cambridge Special Access Scheme demonstrates (see our comments in response to Question 3a), we already recognise the relevance of some personal and contextual factors (such as health or schooling

problems). However, we cannot subscribe fully to the notion of taking 'family background' in general into account without knowing much more about what information might be provided, how its accuracy is verified and how it is envisaged that it might be used. Our experience is that such information is really only useful in considering extreme cases of disadvantage - making fine distinctions as to the amount of disadvantage suffered by applicants is fundamentally impossible.

We would be interested in learning from the experiences of other HEIs that do already use arrangements of the type covered by (v) in order to consider whether such arrangements might be appropriate and beneficial in the context of our admissions procedures.

Question 6

Should the education sector move to a system of post qualification applications (PQA)?

Yes - We see the potential benefits to a fairer and more transparent admissions system of a PQA system as outweighing the disadvantages, but there are clearly major logistical difficulties to be overcome. It is impossible to see how a PQA system could be introduced within the current school and HE academic year timetables.

It must be recognised that UK universities operate on an international timetable with student exchange programmes with universities in Europe and North America and the timings of major international conferences being predicated on the academic year starting in the autumn. A PQA system that required a change in the timing of the academic year for UK universities would not be acceptable.

Question 7a

Do you have any general comments on the list of possible options for institutions to consider in assessing the merit and potential of applicants for courses (paragraph G4 of the consultation document)?

We would support the introduction and use of any options that will enhance the fairness and transparency of our admissions system. Our desiderata are:

1. The provision of, as far as is possible, a consistent level of information about all applicants. We are particularly frustrated at present by the wide variety of practice within UK schools and colleges concerning the certification and disclosure (in personal statements and references) of AS-level unit performance.
2. The provision of reliable and appropriate information that enables us properly to contextualise the achievements to date of all applicants.
3. The provision of means (such as aptitude tests and interviews) that allow potential to be identified and the very ablest to be distinguished from the 'merely' able and well taught.
4. The provision of more discriminating measures of student achievement in public examinations and more generally (class rank may be helpful in this regard, particularly in science subjects).

Question 7 b

More specifically, do you favour the inclusion of the following options within such a list?

- i. using school performance data or school type to contextualise individual performance - Yes
- ii. using GCSE grades more explicitly - Yes

- iii. using class rank - Yes
- iv. additional testing - Yes
- v. using additional objective criteria linked to success on HE courses - Yes
- vi. interviews - Yes
- vii. explicitly considering personal background - Yes
- viii. compacts - Yes
- ix. encouraging centralised admissions

As indicated in earlier answers, we would find all of (i) to (vii) useful. Where the factors help us to contextualise adequately an application and to assess more accurately the nature of the applicant's academic attainments and, as a consequence, potential, we would find this information invaluable. However, it is important that such information is used with care. For instance, although it is valuable to use GCSE grades (recognised for some but not all subjects as good predictors of success at undergraduate level), it is important to allow that there may be very compelling reasons why an applicant with all the requisite potential may have underperformed at the GCSE stage. Therefore we would resist any move towards a point-tallying, or standardized approach.

As indicated in our answer to 5(b), we recognise the potential value of compacts to many HEIs, although we cannot immediately see a useful role for them for institutions, such as Cambridge, with national recruitment agendas.

Our blank response to (ix) needs clarification. We see benefit in improved co-ordination within our collegiate admissions system, in terms of the accumulation and dissemination of information about the gathered field of applicants in each subject and the use of common modes of assessment, such as aptitude tests.

However, we are totally convinced that a collegiate university needs a strong collegiate component to its admissions processes, especially in the decision-making process. The 'healthy competition' between Colleges this system engenders brings considerable commitment (and resources) to the processes of student recruitment and selection. The personal commitment to the support of individual students that naturally arises from selectors wanting to see those they have admitted succeed is, we believe, one of the reasons why Cambridge has the highest student retention rate in the country. We see interviews with subject specialists as being an essential part of our selection procedures for the foreseeable future. It is our firm belief that only (appropriately trained) subject specialists are competent to identify in applicants the high-level skills, aptitudes and abilities needed to flourish on our demanding academic courses and to benefit from the individualised teaching and learning system, with its emphasis on discussion and arguments and face-to-face contact, used so successfully at Cambridge. This vital role cannot be delegated to admissions administrators, however professional and well trained they are.

Admissions selectors at Cambridge are all subject specialists (in their own fields) with considerable experience of teaching and supporting students in those fields. They and the College Admissions Tutors (who are also subject specialists) have between them enormous experience and expertise in admissions, and are supported by experienced, professional admissions staff within the Colleges and the Cambridge Admissions Office.

Question 8

Do you have any comments on the list of measures proposed to make the admissions process more transparent and professional (paragraph F1 on the consultation document)?

The measures listed in para F1 accord exactly with our existing practice, as detailed in our Code of Good Practice in Admissions, which we will be publishing in the near future. These procedures are constantly under review and being improved when means of improvement are identified.

Question 9

Do you have any other comments?

As a University and Colleges committed to equality of educational opportunity, we welcome the consultation on key issues relating to fair admissions to higher education. These issues are not unfamiliar to us; over the last ten years and more, our admissions practice has already addressed the issues raised here. Our assessment process already incorporates many of the factors identified in the consultation document, so as to assess most effectively the potential to benefit from the kind of higher education which Cambridge offers. Such factors include using school performance data, using GCSE grades more explicitly, additional testing, and, where appropriate, taking into account significant personal, social or economic disadvantage (as set out in our answer to Question 3a).

However, not all the suggestions in the consultation document seem fully persuasive, particularly those that seem to be derived from US university admissions practice, such as the centralised, semi-detached model described in (F5 b). The questions relating to the desirability of diversity (D3) also seem to refer closely to US universities' models and strategy. Diversity seems such an evident and existing 'good' in our own university culture that the emphasis seems to imply further strategic thinking modelled on US practice. This requires much more detailed and explicit discussion.

We wish to highlight our concern that in focussing on admissions practice, the consultation document neglects a key issue. Indeed, this is possibly THE key issue, namely, reaching potential applicants in social groups IIIIM, IV and V, and those at schools and FE sector colleges that are under-represented in the current field of applicants. Such schools may also be the schools identified as having relatively low A level and GCSE results. To widen participation, and make admissions processes as fair as possible, in the first place, access and aspiration have to be addressed. This is a task primarily for the secondary sector, although Colleges and the University of Cambridge have a valuable role to play in raising aspiration. Once applications from a wider population are being achieved, Colleges also have a role in working on projects which will bridge the knowledge gap that disadvantages those in low-achieving schools and colleges, so as to enable them to embark on our courses more adequately prepared. This has funding implications, as does much of the work undertaken to widen participation, beyond the existing HEFCE aspiration funds. We would welcome discussion of the economics for us of continuing work to increase fairness in admissions in the broader sense outlined in this paragraph. We would also wish for further discussion of the deterrent effect of higher fees on potential applicants from social sectors IIIIM, IV and V. No amount of good admissions practice on our part will achieve the desired aims if those with potential in these sectors will not apply for fear of debt or other reasons. Our final comments relate to some of the assumptions in the consultation document, notably regarding the role of A level results. Whilst in our view an array of factors should be used to supplement A level predictions, the idea that A levels are as effective predictors of success at degree level as is required is moot. To quote from a recent study undertaken for us by Colin Greenhalgh, the former Head of Hills Road Sixth Form College:

'When A levels were established, they were never intended to be used as decisive arbiters when selecting from very large fields of applicants, many of whom are predicted to achieve several A grades at A level. In view of recent changes in the methodology of A level examinations, the impossibility of comparing with precision the value of particular grades in individual subjects examined by different Awarding Bodies, the annual improvements in overall results and the erosion of confidence resulting from the 2002 examination season, it is clearly insufficient to select on the basis of A level results alone.'

The consultation document emphasizes the significance of the other factors to be included in a fair admissions process, but it could have emphasized further the limits of the A level as a predictor. It also does not adequately acknowledge that alternative academic tests (BMAT, AEA, etc.) may offer useful information about potential in the short term and seem to represent a form of test which is equally open to all [Cambridge is making every effort

possible to ensure that our aptitude tests (BMAT and TSA) are accessible to students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties]. Having said this, there is no guarantee that these tests really are equally open to those at low-achieving schools, or that they cannot be trained for. The opportunity to be assessed by these means does not fully compensate for inequality of educational opportunity at secondary level and does not reliably offer complete 'fairness' in admissions.