

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

UNIVERSITIES UK REVIEW OF FAIR ADMISSIONS

STAFF AT UK HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Please use this document to help prepare your responses before submitting online at:

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/fair-admissions-review.aspx>

PAGE ONE: ABOUT THIS SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey, conducted by Universities UK.

We are seeking your views about the fairness of undergraduate admissions in UK higher education.

This survey, which is for staff at all UK higher education providers, includes questions about:

- the key issues and challenges relating to transparency and fairness in admissions
- the strengths and weakness of recruitment and admissions practices from the applicant perspective
- whether the Schwartz review (2004) principles remain fit for purpose.

Please do include examples of your own provider's practices as part of your response.

The information gathered in this survey will inform Universities UK's evidence base for its Fair Admissions Review. Please note that all responses will remain confidential and findings will only be presented at an aggregated level. The Universities UK privacy notice can be found on our website.

The deadline for responses is **Friday 29 November 2019**. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions, please contact us on + 44 (0)20 7419 4111 or daniel.wake@universitiesuk.ac.uk.

PAGE TWO: RESPONDENT DETAILS

1. Please enter the name of your higher education provider:

University of Cambridge

2. Please select the location of your higher education provider:

England

Northern Ireland

Scotland

Wales

3. Please enter your job title:

Jon Beard

4. Please enter your email address:

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PAGE THREE: INTRODUCTION

In June 2003, an independent steering group reviewed the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses. The group was also asked to report on the high level principles underlying these options. The steering group, chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, published a report in September 2004 on its findings, which included a set of five principles for the basis of fair admissions:

1. A fair admissions system should be transparent
2. A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
3. A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
4. A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants
5. A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

Further reviews have followed, including developments in Scotland where, in 2016, the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) published a report called 'A blueprint for fairness', which included recommendations for universities relating to areas such as transparent admissions policies, delivering a coordinated approach to access and basing entry requirements on a strong educational rationale, and included challenging targets on access. The higher education sector responded through Universities Scotland's 'Working to widen access' report, which had actions on admissions, articulation and bridging programmes.

However, the focus of this survey relates to principles outlined in the Schwartz report. While the report's terms of reference were focused on English institutions, it included over-arching principles that could be adopted by all UK higher education providers. With this in mind, we recognise the distinction of admissions systems across the UK nations and encourage all providers to respond in the context of their own admissions processes and policies.

PAGE FOUR: INFORMED CHOICES

The Schwartz report recommended that universities and colleges should provide, consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make informed choices. With this in mind:

5. What key information do applicants need in order to make informed choices about higher education during the different stages of the admissions process (pre-application, application, post application, and transition to higher education)?

Notes:

- *Pre-application stage: This covers an individual's consideration of higher education study, including all pre-application activities and interactions with a higher education provider prior to starting a course of study.*

Information regarding (a) the university, (b) its courses and teaching provision (including contact time and study expectations), (c) its admissions requirements (including those for international students, which will include English language and visa requirements), (d) its accommodation provision, (e) its student support provision, (f) its co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (g) the costs and financial support available, and (f) careers destinations.

Opportunities to visit the University (eg institutional and departmental open days).

Opportunities to engage with initiatives targeted at specific groups of applicants (eg summer schools and other outreach activities).

- *Application stage: This covers activities from the point a prospective student decides to complete an application to university up to the point where the application is considered by the institution(s) applied to.*

Detailed information regarding admissions process and specific course requirements, including information about (a) how to apply including application deadlines, (b) specific course requirements, (c) any special preparation for application (eg work experience, reading lists, written work, portfolios), and (d) interviews and tests.

- *Post-application stage: This covers activities surrounding an institution's consideration of an applicant's submitted application, from the point the application is submitted to when an applicant has been confirmed, or guaranteed, a place of study.*

Detailed information regarding the assessment and selection process, including (a) treatment of applications received before and after deadlines, (b) how and when students will be advised of the need to attend

interviews, tests or visit days; (c) institutional use of contextual data; (d) how decisions will be reached and to what timeline; (e) the feedback process; (f) the complaints process (if applicable); (g) how the University responds following the publication of examination results.

- *Transition to higher education: This covers post-confirmation activities, from the point an applicant's place has been confirmed through to (and potentially beyond) the commencement of higher education studies.*

Confirmation of accommodation allocation; advice regarding reading lists and other course preparation; advice about arriving at the university and what to bring; advice regarding registration / matriculation arrangements; information about academic and social orientation and events for incoming students

Advice about bridging programmes, on-line educational support in preparation for the course

6. How does your provider ensure that applicants have access to the right information, at the right times, in order for them to make informed choices?

This information is provided to students through the printed UG prospectus, UCAS, course brochures, relevant sections of the institution's website, through schools visits, events such as student and teacher conferences and open days, and initiatives such as our summer school programmes. The University also engages with parents, teachers and advisers.

Once an offer has been made additional information is provided in the form of Terms of Admission.

7. On balance, how transparent are the ways that higher education providers use applicants' qualifications and experience to assess potential?

- Very transparent
- Fairly transparent
- Not very transparent
- Not at all transparent
- Unsure

Please explain your answer:

It is difficult to speak for the sector, but certainly most universities publish detailed information about the suitability of a wide range of domestic and international qualifications for entry, and the level at which attainment is expected. The caveat to that is that some institutions express entrance

requirements in terms of a range and may indeed depart from those later in the cycle.

How institutions convey their assessment of potential is more variable. Highly selective universities generally publish their policies on their use of contextual data. It is difficult for them to be prescriptive about how they will use this data however, because assessment of potential is about considering all aspects of an applicant's background and attributes and is thus highly individualised rather than mechanistic. It would be risky to simply make a decision (to admit or to reduce the entry requirements) based on a data-generated scoring because institutions are so reliant on proxies for disadvantage and lack important data items (eg free school meals, pupil premium). Less selective institutions offer greater latitude in terms of entrance requirements and so have less need of highly detailed policies on use of contextual data.

PAGE FIVE: ASSESSING APPLICANTS

The Schwartz report recommended that the ability of an applicant to complete a 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; and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment. With this in mind:

8. What types of information do higher education providers need in order to fairly assess an applicant's potential to succeed on a course?

We currently have information about the academic profile of applicants, but arguably it is deficient in terms of contextualising the application in several ways:

- i. There is no systematic way of determining how well a student has performed within their school context; arguably UCAS might play a role in showing institutions what percentile or decile a student's GCSE profile or A-level (or equivalent) grade predictions put them in relation to previous years performance at that school, and at Confirmation providing information about where the student was ranked within their school or region either overall or by subject.
- ii. Although we receive some indicators of a student's educational and socio-economic context at the point of application (eg school type, POLAR quintile), many are missing. It should be straightforward, for example, for UCAS to provide indicators for IMD, IDACI and TUNDRA; we currently only receive ethnicity data after point of admission but consideration might be given to whether this should be provided at point of application given OfS priorities; and working with the DfE it should be possible to provide

institutions with individualised data regarding free school meals and pupil premium eligibility. These would considerably improve the quality of contextualised decisions. UCAS services like MEM are of limited value because they combine data in a way that obscures specific items which may be more relevant to some institutions than others.

9. To what extent does the use of personal statements to assess applicants support fairness in admissions?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- Very little
- Not at all
- Unsure

Please explain your answer:

Personal statements are highly variable overall in terms of their content, and for that reason alone it is difficult to use these consistently in assessing applications. Some students who have performed relatively well despite difficult personal or educational circumstances may simply not wish to discuss this in their application, may not understand what their socio-economic context is (either at all or relative to others), and in either case may not understand the need to convey this information; so they have limited use in contextualising an application. Regardless, they should not be used as indicators of academic ability given that the more advantaged the student is the more likely it is that they will have had support in producing and refining their personal statement.

However we do find that sometimes personal statements provide some useful context, which taken along with supporting data assists with assessment, and personal statements can be a good way of assessing motivation, and likelihood of integrating well within the student body of a university. The latter is important in terms of preserving work/life balance and for mental health; but it should not count in any way towards the academic decision whether or not to admit.

PAGE SIX: SUPPORTING APPLICANTS

The Schwartz report recommended that 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). With this in mind:

10. What are the key admissions challenges for the following applicant groups, and how do / can higher education providers best support them?

- a) Part-time applicants
- b) Mature applicants

Many mature learners take Access to HE Diplomas; whilst these are Level 3 qualifications, they do not necessarily have the content required to successfully engage with some courses at some institutions, particularly in Sciences. This is a problem, because mature learners can no longer receive funding to take A-levels as an alternative or supplement.

Mature applicants necessarily require more or different information than those of standard age because they often have commitments and circumstances (less or no application support from a school or college, inability to attend weekday or daytime open events, caring responsibilities, financial need, re-engaging as a learner) that potentially make their application and transition more challenging.

- c) Disabled applicants

Institutions need (a) to provide applicants with the information described in section 5 of this document in a way that is accessible to them; (b) be clear that a disability will not have a bearing on the academic decision whether to admit; (c) provide an overview of the support available during the application process (eg attending interview) and (d) to have detailed information about the way in which their support needs will be assessed and then supported should admission be offered.

- d) Estranged students

Estranged students will likely lack support from home for the process which they propose to engage with (though note that this also applies to some students who are not estranged from their families), and may have considerably different support needs to other groups of students. They may, for example, have greater need in terms of finance, year round accommodation, and pastoral support. This information needs to be provided clearly alongside that provided at section 5 in this document.

- e) Applicants applying through non-traditional routes

This category covers a wide range of students which includes students who come from low income and/or particular socio-economic backgrounds, certain school types, have been in care, belong to certain ethnic groups, are from military families, are refugees etc. Their needs can be quite specific, and again should be addressed in the information described at section 5 in this document and, where appropriate, recognised in the admissions process.

PAGE SEVEN: OFFER-MAKING

The Schwartz report recommended that admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. The report adds that criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit. With this in mind:

11. Please outline the key strengths or weaknesses of using the following offer types, and where there might be room for improvement to promote greater fairness and transparency for applicants:

a) Contextual offers

It depends on what is meant by a “contextual offer”. It is vitally important to recognise that students from different backgrounds have very different journeys, and that this may have a bearing on their attainment, potential, and indeed how they articulate their strengths. This needs to be considered when making admission decisions. Whilst it might be quite legitimate to use context to vary offers from the standard entrance requirement at many universities, it should be recognised that for highly competitive courses it may be the case that context simply determines who is made an offer (possibly with the requirement to attend a bridging or foundation programme attached), rather than resulting in a lower one. In other words, a contextual offer might give priority to a particular student for an offer, but that offer may not always be at a reduced level.

b) Unconditional offers

These are entirely appropriate where a student has already met the conditions of entry when applying. We would note that Government has made several attempts at creating a market within higher education (for example through allowing institutions to set their own tuition fee rates, within parameters), and should not be surprised that without numbers controls and a falling unit of resource that some institutions will deploy a range of tactics to compete more effectively with their peers in order to increase their intake. That said, we do not believe that the recent proliferation of unconditional and ‘conditional unconditional’ offers being made to students who have not attained at the level normally required for entry is healthy for the student, as it compromises freedom of choice, disincentivises effort on study in Year 13, and can in turn impact on transition to university as recent data from the OfS suggests is the case. The University of Cambridge only makes unconditional offers to applicants who have already achieved the entry requirements for the course applied for.

c) Conditional unconditional offers

See above. Such offers are clearly designed to put pressure on students to make a decision in a certain way, and could result in them firmly accepting an offer at an institution and/or on a course which is not necessarily the best fit for them.

12. In which ways can higher education providers' use of incentives support fairness and transparency for applicants? Are there any ways in which incentives would not support fairness and transparency?

It depends on what is meant by incentive. By definition an incentive motivates an individual to take a course of action, which arguably could militate against fairness – conditional unconditional offers are a case in point.

PAGE EIGHT: PROCESSES

The Schwartz report recommended that 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. The report also outlined that a fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid. With this in mind:

13. How might higher education providers best monitor and evaluate the impact of their admissions processes on applicants?

Institutions (either collectively or individually) should monitor the attainment, completion and graduate outcomes for specific groups of applicant, particularly where admissions policy has been adjusted with a view to improving access for specific groups. This is currently a key feature of OfS Access and Participation Plans.

14. To what extent do the processes of Clearing and Adjustment support fairness in admissions?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- Very little
- Not at all
- Unsure

Please explain your answer.

It depends on how the process is delivered, and the market at the time. Over the last few years Clearing has become much more of a buyers' market, with students with lower grades or who are later to apply being able to secure places with reduced entrance requirements on a much wider range of courses at many more universities than was the case 5-10 years previously. It is questionable how 'fair' that is, as certainly students who feel that they have had to perform at a high level to secure an offer early in the season may feel that this was wasted effort if another student secures entry having attained at a lower level. Both Clearing and Adjustment do however present an opportunity for students to correct their trajectory based on their actual results and avoid losing a place or optimising their potential, and institutions could gear either process using contextual data to manage their intake and improve access.

PAGE NINE: SYSTEMS

Some parts of the admissions system operate differently in different UK nations.

What would be the relative advantages and disadvantages for applicants, providers and schools of the following features of an admissions system?

15. System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider can make offers to applicants before they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, applicants may apply, receive offers and have their places accepted before receiving their qualifications.

Advantages:

- The current process allows students to spend time researching options and to build a relationship with a chosen institution(s)
- Students have access to information, advice and guidance via their school or college
- It also gives students a clear objective to work towards in terms of attainment in school/college
- Because universities use predictions, this forces more selective universities to consider the likelihood of reaching those grades within their context – ie it encourages assessment of potential.
- Builds in time for interviewing, tests, compilation of portfolios etc
- The current process avoids a scramble to secure students / places, which could be to the detriment of both universities and students.

Disadvantages:

- It is true that many grade predictions are not accurate, and this can affect the choices that applicants then make. Although compensation can be made for that at Clearing and Adjustment, it forces decisions to be taken at speed and scope to do so will diminish as the number of 18 year olds applying to HE recovers
- Unconditional and conditional unconditional offers can be made without entry qualifications being completed – see above.

16. System B: Post-qualifications confirmation (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider confirms all applicant places after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply and receive offers before achieving their qualifications, but their place will not be confirmed until they have achieved their qualifications.

The primary advantage of post-qualification confirmation is that it allows institutions to ensure that students have qualifications at an appropriate standard to enable them to thrive on their chosen course (i.e. they can reject

those who don't make the grades, in August). The primary disadvantages are (for HEIs) numbers management – there can be considerable volatility in examination results – and (for students) the fact that they may have to navigate Clearing and/or make other difficult choices in the middle of the summer holidays, when school support and advice may not be at its most robust.

17. **System C: Post-qualifications offer-making**, whereby the higher education provider only makes offers to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply before achieving their qualifications, but will not receive an offer until they have achieved their qualifications.

This is effectively already available: Clearing and Adjustment

Advantages

- Offer made based on real results, so students can be more focussed on where they can and can't apply, avoiding over or under ambitious (ie wasted) applications.
- Rightly or wrongly, there is undoubtedly a public / political perception that a post qualification system must be fairer.
- A reduction in 'churn' within the system

Disadvantages

- Whilst this removes the need for correction during Clearing and Adjustment, decisions may need to be taken at short notice, which could increase the risk of poor decision-making and lead to less consideration of context and potential. This risk could possibly be reduced with modest changes to the examination results publication dates.

18. **System D: Post-qualification applications**, whereby applicants apply after they have achieved their course entry requirements. Under this system, applicants cannot apply until they have met the conditions of the course.

- As above, but with interviewing and testing arrangements put under pressure. Both C and D may necessitate a change to either the school year, university year, and /or the timing and speed of production of examination results, which would be major shifts for the sectors with significant financial impact. All applicants would need considerable support from their advisers in a narrow window; we do not believe this would be in an applicant's best interests.

19. Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline).

We would note that prior to A-level reform students received UMS results at the end of Year 12 which were a good predictor of final outcomes which, to a certain extent, negated reliance on teacher predictions.

It is worth further noting that comparison with other HE systems is not necessarily helpful. In many countries institutions are less concerned with prior attainment (for example in the US, where there is an emphasis on 'building a class', which draws in non-academic attributes), and students tend to study at their local institution (for example in several other countries in Europe), both of which result in a different kind of competition

We do believe however that models of PQA are worth exploring, and we would be interested to engage with that.

20. On balance, which of the above features might best operate in the interests of fairness and transparency for applicants while guaranteeing an efficient and effective admissions process? (Tick all that apply).

- System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making
- System B: Post-qualifications confirmation
- System C: Post-qualifications offer-making
- System D: Post-qualifications applications
- Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline)
- Unsure

Please explain your answer.

PAGE TEN: PRINCIPLES

Based on your responses and experiences, please suggest whether each Schwartz report principle is still valid or needs to be amended:

21. Principle one: A fair admissions system should be transparent.

- Still valid
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

Please explain your answer.

22. Principle two: 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.

Still valid

Needs to be amended

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

The question is how potential is demonstrated

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

Still valid

Needs to be amended

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

24. Principle four: A fair admissions should seek to minimise barriers for applicants.

Still valid

Needs to be amended

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Selective universities by definition have to reduce the size of the field of applicants, often making very fine decisions and by introducing steps such as interview or tests. The statement might be adjusted to say “unnecessary barriers” or “barriers to access”

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

Still valid

Needs to be amended

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

26. Are there any other principles that should be considered?

END OF QUESTIONS
