

Is the UK HE admissions system fit for purpose?

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Structure

- My background and personal experience of admissions
- The wider context
- Faults in the system: UCAS and the universities
- Post-Qualification Application (PQA)
- Other routes forward
- Conclusion

My background

- Senior Tutor of Churchill College, Cambridge
- Political historian
- First-generation university entrant and Cambridge undergraduate
- Interest in systems, structures and widening participation
- Admissions Tutor in the collegiate University since 2000
- Academic involved in undergraduate admission since 1997
- Personal experience of Cambridge admissions across three decades
- Direct involvement in student recruitment and selection for nearly 20 years
- Pioneer of 'data-driven' Cambridge admissions

My experience 1

- The UCAS process through which I applied was at one level simple but also very mysterious
 - What were they looking for?
 - Universities could play fast and loose with entry requirements
- The system that selected me for Cambridge in 1986 was heavily focused upon results in public examinations
- A Level and STEP – a more challenging and explorative exam, based upon the A Level syllabus – were combined to produce conditions for entry that really bit
 - Nearly two conditional offers were made for each available place, typically at grades AAB at A Level and 1, 2 at STEP
- The Cambridge system was challenging but transparent
- However STEP proved a deterrent to applications and was duly abandoned – except for entry to Mathematics

My experience 2

- The abandonment of STEP, combined with improved A-Level results, left admissions selectors groping in the dark
- Application forms included little data and were hard to judge
- Entry was essentially based upon interview
- Most selectors did not worry: to the interviewer, interviews seemed a powerful and reassuring selection-tool
- But in fact many admissions mistakes were made
 - Complaints were legion – and often understandable
 - Immensely able and hard-working students were rejected; others were admitted who struggled to cope academically
 - Participation from among disadvantaged groups was very low
- Too little hard information; too much inadvertent social and cultural judgement

My experience 3

- Rescue came from an unexpected quarter
- Curriculum 2000 was greeted by many academics with unalloyed horror
 - Directive, reductionist learning that seemingly ran counter to the essence of university education
- But from around 2003 we began to notice striking correlations between AS-Level uniform marks (UMS) and degree outcomes in Cambridge
- In 2005 Cambridge established a research-based approach to present and future selection
 - Steered by a committee of admissions tutors and officers
 - Underpinned by dedicated research staff and a website
- We concluded that admissions should and could be demonstrably fair and valid

My experience 4

- From 2007 UMS constituted an important safety-net for Cambridge applicants who had underperformed at interview
- By 2011 research had shown that UMS was the best indicator of potential in the Cambridge admissions process
- From 2012 UMS was fully embedded in the intercollegiate admissions system, and the key selection criterion
- During this time, outcomes improved significantly
 - More state-sector students: ~62% now; ~50% in the mid-1990s
 - Greater diversity
 - Better degree outcomes in Cambridge
 - Many fewer admissions complaints
- UMS = a uniquely informative and granular 'number' for admissions purposes; but one now about to disappear

The wider context

- Key factor is the dramatic rise in UK HE entry over time
 - 1970 ~5% of the UK population entered HE
 - 1990 ~10%
 - 2000 ~20%
 - 2010 ~40%
- But resources for admissions and advice were squeezed
 - Mass interviewing disappeared
 - Testing for entry to the most competitive subjects emerged
- A Level was twice reformed (2000 and 2015)
- Concerns about fair admissions and social mobility came to the fore
- But the UK-wide HE application system (UCAS) was unchanged

Core elements in the UCAS process

- Track-record (GCSEs)
 - The only element involving hard data
- A-Level (or equivalent) predictions
 - Wrong ~50% of the time
- Personal statement
 - Free-form, opaque to applicants, socially and culturally biased, and susceptible to assistance in preparation
- School or college reference
 - Also free-form, and varies significantly in usefulness according to the experience of the referee
- Significantly restricted choices for students
- An historical artefact

Complicity of individual universities

- Focus upon maintaining competitive advantage in the system, rather than reforming it in the interests of students
 - Cambridge kept its findings on the utility of UMS largely to itself
- 'Gaming' of the system for institutional purposes
 - Official offer-levels can bear scant relation to actual standards for entry, as grade requirements are used as a marketing tool rather than being provided as a genuine guide for applicants
- Opaque selection criteria, e.g. 'wider contribution'
- Invalid or poorly evidenced selection methods, especially in respect of admissions testing and interviews
- An heterogeneous system, off-putting to the disadvantaged
- Consequent upon well-meaning complacency and a lack of external scrutiny

Dissatisfaction with the system/PQA

- Anecdotally witnessed by a myriad of complaints, although the worst effects have latterly been mitigated by university expansion; bottle-necks have been accidentally eased
- Also witnessed by the move to provide better data for students via KIS/Unistats and independent providers
- Above all, the repeated revisiting of PQA evidences that many stakeholders consider the present system flawed
- However PQA is a false prospectus, militated against by the following
 - The difficulty of shortening A Level or its marking
 - July/August is too late for international admission
 - The rhythm of the international academic research year
 - The need further to restrict student choice to make PQA work

Routes forward 1: A Level to the fore

- PQA is not the only rational way ahead; nor is the alternative radical
- Cambridge's experience with data-driven admissions and UMS indicates the direction
- Although results at the end of Year 12, in advance of decision-making on conditional offers, will surely disappear, research on A Level has repeatedly shown that A-Level grades are a strong and reliable indicator of university potential; as strong as UMS
- In a reformed system, A Level could again provide a valid and granular basis for university entry, a 'number' that would minimise complexity and maximise transparency
- In this way A Level could revisit its genesis and reaffirm its status as a pre-eminent university entrance-exam
- But this can only be done systemically, thinking about the system as a whole; other aspects of university entry also need to change

More about A Level

- Two major studies, HEFCE 2003 and HEFCE 2014, evidence A Level's great utility as an indicator of potential
- The new grade of A* has also been shown to correlate strongly with university outcomes by Chetwynd (2011) and Vidal Rodeiro and Zanini (2015)
- Indeed research in Cambridge has shown that A*s achieved correlate with university outcomes in every year of study in almost every subject; moreover final-year correlations can be even stronger than those achieved in earlier years
- This makes sense when one considers that A Level imparts key technical knowledge as well as skills, and that its results reward effort over time, appropriate focus and calmness under pressure, as well as intelligence, logic and imagination
- Using A Level also involves erecting no additional barriers to entry
- However, to have maximum utility, A Level arguably needs to change in two key ways

Changing A Level 1

- First, faith in the soundness of A-Level marking needs to be increased
- Recent criticism of marking has at times verged on the hysterical
- In most subjects marking remains very reliable; we also need to be realistic about how reliable any marking system can be, if it is to reward creativity and adventure rather than just box-ticking
- Nonetheless 99% of grades being correct first time is arguably achievable, and we are not there yet
- The problem is the difficulty of recruiting and retaining examiners
- Although it has been argued that paying examiners more will not improve the standard of examining, in the end it does all come down to money
 - Incentivising teachers to examine in much greater numbers as part of career-progression and seniority requires resource
- Neither schools and colleges nor exam boards can afford to pay for this under the current financial settlement

Changing A Level 2

- Secondly, A Level grades need to be more granular
- A* is probably challenging enough: grades A*A*A* are attained by only the top 3% of candidates
- But grades A*A*A identify the top 7% of students and grades A*AA the top 12%; what if a university is seeking to admit the top 5% or 10% of the ability range?
- For the most competitive-for-entry courses, a mix of grades A*, A and B are required, within a context in which 54% of results are at those grades
- So admissions tutors and officers need more grades to play with, in order to be able to sort more finely among applicants by making, where appropriate, more conditional offers for each available place
- Cambridge's early use of A* increased state-sector admissions

Routes forward 2: UCAS scaffolding and choice

- Any system for assessing students straddles a line between allowing individuals the freedom to be creative and enabling the less advantaged to perform to their potential by providing them with clear and detailed guidance
- UCAS personal statements and references have remained free-form and qualitative, while examination guidance and practice has rightly moved to provide more scaffolding, where appropriate
- UCAS should now do the same: applicants and teachers should be steered by the UCAS form to provide some more specific information and (in the case of references) quantitative data, in the interests of transparency and widening participation
- Reference forms for graduate study routinely ask university tutors to do this, and most of us find this helpful, both as reference-readers and reference-writers
- The restriction to 5 UCAS university choices, and one 'firm' and one 'insurance' offer should be reviewed; more choice should be possible

Routes forward 3: enforcing transparency

- Universities should be required publicly to evidence, on their websites, the basis upon which admissions decisions are made
- Where the interrelationship between decision-making and university outcomes can be quantified, that data should be published
- Applicants should not be required to pay good money to sit admissions tests unless those tests can be shown to be valid
- Since, in most cases, multiple-regression analysis would show admissions tests to be less powerful selection tools than A-Level results, universities would need to evidence strong arguments for their utilisation
- Grade requirements should be pinned to actual entry standards so that applicants might better gauge which universities to aim for
- KIS data and its presentation should be reviewed; enabling better-informed choices to be made by students has to be right, but the information now available requires guidance if it is to be understood

Conclusion

- New approaches to HE entry in the UK should, in the interests of good university outcomes for students, fair admissions and widening participation, major on A-Level results – the best foundation for valid decision-making
- PQA is logical but will remain impracticable; however many of its benefits might be obtained under the current timetable, if
 - A Level is made more granular
 - Universities make larger numbers of conditional offers
 - Universities are persuaded or required to be transparent about entry standards
- But transparency and widening participation would be further boosted by revisions to the UCAS system, as well as by the requirement that universities publicly and clearly explain the basis and validity of their decision-making