

University of Cambridge's Response to the Fair Admissions to Higher Education (Schwartz Report): draft recommendations for consultation, May 2004

Consultation documents associated with this response can be viewed/downloaded from the Admissions to Higher Education Review website

(<http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/consultation.html>)

Question 1

Do you agree that the following should be high-level principles of fair admissions?

(a) A fair admissions system should be transparent (see paras D4-D7 of the consultation paper)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	--------------	----------	----------	-------------------

The Colleges of the University of Cambridge share a common admissions policy based on the principal aim of admitting students of the highest intellectual potential irrespective of social, racial, religious and (for UK and EU students) financial considerations.

Through joint committees and working parties, Cambridge ensures that, as far as is practicable, students are admitted based on common policies and methodologies and that an individual's chance of admission does not depend on their choice of College. To help ensure that the composition of our undergraduate body appropriately reflects educational attainment throughout the UK, access and aspiration are being addressed and the University and Colleges are working together to encourage groups currently under-represented at Cambridge, to apply.

Statistics are commonly quoted as a measure of transparency but are always open to interpretation and publishing them in general terms carries an element of risk, as is seen every year in the headlines when the University of Cambridge publishes applications and admissions statistics in The Reporter.

The principles of equality of opportunity and diversity are fully endorsed; hence we believe that applicants must be considered as individuals, judged on their own merits, without partiality and bias.

We "agree" rather than "strongly agree" because some qualities relevant to selection (e.g. enthusiasm, motivation and levels of technical skills) are difficult to quantify. We can publish information about qualities assessed but not necessarily about acceptable levels.

We would also suggest that quoting the "range" of entry qualifications accepted (D4ii) is likely to be misleading. In the Cambridge context, the vast majority of the students we admit achieve AAA or better at GCE A level (or equivalent). However, because we make due allowance for educational disadvantage or disruption, we do admit students with lower attainment levels than this. It would be unfortunate if unrealistic applications arose as a result of seeing such data without appropriate explanation.

There is also a potential difficulty in indicating "how applicants may demonstrate potential and relevant capability". If this is made too explicit, then it will simply become another factor which fails to differentiate between applicants - all applicants will demonstrate the required potential and relevant capability! This may well result in students better prepared for HE, but may not assist the admissions process at all.

It can be argued that thinking for oneself how one can demonstrate potential and relevant capability is part of the challenge of the application process. However, while this might indeed help to identify those who can think for themselves, it will also inevitably advantage those whose support network is able to do the thinking for them.

(b) A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods which are reliable and valid (see paras D8-D11 of the consultation paper)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
-----------------------	-------	----------	----------	-------------------

While strongly agreeing with this principle, we must note that validation of any assessment method can only be achieved from the perspective of measuring its reliability in predicting subsequent success amongst those actually admitted. This is a valuable but necessarily limited measure, since it is impossible to compare achievement with evidence of the performance of those not admitted to a particular course.

For the most selective universities and competitive courses, admitting students using A levels as the primary indicator can be unreliable and leave the process vulnerable. A levels alone cannot be used as an effective selection tool given the large number of applicants predicted to achieve the top grades.

We believe that additional tests (e.g. the Biomedical Admissions Test [BMAT]) administered by a professional and independent organisation, such as UCLES, offer useful information about the potential of students, and these are, of course, monitored and evaluated to ensure that they add value to the admissions process.

In the long term, though, a reformed A level (or equivalent), assessing creative thought and potential as well as knowledge, and properly differentiating between students at the highest level, probably offers the best solution.

(c) A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential (see paras D12-D17 of the consultation paper)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
-----------------------	-------	----------	----------	-------------------

We agree that "applicants should be assessed as individuals" but the second half of the statement in D12 could be interpreted as contradicting this and seems to conflict directly with D14. Consideration of the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement must inevitably mean treating one applicant more or less favourably in comparison to another by virtue of his or her background or school/college. The key seems to be what the use of the word "automatically" in D12 actually means.

Any such contextualisation must be done carefully. Simplistic considerations, such as 'independent vs. maintained', are not appropriate – perhaps this is what the Steering Group means by "automatically".

If contextualisation is to be done fairly, then it is important that the information needed to do this is made available to HEI admissions staff on a consistent basis for ALL UK schools and colleges. Admissions Tutors now have significantly less information about schools and colleges in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than they had three years ago.

We note that selecting students who are able to complete the course will mean, if taken to its logical conclusion, that factors other than purely academic ability will be considered during assessment. For example, previous history of attempts to enter higher education.

Cambridge has a drop out rate of less than 1%, which demonstrates that our students are being admitted with due regard to their ability to complete their chosen courses.

While recognising that diversity is a self-evident 'good' with clear educational benefits, we are slightly concerned that the emphasis in D14(iii) opens the possibility of expectations among applicants, their families and advisers that they should be admitted merely because doing so will increase diversity in the student body. We believe that a fair admissions policy will naturally result in a diverse academic community.

(d) A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants (see paras D18-D21 of the consultation paper)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
-----------------------	-------	----------	----------	-------------------

Cambridge aims to admit students of the highest intellectual potential irrespective of social, racial, religious and (for UK and EU students) financial considerations. Applicants with a disability are assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with the policy on Equal Opportunities and the Disability Discrimination Act, and schemes, such as the Cambridge Special Access Scheme, enable details of any obstacles applicants have encountered to be drawn to our attention.

While endorsing this principle strongly, we note that within an admissions system that has fixed total resources, full compliance might mean spending more time and resources on assessing applicants from overseas at the expense of UK applicants. Increasing applications from the new EU accession countries may magnify this issue.

In particular respect of D20, we would welcome offering applicants the opportunity to disclose their circumstances or the support available to them more transparently than is required at present, to allow proper individual assessment.

(e) A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect (see paras D22-D25 of the consultation paper)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
-----------------------	-------	----------	----------	-------------------

We fully agree that all those involved in admissions should be appropriately trained and undertake their responsibilities in a professional manner, but we must reiterate our comments in our first submission to this consultation that we see assessment by and 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.

We welcome the recognition [D22(ii)] that a proper admissions process requires substantial resources.

We welcome the indication [D25] that teachers require appropriate training if they are to provide advice to applicants, and we highlight our willingness to respond to reasonable requests for assistance.

We would question the assumption [D23] that UCAS is the most appropriate body to lead discussion on the issue of quality assurance for institutions' training in the area of admissions. Clearly in respect of the interactions with UCAS, which form a central part of the admissions

process, then UCAS is an appropriate leader, but in respect of, for instance, the training of admissions interviewers other bodies, including many universities, have considerably more relevant experience. Indeed, it is regrettable that the Steering Group's report does not give greater recognition of the considerable existing experience and professionalism in admissions within the HE sector.

Question 2

What other high level principles or practical recommendations not mentioned in the consultation paper might help ensure fair admissions for all applicants, whatever their age, background, or route into higher education?

Admissions to the most competitive courses would undoubtedly be fairer if the main public examination system in this country was more rigorous and demanding. The fact that the most challenging conditional offer that can routinely be made on GCE A levels is AAA means that the opportunity to win a place at leading institutions, such as Cambridge, depends on being made a conditional offer, rather than success in meeting a challenging offer being the determining factor. Only for Mathematics, where we are able to ask applicants to take the more demanding STEP examinations, are we able to make offers to all those whom we judge have the potential to flourish on our course. More widespread, and ideally universal, taking of Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) by high-achieving students would potentially provide similar finer-grained differentiation for admissions in other subjects (as well as being of substantial educational value to the students concerned), but this is only a viable option if the delivery of AEAs in schools and colleges is properly resourced.

We very much welcome the proposals in the Tomlinson review, which we believe do have the potential to develop a secondary education system that helps to ensure fair admissions by providing challenge to and differentiation amongst the most able and prepares all learners better for study within higher education.

It is slightly puzzling that the report's recommendations do not seem explicitly to mention the experience of the admissions tutor/selector as one of the qualities that should inform assessment methods.

Interpreting this question in its widest sense, a student support system that provides adequate maintenance support for those from financially disadvantaged backgrounds is key to providing fair admissions in the sense of not constraining an applicant's choice of course or institution through financial considerations.

Question 3

Do you agree that the wider recommendations outlined in Section E would help make admissions fairer?

We have opted not to check any answer to several of these questions. This is because in some cases our answer is both "Yes" and "No", while in others we feel that the question is not well posed or one on which we are not qualified to express a view. Where appropriate, we make comments relating to such questions below.

(a) more consistent implementation of the QAA Code of Practice (see paras E2 and E3)

We agree that the QAA Code of Practice should be implemented consistently, but, as the Steering Group do not make clear in what respects they feel that the QAA Code of Practice is not being consistently implemented, it is difficult to answer this question in the form posed.

(b) a degree of centralisation of the admissions process within institutions (see paras E2 and E4)

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, and, of course, in communication with UCAS, but more extreme versions of centralisation would irrevocably damage our ability to consider carefully each applicant as an individual on his or her own merits through the distributed sharing of this task across our Colleges.

We are 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.

(c) standard use of electronic application forms (see paras E2 and E5)

Yes	No	Not Sure
-----	----	----------

(d) improving information provision through redesign of application forms (see paras E6 and E7)

Yes	No	Not Sure
-----	----	----------

(e) collaborative review of compact and similar schemes (see para E9)

As we are not involved in any compact schemes we are unable to comment on whether they need review. This is for those who are so involved to determine.

(f) the introduction of a broader 14 – 19 qualification that would allow the testing of aptitude, potential and relevant skills as well as academic achievement (see para E10i)

Yes	No	Not Sure
-----	----	----------

The framework proposed by the Tomlinson review does have the potential to provide an educational system that provides better differentiation amongst the most able and better develops and assesses the skills and aptitudes needed for study in higher education. However, the devil is in the detail, which, of course, is yet to be determined. Certainly something better than the current system is needed.

(g) greater co-ordination of admission tests across the sector (see para E10ii)

Yes	No	Not Sure
-----	----	----------

We agree that, if there are tests, they should, if at all possible, be common to those institutions that feel the need to use them. However, we are unconvinced of the value of SATs, which are designed to assess general suitability for HE in the US context, rather than suitability for the study of a specific academic subject in the UK context. We would hope that the reforms to the 14-19 curriculum will, in due course, obviate the need for additional tests.

(h) making more use of existing information rather than developing new admissions tests (see para E10iii)

We would welcome the greater use of existing information (e.g. AS/A2 module scores) to help differentiate amongst the increasing number of straight A students, but do not see such information as an alternative to additional tests. Regrettably the present secondary examination system does not adequately assess some of the aptitudes and skills (such as critical thinking, problem solving, essay writing, extended argumentation etc.) needed for successful study at leading HEIs.

(i) common interviews (see para E10iv)

While common interviews arranged by suitable agencies (e.g. the GMC, RCVS, TTA etc.) might conceivably be desirable in a strictly limited range of subjects with clear issues of vocational suitability, in addition to academic suitability, the logistical issues to be overcome in implementing such a scheme are formidable. Given the enormous variety of course structures, course contents and teaching and learning systems within the UK HE sector (a great strength of the system, of course), it is for the individual HEI concerned to judge the suitability and compare the merits of those applying for its courses. If HEIs wish to collaborate in sharing the task of interviewing applicants, then it is their right to do so, but no external body should impose such arrangements on universities.

(j) a central source of expertise on admissions (see para E13)

Yes	No	Not Sure
-----	----	----------

We would welcome a central source of expertise on European and overseas examination systems, enlarging on the existing UCAS booklet. The sharing of best practice and experience and collective research into predictors of success in HE are, of course, laudable aims, but the great heterogeneity of the UK HE sector and with this the inevitable limitations on the general applicability of any recommendations or findings must be recognised.

Question 4

Do you have any comments on the options for assessing merit and potential? (see paras F5-F8 of the consultation paper)

These options largely reflect our current practice and therefore seem eminently sensible to us!

F4: Although A level grades may be the single best indicator of retention and success at undergraduate level, this information is of no value if the vast majority of applicants to an institution are indistinguishable on this basis.

F5: It is hard to see how achievement at additional and non-compulsory academic support programmes can be used as a basis for fair selection unless the accessibility of such programmes to all learners is guaranteed.

F6: We find written work very helpful in some subjects. We also found the ability to look at individual examination scripts, which we used to be able to do when we used STEP much more widely than now, very helpful as this gave considerable insight into an applicant's abilities not conveyed by the raw mark on the examination. We still value this opportunity in respect of STEP Mathematics, and would welcome such opportunities in other subjects.

F6: Generic/subject aptitude tests and tests of critical reasoning: As evidenced by our increasing use of these (the BMAT, TSA and, soon, the LNAT), we believe these may be useful and are interested in their development. They are currently under evaluation both internally and by the examination boards that set and administer them. As mentioned in

respect of 3(g) above, we are sceptical as to the value of totally generic aptitude tests, such as SATs.

With respect to the necessity of establishing that any method of assessment is reliable and valid, which we would wholeheartedly endorse, we would reiterate our comments made in response to question 1(b) above. There is a substantial body of evidence within the Cambridge Colleges that well conducted, structured interviews do contribute effectively to our holistic assessment procedures.

Question 5

(a) Do you agree that a mechanism should be found to encourage adoption of the high-level principles of fair admissions and review progress on their implementation? (See Section G of the consultation paper)

It is self-evidently in universities' interests to ensure that their admissions procedures are fair and that the students they admit are able to complete their courses successfully. It is also self-evidently in universities' interests to seek to select the best students from amongst their applicants. Thus, there is every incentive for universities' admissions procedures to reflect the high-level principles of fair admissions set out in this report. The need for a "mechanism" to encourage adoption of these principles is not clear.

(b) If so, do you favour voluntary inclusion of admissions information within access agreements for the proposed Office for Fair Access (OFFA) - see para G2(i); or a role for HEFCE - see para G2(ii)?

The proposed statements in G2(i) and (ii) are entirely reasonable, and, if a mechanism for encouraging adoption was judged necessary, then we would be happy to sign up to either of these. However, we fear that more burdensome conditions which we might not be able to accept could be proposed by OFFA, and at this stage would therefore wish to reserve our position.

(c) Are there any other mechanisms which you think should be considered to encourage adoption of the principles of fair admissions?

We do not accept the underlying premise that current admissions procedures are not fair.

Question 6

Do you have any comments on the initial impact assessment? (mentioned in para H1 of the consultation paper and available on the website at www.admissions-review.org.uk)

In general, the initial impact assessment seems reasonable, but its scope is limited to consideration of the direct impact of adoption of the various recommendations made by the Steering Group. Given, as explained in our response to question 5(a), there is every incentive for universities to adopt the "Schwartz principles", there is a strong argument for a light touch approach.

What the initial impact assessment does not consider are the wider implications of these proposals. The issues of university admissions, fair access and variable fees have become inextricably linked (in England), and there is a potential danger that the demands of the proposed Access Regulator will create tensions. A fair admissions system must respect the primacy of the principle that applicants for admission should be considered as individuals on their own merits with academic, and where appropriate vocational, potential and suitability being the paramount selection criteria.

Question 7

Do you have any other comments on any issues covered in the consultation paper?

1. 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. The fair nature of our existing processes is supported by the minimal changes required to achieve full conformity with the principles and proposals of this report.
2. A huge amount of time and energy is already invested in the HE admissions process. Inevitably at the 'selecting' universities and for highly competitive courses there will be those applicants who are qualified to take up a place, who because of the sheer pressure of numbers cannot be offered one. This does not mean that the admissions process itself is unfair. It does mean that applicants must not be led to believe they have a 'right' to a place at any given university.
3. 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.

4. We wish to reiterate the concern we expressed in our first response in this consultation that in focussing on admissions practice, the consultation neglects a key issue. Indeed, this is possibly THE key issue, namely, reaching potential applicants in social groups III, IV and V, and those at schools and FE sector colleges that are under-represented in the current field of applicants. Such schools and colleges may also be those identified as having relatively low A level and GCSE results.

Universities cannot single-handedly compensate for the shortcomings of, and lack of investment in, the secondary education system. 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.