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Competing conceptions of fair admission and their implications for supporting students to fulfil their potential at university

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how fairness was conceptualised by those responsible for admission to highly selective undergraduate courses at 17 universities in England. Fairness was conceptualised principally with reference to the traditional *meritocratic equality of opportunity* paradigm, which holds that university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of social background. There was sympathy for an alternative *meritocratic equity of opportunity* model of fairness, involving the assessment of prospective students' qualifications in light of their socio-economic circumstances. However, our interviewees reported institutional resistance to reducing academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged students for fear of setting them up to fail, and acknowledged that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate for the task of supporting disadvantaged students entering with lower grades to fulfil their potential at university.

KEYWORDS

Fairness; admissions; meritocracy; equity

Introduction

Despite dramatic increases in the HE participation rate during the 1960s, 1990s (Boliver 2011) and since 2000 (Bolton 2020), the socio-economic gap in rates of HE participation has been slow to close, especially at England's most academically selective universities (Boliver 2015; Harrison 2017). In 2020, comparatively disadvantaged young people who received free school meals during secondary school were just one-third as likely as non-FSM pupils to enrol in higher-tariff universities,[1] while the corresponding figure for those from areas with the lowest compared to the highest rates of participation in higher education nationally was around one-fifth (UCAS 2021).

In response, the higher education regulator for England, the Office for Students (OfS), has set challenging new widening access targets for England's most academically selective universities (OfS 2019a). OfS has tasked these universities with rapidly reducing the ratio of young entrants from areas with the highest and lowest rates of HE participation to 3:1 by 2024/25 and to 1:1 by 2038/39. In order to achieve this goal, the OfS has explicitly called on higher-tariff universities to engage in a process of 'rethinking how merit is judged in admissions' (OfS 2019b, 8) and has advocated the more ambitious use of contextualised admissions practices involving significant reductions in academic entry requirement for disadvantaged applicants. This will require universities to move away from the traditional 'meritocratic *equality* of opportunity' model of fair admission, which deems that university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of social background in accordance with the principles of procedural fairness (Parsons 1970; Bell 1973). In its place, universities are being encouraged to adopt an alternative 'meritocratic *equity* of opportunity' model, which holds that prospective students' qualifications should be judged in light of the socio-economic circumstances in which they were obtained and that disadvantaged students should be supported to achieve their potential once at university (Clayton 2012; Boliver et al. 2021).

Previous research has found the meritocratic equality of opportunity model and associated notions of procedural fairness to be the dominant paradigm among access and admissions staff at universities in England and the wider UK. Interviews conducted in the early 2000s with ten admissions selectors for humanities programmes at Oxford University found that selectors expressed a commitment to the ostensibly '"amoral elite" criteria of academic excellence' (Nahai 2013, 686). Consequently, applicants from disadvantaged social backgrounds had to 'make the grade' before they could be given additional consideration for admission. Similarly, interview research conducted in the mid-2000s at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Mountford-Zimdars 2016) found that

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a narrow definition of 'merit' prevailed, with selectors aiming to admit 'the best' applicants as indicated by formal academic achievements and a strong performance at interview. While admission selectors received contextual data about applicants' socio-economic circumstances, prior academic achievements and performance at interview were regarded as objective indicators of individual 'merit' and the bar was set very high for applicants from all backgrounds.

Following the publication of the Schwartz Report on fair admissions (Schwartz 2004), a study of senior managers found that institutions had improved the transparency and consistency of their admissions practices in order to improve procedural fairness, for example publishing their entry requirements on the UCAS website and codifying or centralising admissions decision-making (Adnett et al. 2011).[2] Some selective institutions were using contextual data in order to achieve a greater degree of distributive fairness in admission, but only for applicants expected to meet or exceed standard entry requirements. Virtually, all institutions surveyed agreed that it was important to admit students from a wide range of social backgrounds; however, almost half considered it unfair to make a lower offer to some applicants in order to achieve a more socio-economically diverse student body.

A study involving interviews with admissions tutors at 24 UK medical schools in the early 2010s revealed that selectors endorsed the goal of widening participation on the grounds that the medical workforce should be representative of the community it serves (Cleland et al. 2014). But whilst selectors understood that restricting admission to medical school to those with very high levels of prior achievement made this goal unachievable, they felt that universities could not be expected to compensate for the perceived deficiencies of the state school system. Moreover, lowering entry requirements for disadvantaged students would be a risk to quality and reputation, increasing the risk of academic failure for such students and exposing the university to claims of unfair 'social engineering'.

An interview study with those leading on widening participation strategy at Northampton University and the Open University conducted in 2011 identified an active commitment to widening participation on the part of senior staff. However, widening participation leads also recognised that widening participation discourses tended to advance a deficit model of disadvantaged students, characterising them as lacking in aspiration and as intrinsically low-achieving, rather than requiring student-centred initiatives to better support their learning (Butcher, Corfield, and Rose-Adams 2012). Similarly, in-depth interview research with widening participation professionals at 7 UK universities in 2010 found that those who were themselves from widening participation backgrounds and those whose teams were located in recruitment and marketing rather than part of the central administration felt marginalised within their institution and unable to make the case for more inclusive practices (Burke 2013; Rainford 2021). Some reported that widening access successes were met with internal critiques about the declining 'quality' of students, reflecting a misrecognition of a structural disadvantage as an individual deficit.

A study of academic and administrative admissions selectors involved in offer making at a higher-tariff university in England in the mid-2010s found that although some selectors were personally inclined towards admissions practices that promoted a diverse student body, these personal values tended to conflict with an institutional focus on a meritocratic competition for places (Jones, Hall, and Bragg 2019). While some selectors emphasised the need to contextualise attainment and extra-curricular activity information so as to avoid unfairly advantaging applicants from more privileged backgrounds, others regarded such contextualisation as unfairly penalising applicants for simply having had 'a middle class or an upper class upbringing' (Jones, Hall, and Bragg 2019, 938).

More recently, contextualised approaches to admission involving small reductions in academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants have become more commonplace. In turn, studies show that universities have increasingly voiced concerns about 'diminishing standards'. A comparison of the data from two studies of admissions staff in two selective universities, one in England and one in Ireland, conducted in 2016/17 and 2013 respectively, found that there was ambivalence about reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged learners (O'Sullivan et al. 2019). Staff preferred to increase the number of offers made to disadvantaged applicants without modifying the entry standard so as to avoid what they perceived to be the unfair displacement of better-qualified applicants. In addition, the large reductions in entry requirements typical of foundation year programmes were seen as posing a risk to the university's reputation as a place for high achievers.

Similarly, interviews at nine English universities in 2018 revealed the widespread usage of contextual data about applicants' socio-economic circumstances to identify the potential to succeed at university, over and above considerations of already-demonstrated merit. However, there was also widespread concern about the possibility of unwittingly admitting students insufficiently prepared for successful study at the institution, and about the risk of declining university league table position due to reduced entry standards (Mountford-Zimdars and Moore 2020). These findings were echoed in a study involving 75 in-depth interviews with admissions personnel at 18 universities in Scotland in 2017/18 (Boliver et al. 2018). The study found that admissions selectors for universities identified as globally competitive or nationally

selective saw their mission as being to admit only the 'best' applicants, as indicated by high grades achieved in formal qualifications, who could be expected to succeed with little need for support.

As this body of prior research shows, university admissions personnel have increasingly engaged with various policy recommendations in relation to widening access, for example by implementing the Schwartz principles on transparency and consistency, and tentatively introducing modest contextualised admissions practices. However, the meritocratic equality of opportunity model of admissions with its emphasis on procedural rather than distributive fairness has remained the dominant paradigm.

Methodology

Against this backdrop, this paper reports on the findings of 70 in-depth interviews conducted in 2017/18 with Heads of Admission and Admissions Selectors at 17 universities in England offering courses with high academic entry requirements and a high level of demand for places. We adopt a qualitative approach to obtain a deep understanding of how fair admissions are conceptualised and practised. Most qualitative studies in this field to date have focused on a single course (Burke and McManus 2011) or a small sub-set of institutions (Adnett et al. 2011; Mountford-Zimdars 2016; Mountford-Zimdars and Moore 2020). This study draws on data from a large and nationally representative sample of higher education institutions in England offering courses with high academic entry requirements and high demand for places, making the study findings both richly detailed and more generalisable than previous studies.

Our primary research involved qualitative interviews with Heads of Admission and with Admissions Selectors involved in the undergraduate admissions decision-making process at 17 universities located all over England. Using *Complete University Guide 2018* data on the average UCAS points of entrants, we selected a sample of 21 English universities with comparatively high academic entry requirements and high demand for places. Four universities declined to participate in the study, resulting in an achieved sample of 17 institutions, both Old (pre-1992) and New (post-1992), throughout England (Table 1).

Table 1. Universities sampled for interview.

	All HEIs in England		HEIs included in sample	
Region	Old HEIs	New HEIs	Old HEIs	New HEIs
North East & North West	5	12	2	1
Yorkshire & Humberside	5	5	1	1
Midlands	7	11	1	1
East	3	6	1	0
South West	3	9	1	1
South East	8	9	2	1
London	11	11	3	1
Totals	42	63	11	6

At each participating institution, an initial scoping interview was carried out, usually with the Head of Admissions. Further interviews were then carried out with Admissions Selectors for programmes identified in the scoping interviews as having high academic entry requirements and high demand for places. A total of 70 interviews were conducted, as summarised in Table 2.

Most of the interviews took place during the 2017/18 academic year and almost all were carried out by the same interviewer. The interviews were intended to be dialogic in nature, with the interviewer seeking to engage university admissions personnel in reflective and constructively critical discussions about what constitutes fairness in the abstract, and how conceptualisations of fairness are put into practice at their institution. The resulting interview data were subject to a systematic thematic analysis using NVivo. The themes were developed inductively via a constant comparison of cases, and the analysis sought to establish the prevalence of each theme as well as any patterns of association between themes across cases.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Sociology at Durham University. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all those who agreed to be interviewed. Interview participants were also asked to consent to the use of selected extracts from anonymised interview transcripts in this report and other materials intended for the public domain, and to the subsequent deposit of anonymised interview transcripts in the Qualidata archive for other researchers to use. The anonymised transcripts will be made available to other researchers via https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/.

Findings

The admissions personnel we interviewed framed fair admission largely with reference to the traditional meritocratic *equality* of opportunity paradigm. These HEIs sought to admit the 'best students', widely understood to mean those most likely to succeed if admitted to the university:

> I think the ultimate goal is to ensure that [this university] has got a high calibre of students. (H6[3], Old HEI)

Table 2. Admissions personnel sampled for interviews.

	Old HEIs	New HEIs	All HEIs
Heads of Admission	12	7	19
Selectors for science programmes	12	6	18
Selectors for arts/humanities/socsci programmes	28	5	33
Totals	52	18	70

> I think ethically we've got to recruit individuals who can succeed. (H10, Old HEI)

The likelihood of succeeding at the degree level was regarded as being evidenced first and foremost by high levels of previous and predicted academic attainment in school examinations:

> I suppose it's our main … it's based, I suppose, on looking at the grades the students have come in on with A levels, and then how they achieve once they're here. So if you look at retention, if you look at achievement, then it all … it's the evidence to tell us that this is the level that we need to be at. (H15, Old HEI)

> We are looking for people that we think will succeed on our course, progress. And the single best predictor of that is A Level grades. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

A-levels were highly favoured by Old (but not New) universities, which saw more vocationally-oriented further education qualifications as poor preparation for university study:

> We don't accept BTECs, which probably reduces our numbers much more. […] Historically, students haven't done that well, especially on the quantitative courses that we offer. So they really struggle to get through the first year, then second year. […] We've had a lot of failure. (S37, Arts, Old HEI)

Despite not being a formal element of published academic entry requirements, GCSE attainment was also frequently taken into consideration, partly to sense-check the predicted grades at A-level:

> So I'll look at the list of GCSEs and there's a list of grades, and I just skim down them, because what you're looking for and I suspect most other departments are looking for, is As and Bs at the very least. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

> So, normally like you'd be liking As and Bs, things like that. More As than Bs. And then, yes, I think that can show … It shows academic merit and it shows their … It does show their academic potential to deliver on their A level results as well, you know. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

There was a heavy dependence on predicted A-level grades, despite awareness that these were often incorrect and frequently over-predicted:

> And we know from all the research that UCAS have done that predicted grades are sometimes two grades out, and in some institutions, again it's anecdotal, but there's anecdotal information about parents putting pressure on staff to bump up the predicted grades so they will get an offer. (H18, New HEI)

> I think, well predicted grades are a problem anyway and we all know that predicted grades don't really work. (S44, Science, Old HEI)

As a result, many HEIs ultimately admitted a substantial number of offer holders who failed to meet the academic entry requirements as 'near-misses' during the August confirmation period.

> So at confirmation we're normally trying to recruit to a certain target number [… .] That means that in some years we have held almost on the offer at confirmation: so we've confirmed down to A*AA and then no further. […] And then there are other years where the university where we might be struggling for applicants say the last year where we've actually confirmed down to ABB. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

When asked what was meant by fair admissions at their institution, most Heads of Admission pointed to the importance, first and foremost, of the procedural fairness principles of transparency and consistency, and secondarily to a developing desire to effect a greater degree of distributive fairness:

> For me it's about being upfront about how we consider applications; how we process things; what our selection criteria are; what the entry requirements are and actually applying them fairly and consistently to every applicant. But also, as we are moving towards this differential-offer scheme, making sure that applicants that have been at a disadvantage have an opportunity to come to [this university] and benefit from being a student here. (H19, Old HEI)

With regard to distributive fairness, many interviewees explicitly acknowledged that the grades of socio-economically disadvantaged applicants might not do justice to their ability and potential to succeed in higher education:

> So it's not reasonable to compare a candidate that's had every possible opportunity in life with another candidate that's had very few opportunities and make a judgment on which one is likely to be the more successful or the better applicant. So you need to take what they've done in the context of what opportunities they've had and the environment in which they've been doing it. (S28, Science, Old HEI)

> … we also know … We have this discussion all the time. Somebody that's got a B and two Cs at an awful comprehensive [nearby], okay, he's probably got … He's probably the same calibre of a student from a private school with three As, yes. So how do I judge that? So that's why I go back to the show us you can. And partly we can do that because we never are in the luxurious position of [selecting] to a particular programme. (H3, New HEI)

All of the Old universities in the sample made some use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions. In contrast, virtually none of the selectors for New universities had formal contextualised admissions policies. This reflected the fact that New universities tended to attract a more socio-economically diverse set of applicants in the first place, and offered places to virtually all applicants who met their, comparatively low, standard academic entry requirements. A little-

over-half of the Old HEIs in the sample used contextual data to enable extra consideration to be given to socio-economically disadvantaged applicants who met the same demanding academic entry requirements as their more advantaged peers:

> … if you're a POLAR3 quintile 1, it's almost, like, well, what's the reason to reject the student. It's not I need to find a reason to accept this student. It's almost what would be my reason for rejecting the student. If they meet the predicted A-level requirements. If they meet that, they are quintile 1, and their personal statement is good enough, why would I reject that student? And that is a change from what we would do five years ago. (H6, Old HEI)

A little-over-half of all Old universities in the sample had recently begun or were planning in the near future to reduce academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants whose predicted grades were lower (but not too much lower) than the standard offer:

> I mean we've always had the policy of we will pay special consideration to your application if you've got a WP flag, but we've never been in a situation where we were able to make a lower offer on the grounds of that. Whereas now, going forward we are and I'm actually quite pleased about that, I think that's progress (S39, Arts, Old HEI)

> … something that is coming in, however, is that the university from next year is moving to a slightly reduced offer for those students with WP Plus Flags on their UCAS forms. So, I guess that is a recognition that people from WP backgrounds might have more potential than other students that get the same grades. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

Most Heads of Admission reported resistance by some academic staff members to reducing academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants on the grounds that doing so would inevitably set those students up to fail.

> All the academics' fear about us recruiting the wrong students, the dropout rates … you know, the standard arguments that come up around this sort of thing haven't come to pass. Obviously, they haven't come to pass. And we were quite rigorous in our testing of it as well to try and give the academics some assurance that the change wouldn't negatively impact and we would make the same decisions that they would tend to make. (H16, Old HEI)

Crucially, many Heads of Admission at Old universities felt that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate to the task of ensuring that contextually admitted students would be appropriately supported to fulfil their potential at the institution:

> And then, of course, it's about support on programme as well. You can't just let them in and then go, oh, there you go. Off you go. You have to make sure … And that worries me in that are we prepared at [this university]? With our [internal widening participation] scheme, are we fully prepared for the ongoing support through the first year that these students may need? (H16, Old HEI)

> I think some of it probably was a resource issue, but I think it was also a culture issue. So we traditionally had a very, a very much high achieving A level cohort and were starting to attract some students with maybe BTECs or lower A level grades. With a, you know, another university would be geared up to make sure the first year in particular would take that cohort and make a success of their learning such that they could go on to get a two-one or a first, whatever. And perhaps our degree courses hadn't evolved at the same pace as the student cohort. (H10, Old HEI)

Similarly, only 2 Science selectors for Old universities and only 3 Arts selectors for Old universities reported providing on-programme support to help bridge gaps in academic subject knowledge and skills. Other Selectors at Old universities acknowledged that the curriculum structure would need to be substantially revised in order to support learners with gaps in academic subject knowledge; something for which there was little appetite within the institution:

> It's not impossible to do. But it is … But it would involve, sort of, root and branch upheaval of our curriculum in order to achieve it. If you want to do it properly. And you can do it properly. It takes an awful lot of work to get there. […] But it's not something that is designed, sort of, into our curriculum yet. And I have my … forces of conservatism would make it very, very difficult actually to achieve that in anything like the medium term, let alone the short term. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

In contrast, half of all Science and Arts selectors at New universities spoke extensively about the support for learning they provided in order to help fill gaps in subject knowledge and academic skills more generally:

> Where we're supporting the absence of academic merit, I think we're a very good programme for that, to be quite honest. I think we have academic tutors who are allocated to students who would quickly identify students who need academic support. […] So, we can quickly identify people who we think need support in that area and we'll schedule meetings for personal tutors with them all in the first two weeks, two to three weeks. […] It might be that doesn't come out until their first assessed piece of writing. (S8, Science, New HEI)

> And I think that's something that we're quite keen on here is having a quite supportive approach to our teaching. Again, that's something that we value in terms of our cohort size. Some of our competitive universities have much bigger cohorts than us. […] So I think for us it's having that smaller cohort means we know our students better and that transition. (S46, Science, New HEI)

> So, we have [academic support] project here, which is all about identifying different groups of students who may not be doing as well. We're trying to put the support in place for them. So, one of them is in the BTEC champions group. Another group of students is our progression colleges. So, despite that they can do very well at our feeder college, it's sometimes they seem to struggle when they get here. And I think often that's actually seen as a perception of the quality of the student, the teaching that they've had. And I don't think that is the reality. (H11, New HEI)

Conclusions

Our analysis of the data from interviews with Heads of Admission and Admissions Selectors indicates that fair access and admission was framed principally with reference to the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm. These HEIs were seeking to admit the 'best students', defined as those most likely to succeed at degree level, and seen to be evidenced first and foremost by high levels of previous and predicted academic attainment in school examinations. Though institutions relied heavily on predicted A-level grades as indicators of 'merit', it was widely acknowledged that A-level grades were often over-predicted, to such an extent that many HEIs admitted a substantial number of offer holders as 'near-misses' during the August confirmation period.

Notwithstanding the practice of admitting some 'near-miss' applicants with grades below the published entry requirements, fairness was defined primarily with reference to the procedural justice principles of transparency and consistency. This emphasis on meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment was held in tension with a secondary commitment to the competing paradigm of *equitable* opportunity in pursuit of distributive fairness. All of the Old universities in the sample had some form of contextualised admissions policy in recognition of the impact of socio-economic inequalities on prior academic achievement, but only half of these institutions routinely reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants, typically by just one or two grades. Many interviewees reported resistance to reducing academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants for fear of setting students up to fail. This risk of failure was framed principally in terms of a deficit on the part of disadvantaged applicants – '*ethically we've got to recruit individuals who can succeed*' (H10, Old HEI) and '*they really struggle to get through*' (S37, Arts, Old HEI) – with only secondary acknowledgement of the deficiencies in the support provided to help students to succeed.

That said, many admissions personnel at Old (but not New) universities recognised that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate for the task of ensuring that contextually admitted students would be appropriately supported to bridge gaps in their knowledge and skills in order to successfully complete their programmes. Often the changes needed were regarded as too large to be feasible, as amounting to '*root and branch upheaval*' (S41, Science, Old HEI). Consequently, concern for ensuring equitable opportunity in pursuit of a greater degree of distributive fairness tended to be outweighed by the dictates of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm.

It is clear that the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm, which dominated at the time of our fieldwork, fosters a deficit model of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, misrecognising them as lacking the ability to succeed at degree level. The alternative meritocratic equity of opportunity model, in contrast, explicitly recognises that disadvantaged students have the potential to succeed at degree level if supported to do so. The contrast between these two competing models of fairness has important implications for the capacity of highly selective universities to meet the twin challenges set by the Office for Students to significantly widen participation and simultaneously eliminate socio-economic inequalities in degree completion and attainment (OfS 2019a). In order to meet these challenges, higher-tariff universities will need to reorient their cultures and practices towards the meritocratic *equity* of opportunity model of fairness.

Perhaps encouragingly, a review of the five-year Access and Participation Plans submitted to the higher education regulator for England in 2019 indicates that higher-tariff universities are beginning to acknowledge their role in ensuring the success of their students at degree level (Boliver and Powell 2021). Correspondingly, these institutions have committed to a range of initiatives designed to significantly improve the academic and social inclusion of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. These initiatives include several promising methods of student support identified by a recent review of the literature such as identifying points in the student journey associated with a high risk of dropping out; targeted messaging in relation to support services; deconstructing assessments to reveal their 'hidden rules'; and diversifying the curriculum to make it more accessible and inclusive (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2017). As our data reveal, the New universities in our sample were much more likely than their pre-1992 counterparts to have highly developed systems in place to support students to succeed at degree level. This suggests that Old universities would do well to look to New universities for inspiration in this regard as they seek to answer the higher education regulator's call to

'rethink merit' (OfS 2019b) in pursuit of a greater degree of distributive fairness in the allocation of university places.

Notes

1. Higher-tariff universities are defined as those with average academic entry requirements that fall within the top third of the national distribution for all universities (Montacute and Cullinane 2018).
2. As we discuss later and in more detail elsewhere (Boliver and Powell 2021), although universities publish their standard entry requirements, a substantial proportion ultimately admit some offer-holders with lower grades than were stipulated in their conditional offer. This practice is, of course, at odds with claims to procedural fairness.
3. H indicates Head of Admission, S indicates Admissions Selector, numeral refers to interview number.

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