



**Innovative University Admissions
Worldwide:**

A Percent Scheme for the UK?

July 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenge for the UK's leading research intensive universities

- The proportion of non-privileged students at the UK's most academically selective universities remains extremely low - the latest official figures show that progress has stalled in recent years.
- 80% of disadvantaged young people -- those from low HE participation neighbourhoods - live in the vicinity of a highly selective university, but only 1 in 25 of these disadvantaged young people attend a highly selective university.
- There is a considerable pool of untapped potential talent among school pupils who are doing well at GCSEs and before, but who are not currently progressing further in education or pursuing a route to elite higher education in particular. In 2007 for example 35,000 pupils in England aged 19 with eight or more GCSEs graded A-C did not go on to take A-levels.
- The admissions and student finance system is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to navigate for prospective students.

The evidence on alternative admissions schemes

- Alternative admissions schemes that take into account the different school and social backgrounds of disadvantaged students and use alternative tests and courses to assess academic potential are in widespread use across the world by highly selective universities.
- All the studies we are aware of suggest that students admitted through such programmes do at least as well academically as other students at university - and perhaps even more importantly prosper in life after graduation.
- The most substantial UK study to date found that pupils from state schools do as well at university as pupils from independent schools with up to two grades higher in their A-levels. However, pupils from low performing state schools did not do consistently better or worse at university than students from high performing state schools with the same A-level grades. Further research is needed to consider the degree outcomes of students attending different schools at age 11-16, including those participating in university access schemes.

The case for alternative admissions

- Increasing the recruitment of students from less advantaged backgrounds to the leading research universities is an important strand in the wider drive to improve widening participation into higher education overall - as it is these graduates who dominate the professions, particularly at the higher levels.
- Students from every background should be aware of the differences between different universities and courses, and make informed choices appropriate to their talent and aspirations.
- We believe that the universities that are most effective in identifying and nurturing academic talent while maintaining the highest academic standards will be the leading academic institutions of the 21st century.

Our proposal - a percent scheme for the UK

- We propose piloting a Sutton Trust Elite Pathways (STEP) scheme in a handful of local areas. The scheme - which is a modification of a US percent scheme, attached to a comprehensive access programme - aims to support a proportion of academically able students from local schools serving disadvantaged areas on a pathway to a research-led university, while raising aspirations in local schools more widely.
- The pilot aims to relay a very simple message to pupils early on: achieve highly and you will get an admissions guarantee with commensurate financial and other support.
- The programme will target able students pre-GCSE, in order to support them through the transition into further education. It will join up existing initiatives in to one clearly communicable and navigable package, underpinned by the promise of a clear route into selective higher education, should the student reach a minimum standard of academic achievement.
- The scheme will recognise the extra barriers that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face in applying to research led universities. Elements of the scheme may therefore include an alternative offer, the opportunity to prove academic potential and commitment through an additional piece of work, or access to a foundation year.

CHAPTER ONE: Low participation, untapped talent, and complex admissions

This chapter summarises existing evidence on the enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to leading research universities. Participation of non-privileged students remains extremely low despite some incremental gains in recent years - and there are particularly low participation rates from schools in the local neighbourhoods of such universities. We provide estimates for the considerable potential pool of untapped talent among school pupils who are doing well at GCSEs and before, but who are not currently progressing further in education or pursuing a route to elite higher education in particular. We also document how the admissions and student finance system is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to navigate for prospective students.

Participation at research intensive universities

Students from less advantaged backgrounds remain a small minority in the UK's most academically selective universities. The Sutton Trust has used a range of measures to monitor the participation figures of 13 highly selective universities which came top of an average ranking of the newspaper league tables in 2000¹. The most recent Government Performance Indicators for 2007/08 showed that 16 per cent of young degree entrants to these leading research universities were from the four lower social classes, slightly down on the proportion enrolled in 2005/06². These groups account for just under 30% of young students in higher education overall³, and half the UK population (excluding those who have never worked or are long-term unemployed).

Improvements have been made in the last decade, but there are signs that youngsters from non-privileged groups remain significantly under-represented at these universities (see table below). The proportion of students enrolled from independent schools for example was 33% in 2007/08, even though such schools make up only 7% of the school population at age 11 -16.

¹ The universities are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York.

² See: <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1446/141/>; for a summary of the recent trends see http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf

³ Recent figures for HE overall indicate a slight narrowing of this gap between 2002-03 and 2005-06, but this effect has been driven by a drop in participation rate among those from higher social groups.

'Sutton Trust 13' intake	1997/98	2001/2	2002/3	2005/6	2007/8
% from independent schools	39	35	32	33	33
% from state schools	61	65	68	67	67
% from lower social classes	13*	14*	16	17	16
% from low participation areas	6	7	8	8	4**

Source HESA; NB Starred figures not comparable with later social class measures; ** different definition of areas used

Meanwhile, 100 elite schools (state and independent) making up just 3% of the 3,700 schools and sixth forms in the UK, accounted for one sixth of admissions to the 13 Sutton Trust universities over the five years up to 2005/06⁴.

The participation trends for leading research universities are largely a result of stark educational inequalities that emerge early in children's lives, before and during school⁵. But a series of studies commissioned by the Trust has also shown that even with the requisite A-levels to gain entry to degree courses at leading research universities, around 3,000 state school students each year do not end up enrolling at these institutions⁶.

More recent analysis by the Trust and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills shows that these admissions trends are driven mostly by application behaviour: independent school pupils, for example, are twice as likely as their state counterparts to apply to the leading research universities⁷. Often the decisions not to apply to these institutions are made without adequate advice or support within schools, with some teachers actively discouraging pupils from approaching the academic selective universities⁸. The Trust argues that pupils' choice of university should not be dependent on which family or school they happen to come from, and no part of the university system should be the exclusive preserve of those from particular social-economic backgrounds.

⁴ See <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/UniversityAdmissionsbySchool.pdf>

⁵ See the Trust's recommendations that include better advice and guidance, more gifted and talented programmes and university visits – residential and otherwise – targeted at younger school pupils. http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf

⁶ <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Missing-3000-Report-2.pdf>

⁷ Joint DIUS research to be published

⁸ <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/MORIJan2008.pdf>

There is evidence of a particular disconnect between many leading research universities and the school pupils in their local neighbourhoods. An analysis of higher education participation rates by neighbourhoods across the country found some of the lowest HE rates in the deprived inner city areas in the vicinity of some of the country's most prestigious universities⁹. Other research has suggested that highly selective universities have little HE participation presence in their local communities¹⁰.

New analysis¹¹ has allowed the Trust to look more closely at how many disadvantaged young people live in the immediate localities of the country's most academically selective universities¹². This analysis shows that 80% of disadvantaged young people -- those from low HE participation wards - live in the vicinity of a highly academic selective university, and 50% of disadvantaged young people are on these institutions' doorsteps¹³.

But despite so many of these disadvantaged young people living near to highly academically selective universities very few attend¹⁴. Only 1 in 25 of disadvantaged young people enter one of these highly academically selective universities, and this rate does not change materially when they live near to one of these universities. For the most disadvantaged 20% of young people just 1 in 40 enter a highly academically selective university. This compares to nearly 1 in 4 of the most advantaged 20% of young people.

⁹ "Young participation in higher education", HEFCE 2005/03 (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_03/) and HEFCE's related POLAR classification and maps (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/polar>) identify many neighbourhoods of low HE participation in cities with highly selective universities.

¹⁰ Slide 19 in the Common Evidence Base presentation at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/2008/challenge/> shows that more selective institutions have much lower local HE participation rates. Further analysis showed that for some highly selective HEIs young people living near the university were no more likely to attend it than those living one or two hours distant from it.

¹¹ By Dr Mark Corver at HEFCE, based on the data used for the 'New University Challenge' initiative (for example, see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/challenge/evidence/context/>).

¹² We define this group of universities using the estimate of academic attainability developed by HEFCE as part of its 'New University Challenge' initiative. See: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/2008/challenge/>. We take as highly selective institutions the 30 large (over 500 entry places per year) universities estimated to have less than 10 per cent of their home undergraduate entry places attainable to someone with 200 UCAS tariff points or less. These are the larger institutions shown in the dark green category in HEFCE's diagram of HE providers at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/challenge/evidence/context/GB_PROVISION_DIAGRAM.pdf. They are listed in Annex 1.

¹³ We define disadvantaged young people as that 40 per cent of young people who live in neighbourhoods with the lowest participation rates in HE. This grouping (based on HEFCE's POLAR2 classification) matches that used in HEFCE's Widening Participation and Aimhigher funding methods and is mapped at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/challenge/evidence/context/LOWYPR.pdf>. 'Vicinity' is defined as within 40 minutes road based commute from the university; 'doorstep' is defined as within 20 minutes road based commute from the university.

¹⁴ Based on analysis by Dr Mark Corver at HEFCE using the same definitions as the POLAR2 young participation measure (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/polar/polar2/>).

The point here is that although these disadvantaged children are not - in geographic terms - irrelevant to highly academically selective universities very few of them enter these universities. The main reason for this is that the vast majority of these children will currently not achieve the A-level grades to be potential students for highly academically selective courses, but we believe many would do if given the support and opportunities to fulfil their earlier academic potential.

The case for fair access

Increasing the recruitment of students from less advantaged backgrounds to the leading research universities is an important strand in the wider drive to improve widening participation into higher education overall. A series of surveys by the Trust have shown that graduates from these institutions dominate the professions, particularly at the higher levels¹⁵. It is important that politics, law and journalism reflect the society they are intended to serve¹⁶. Other analysis meanwhile has suggested that the earnings premium may be greater for graduates attending elite research universities¹⁷.

It is critical that students from every background are aware of the differences between different universities and courses, and can make informed choices appropriate to their talent and aspirations.

The Trust believes that the country's leading research universities have a duty to seek out, support and nurture talent, wherever it exists. This matters for reasons of individual social justice and national economic productivity. But such efforts should never involve the lowering of academic standards.

Indeed, it is in the interests of universities to attract the best and the brightest. A report for the recently convened Windsor Group of elite American and British universities argues that "colleges and universities that are most effective in identifying and nurturing talent will be the leading institutions of the 21st century." It points to the challenge for university leaders in "developing initiatives to identify high-achieving students from low-income families and to

¹⁵ http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST_MilburnSubmission.pdf

¹⁶ In 2001, the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee concluded that it is desirable 'to achieve a more representative social mix in admissions to high-status research-intensive universities, many of whose graduates go on to occupy positions of power and influence in business, industry, the professions and in politics'.

¹⁷ See <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp259.pdf>

provide appropriate guidance and support so that these students have the same access to and success at top-tier institutions as their more affluent peers.”¹⁸

Lost pool of talent at age 16

This report particularly seeks to highlight a significant pool of pupils who are doing well academically during the later stages of compulsory schooling, but whose talent may be wasted post-16. These are pupils achieving impressive GCSE results, but who do not perform as well at A-level, or do not take A-levels at all. Many of these would be highly desirable candidates for higher education.

A series of studies has now documented the transition rates for a cohort of pupils in English schools as they proceed through the key stages of schooling. Figures compiled for this report reveal that there are just under 50,000 pupils each year who are among the top fifth of performers at age 16, but who do not continue to be among the top fifth of performers at A-level¹⁹.

A parallel analysis of Government figures for GCSE results meanwhile, published for the cohort of pupils in England aged 19 in 2007, reveal that a further 35,000 pupils with eight or more GCSEs graded A-C do not go on to take A-levels at all²⁰. A recent Higher Education Policy Institute report highlighted similar figures for 18 year olds, concluding that “it is one of the least satisfactory aspects of our education system that such a high proportion of young people do not go on to achieve Level 3 qualifications”²¹.

These are large numbers even compared with the 320,000 pupils in the UK that enter higher education as a whole - and apply only to England. Many of these pupils in this ‘lost pool’ of talent moreover are likely to come from lower social-economic groups and poor postcode areas.

¹⁸ “Improving Outcomes for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students through Collective Action” (Windsor Group, 2008)

¹⁹ *Closing the gap in university participation: reaching out to high achieving disadvantaged pupils*, Claire Crawford, Stephen Machin and Anna Vignoles, Centre for the Economics of Education, September 2008

²⁰ Data supplied by DIUS show that in 2007 11,000 pupils (age 19) in England with 10 or more GCSEs A-Cs did not go on to take A-levels (or equivalents), 11,000 pupils with 9 or more GCSEs A-C did not go on to take A-levels (or equivalents), and 13,000 pupils with 8 or more GCSEs A-Cs did not go on to take A-levels (or equivalents).

²¹ See <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/downloads/39DemandforHEto2029summary.pdf>

This pool of GCSE talent is distributed widely across schools. 23.2% of candidates achieved 10 or more A* to C grades at GCSE (and equivalents) in 2006 in 3119 schools in England. In the vast majority of schools, at least 10% of pupils achieved 10 or more A* to C grades. In only 77 schools (that had more than 50 entrants) were there no pupils achieving 10 A*-C grade GCSEs²².

Furthermore, there are high aspirations among school children to go to university, even though these intentions, for over half of pupils, are not translated into actual enrolment at age 18 or 19. Over 7 in 10 say that they are fairly or very likely to go on to university-level study, but in reality just over 3 in 10 young people go onto higher education after school²³.

An admissions system of increasing complexity

A bewildering range and complexity of qualifications and factors now affect which pupils are admitted onto one of the 50,000 degree courses now on offer at UK universities. This information already includes: predicted results for A-levels (including A star grades for some universities and unit grades); an increasing range of other qualifications (Diplomas, the International Baccalaureate, the Pre-U); prior qualifications (such as GCSEs); bespoke admissions tests (both general and subject specific)²⁴, personal statements and references, and in some cases, interviews. Different universities and university departments adopt varying admissions practices²⁵. Navigating this complex system is a particular challenge for non-privileged pupils making choices without the support and guidance of well briefed family members or school advisers.

Adding to this complexity, particularly since the introduction of greater tuition fees in England²⁶, is a wide range of financial support packages now offered by different universities. At the last count there were 303 bursary schemes at 117 universities and colleges, with vast disparities in size of awards (ranging from

²² Data from the Government's National Pupil Database

²³ <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/MORI2008.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/index.html>

²⁵ For a review of admissions practises in English higher education institutions, see the report by the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme at: <http://www.spa.ac.uk/schwartz-report-review08.html>. This is an update on the 2004 Schwartz review, see: <http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/>

²⁶ Mean tested tuition fees are set at a maximum level of £3,145 in 2008/9 for domestic and European Union students at English universities. Students receive most of their maintenance costs through a loan that is repaid after graduation. Full non-repayable maintenance grants of £2,835 a year are available to families on incomes below £25,000 a year. A wide range of bursaries and scholarships are provided by individual universities.

£300 to £3,500), and different criteria (40% are not means-tested for example, while a quarter of bursaries are purely merit-based).²⁷

Financial considerations

Concerns remain that an increasingly varied and complex financial support system for prospective university students may influence their choice of university. In particular, students may be deterred from applying to highly selective universities, perceived to be more expensive, or to consider universities outside the local area or region in which they live.

Research for example has highlighted a general ignorance, especially among poorer students, of the financial support packages on offer at universities, and indicated that the fear of debt was influencing pupils' decisions to choose a local university rather than one further afield so that they could continue to live at home²⁸.

With the prospect of higher tuition fees and an increasingly diverse financial support system in higher education - amid times of increasing economic hardship for prospective students -- financial considerations may have an even bigger impact on university choice in the future - as has been borne out in the experience of the US²⁹.

²⁷ Research by Clare Callender from Birkbeck, University of London, presented at an Association of University Administrators conference, February 2008

²⁸ <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/StaffordshireReportFinal.pdf>

²⁹ 'Common Across the Atlantic: The Underrepresentation of Low-Income Students in Higher Education in the US and the UK' (forthcoming) by Sarah Turner, University of Virginia

CHAPTER TWO: Innovative approaches

The under-representation of students from non-privileged backgrounds at elite research universities is a common problem across the world. Other countries have grappled with similar challenges set out in Chapter One. This chapter reviews some of the innovative initiatives from home and abroad which have been deployed to identify talent from all types of backgrounds and widen the social mix of students. We review what lessons may be learned from these approaches, and how such schemes might be developed further in the UK.

The efforts to improve access to elite universities can be categorised into five broad areas:

Raising aspirations

Raising aspirations and increasing the application rates of prospective students who are on course to attain the requisite entry grades to enrol at elite universities, but who may be off-put from considering such institutions for cultural and social reasons - believing them to be 'not for the likes of me'. This includes traditional outreach activities - residential summer schools for example - intended mostly to raise aspirations and applications to research intensive universities, and also booster classes to raise attainment to enhance chances of admission to highly selective degree courses.

Contextual offers

Lowering academic requirements to take into consideration that academic potential may not be fully manifested in particular pupils because of the challenging backgrounds they have come from, for example having attended a poorly performing school. In most cases students are also required to undertake university access courses to demonstrate their academic potential and commitment or to earn extra entry points to receive discounted academic offers.

Access courses

Enrolling students from less advantaged backgrounds on university run courses to help determine their commitment to and suitability for a demanding academic environment, even though they are unlikely to meet the traditional academic

requirements of highly selective degree courses. These schemes have a direct impact on admissions, either by resulting in a lower offer or activities being taken into account at admissions stage.

Alternative tests

In recognition of the very different educational, social and cultural experiences young applicants will have had, offering alternative tests that aim to identify and recognise academic potential in different ways or recognise other abilities such as practical or creative intelligence. Universities often reserve a set number of degree places for students who are admitted through alternative routes.

Selection through ballots

Ballots are used to allocate places to over-subscribed courses for student candidates who have all met minimum academic requirements or reached an academic threshold for university degree courses.

Category 1: Raising aspirations

The first category includes university outreach schemes such as residential summer schools or mentoring schemes, and other targeted support by universities for young people at school. Such programmes, designed to raise aspirations and boost school attainment, are long established in leading research universities in the UK and overseas³⁰. While additional preparation can be conducted in a relatively short space of time, it should also be noted that many universities also offer foundation programmes - year long courses that prepare students for degrees. In this report we are primarily interested in innovative approaches that directly impact on university admissions (covered in the remaining sections), but there are some innovative outreach schemes worth noting.

Questbridge National College Match Program (US)

The Questbridge National College Match Program is a centrally coordinated applications process that aims to overcome a fear of rejection or a lack of ambition that may deter bright disadvantaged or black and minority ethnic

³⁰ For an overview of outreach activities in UK universities, see the recent report by the National Audit Office, at: http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/widening_participation_in_high.aspx

students from applying to elite universities³¹. It is a free process open to high-achieving students on low incomes (usually household incomes under \$60,000 [£38,000] pa), who also gain access to full four-year scholarships. It has 26 university partners, including some of America's most prestigious institutions, such as Stanford, Princeton and Yale. The programme offers two potential admission routes:³²

- The QuestBridge College Match process pairs outstanding low-income students with top-ranked colleges through early admission and access to full four-year scholarships. Students complete one application by September 30 and use it to apply early to up to eight of QuestBridge's 26 partner colleges, ranking the schools in order of preference. The rankings are binding; students must attend the school highest on their ranking list that also admits them. In 2007, 204 QuestBridge applicants who participated in the College Match process were selected as QuestBridge Scholars, receiving admission and full scholarships to their partner colleges.
- The QuestBridge Regular Decision process enables qualified students to apply to partner colleges for free using the QuestBridge application form which partner colleges generally accept in lieu of their own application. Those that do not will use the QuestBridge application as a supplement. In 2007, the partner colleges offered admission and generous financial aid to more than 700 QuestBridge applicants who applied through this process.

Both initiatives provide generous financial packages to successful applicants (an important element in the high fees regime of elite US universities). But what is particularly noteworthy is the use of a single application form for a number of prestigious universities, linked to the bursary scheme. These programmes are targeted at high achievers from low income backgrounds, and there is no reduction in entry standards.

Reach for Excellence, Leeds University

There are examples of outreach schemes in the UK that are developing more extensive links with local schools and sustaining activities for pupils over an extended time period. The Reach for Excellence programme at Leeds University for example - sponsored by the HBOS Foundation and the Sutton Trust -

³¹ See www.questbridge.org

³² Drawn from information at www.questbridge.org/students/program.html

provides a sustained approach to raising aspirations, targeting year 12 (age 16/17) students from non-privileged backgrounds and in schools serving deprived areas. It offers a two year programme of advice and support, including a residential summer school, e-mentoring, study skills and subject-specific sessions. The scheme is currently being evaluated, but initial results suggest that participants are applying to a wider range of universities, with more demanding entry requirements, than peers from similar backgrounds.

Category 2: Contextual offers

Percent Plans in American College Admissions

The percent plan is an alternative admissions approach developed in the US where a certain proportion of students from each school or college is guaranteed a place at a university. It seeks to broaden university intakes by recognising that a student who comes top of their class in a lower achieving school may have as much academic potential and drive as a student who does so in a high achieving school, even if the absolute test results of the former pupil are lower. Student ranking in high schools has long been considered in university admissions in the US. But percent plans go one step further by providing a quota of university places to every school, recognising that the results needed to make the quota will differ in each institution. In all cases pupils have to complete a number of courses and tests to gain their relative ranking in school and be admitted at the university.

Most percent plans in the US were introduced to improve racial representation once affirmative action was struck down in the courts. Supporters of percent plans see them as “effective in maintaining minority enrolment”, while critics of affirmative action argue that they provide “ample proof that race-conscious admissions policies are unnecessary”³³. So the plans, while not uncontroversial, can be seen by both sides in the admissions debate as a practical way to promote diversity while maintaining academic standards. The plans can include access to the most prestigious academic institutions (though not all do). There are also significant differences between each of the three states that have adopted percent plans in the last decade.

³³ Horn, C. L. and Flores, S.M. 2003. *Percent Plans in College Admissions: A Comparative Analysis of Three States’ Experiences*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, p. 11.

The University of Texas guarantees entry to the top 10% of students from every public or private high school in the state . Eligible students are required to obtain a High School Diploma, but they are not assessed on their scores from the SAT³⁴ and ACT³⁵ tests that are normally a prerequisite for university admissions in the United States. Each school district or school from which the student graduated calculates the student's rank at a point closest to the application deadline. Students then gain automatic admission to the Texas university of their choice, including the prestigious University of Texas at Austin . There is also a list of 18 factors that universities consider in admitting students who do not graduate in the top 10% of their high school class, including socioeconomic status, second language ability, and indications that the student overcame adversity³⁶.

In early 2009 the University of Texas at Austin reported that 81 percent of freshmen are now admitted through 10 percent, prompting concerns that the institution retains too little discretion over who is admitted to the university³⁷.

In February 2009 the University of California unveiled a reformed percent plan, which from 2012 will guarantee admission to one of its campuses to the top 9 per cent of pupils from every public or accredited private high school in the state³⁸. Students are ranked by their scores in 15 pieces of coursework they have to complete to gain admission - but do not have to submit ACT or SAT test scores. Another (overlapping) group of pupils -- the top 9% of all high school graduates statewide - meanwhile are also guaranteed entry but are ranked according to their ACT and SAT test scores and results in UC-approved courses. As part of the reforms, prospective applicants are no longer required to submit two SAT Subject Test scores - a move intended to widen the pool of potential students. As before, the California 9 percent plan only guarantees a place somewhere in the university system, not at individual particularly selective institutions, such as Berkeley and UCLA. In its most recent guidance, the university states that its selection processes emphasise academic achievement, but also take into account "a wide range of personal accomplishments and educational contexts".

³⁴ The SAT Reasoning Test (formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test) is a standardized test for college admissions in the US. See <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/SATI.html>

³⁵ ACT is an alternative college testing programme. See www.act.org

³⁶ Long, M.C. and Tienda, M, "Winners and Losers: Changes in Texas University Admissions Post-Hopwood" in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, September 2008, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 255–280

³⁷ <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/01/12/tenpercent>

³⁸ http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/eligibilitychanges/documents/eligibility_factsheet.pdf

In Florida, the eligibility is wider, with the top 20% of graduating students from each public high school given automatic admission to a Florida state university, though again not always their chosen one. In what is known as the One Florida programme, students must complete 19 college preparatory courses, with the flexibility to specialise a little more in one area. They must also submit their SAT or ACT scores. Each secondary school district decides how class rank will be determined³⁹. The University of Florida also gives special consideration to “students who are poor, attended a low-performing high school, or whose parents didn’t attend college.”⁴⁰

Higher Education Access Route at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

University quotas of students from non-privileged backgrounds (rather than school quotas in the percent plans) have also been used in conjunction with contextual offers. Trinity College, Ireland’s oldest and most prestigious university, has developed an access programme to improve the odds of poorer students gaining a place at the university for example. The Trinity Access Programme, which has been operating since 1993, runs a variety of schemes aimed at increasing participation for under-represented groups⁴¹.

Perhaps its boldest project is the Higher Education Access Route, a partnership with seven other leading Irish higher education institutions, through which Trinity College has provided a number of reserved places to students whose educational experiences are deemed to have prevented them from realising their full potential. Trinity states that the programme is based on “clear evidence that socio-economic disadvantage negatively impacts on educational attainment at school and progression to higher education”. The programme is targeted at those with low family income, family unemployment, no family history of higher education and from under-represented groups. Since 2005-06, 15% of undergraduate places for all Trinity College Courses have been reserved for students from these groups⁴². This has now been increased to a 22% quota in the College Access Plan 2009-13.

Irish university course places are awarded according to points achieved for Leaving Certificate subjects. In the most recent application guidelines for students, HEAR applicants are told they will be deemed competitive for Trinity if

³⁹ Horn and Flores, p24

⁴⁰ “Governor stands by One Florida.” Miami Herald, October 27, 2002, cited by Long and Tienda.

⁴¹ www.tcd.ie/Trinity_Access/school_activities/second_level_schools

⁴² www.tcd.ie/Trinity_Access/school_activities/HEAR.php

they reach approximately 80 - 90% of the Irish Leaving Certificate points for the courses of their choice⁴³. The scheme has a non-completion rate of 11% among students, significantly lower than the average Trinity rate of 16.2% or the Irish national rate of 16.8%⁴⁴.

Adjusted Criteria programme, St George's, University of London

Contextual offers also exist in the UK. In 2008 St George's Medical School announced that students from poor-performing schools who were accepted into the school with lower grades performed just as well in the first year degree exams as other students⁴⁵.

The Adjusted Criteria programme assesses applicants' academic qualifications through comparison with their social peers rather than with the national average. Most students need to get at least two As and a B grade in their A-levels to be invited for an interview at St George's. But under the Adjusted Criteria programme applicants with an A-level performance 60 per cent above the average for their school are guaranteed an interview at which their educational background is not disclosed. The scheme is open to students from schools whose A-level average is CDD or below.

Since the programme began in 2002, it has accounted for almost 7% of St George's medical students. In February 2008 the school reported that Adjusted Criteria students scored an average of 65.41% in their first-year final exams, while standard-offer students scored an average of 65.69%.

Other selective UK universities use similar contextual information on the school backgrounds of prospective students as one factor and on a case-by-case basis when selecting students, although one concern is that such criteria are not widely disseminated, prompting accusations of secretive and unfair decision-making in the admissions process⁴⁶.

Educational Access Initiatives in Australia

⁴³ www.tcd.ie/Trinity_Access/forms/HEARGuide0910.pdf

⁴⁴ Information supplied by Trinity Access Programmes

⁴⁵ See: <http://www.sgul.ac.uk/media/news-archive/2008/widening-participation>. The first year exam results for the five-year medicine course were measured between 2003 and 2006, with 35 adjusted criteria students measured against 555 non-adjusted criteria students.

⁴⁶ See for example: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article6381887.ece>

Access remains an important issue for Australian universities, and there are several initiatives aimed at increasing access for disadvantaged students. There is a single application form to apply for 'Educational Access Schemes', although different academic institutions operate different admissions criteria. There are two main methods. In the first, the 'allocation method', each institution sets aside a number of places in each course for EAS applicants, with places offered by ranking students who gaining entry points below the published cut-off for courses. EAS applicants are assessed by the institution as 'eligible' or 'not eligible' for consideration under their scheme and, if eligible, compete for the specified EAS places against each other on the basis of academic merit. Being eligible for consideration under EAS does not guarantee an offer of a place because a large number of EAS applicants with a higher selection rank may apply to the same course for a limited number of EAS places.

In the second method, bonus points are added to an applicant's selection rank, but there are no guaranteed EAS places. This means that an applicant's order in the ranking for places is increased but they compete with all other applicants for a standard place on the course on the basis of academic merit. Criteria for consideration include disrupted schooling, financial hardship, a disruptive home environment, which can include abuse, English language difficulty, personal disability, refugee status or from a designated school in a priority area. The allocation of bonus points does not guarantee entry to the institution or to the applicant's preferred course; applicants must meet the published cut-off for the course they are applying to⁴⁷.

Category 3: Access courses

Access courses in the UK

A recent Hefce report⁴⁸ looked at a variety of access courses under a broader review of 'compact schemes' - projects that link universities with schools. Of the 102 non specialist UK institutions surveyed, 51 ran some kind of compact scheme. Of those 51 institutions, around a third (17) made lower offers to those students who had successfully engaged in some sort of additional learning. The review found little available data on student outcomes, but still concluded that on the whole students on such schemes "perform as well or better than other students" at university.

⁴⁷ See: www.uac.edu.au/career/files/eas_book_2009_col.pdf

⁴⁸ See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_12/07_12.pdf

Some of these schemes appear to offer very tangible benefits to participants, like the Access to Birmingham Scheme (A2B) run by the University of Birmingham. Those accepted on to the scheme can get a reduced entry offer of up to two A-level grades or the equivalent if they complete the programme's Higher Education Learning Module. The scheme is open to those who meet three criteria: little or no family experience of higher education; the main income earners in the family are not in professional occupations; and the applicant's school, college or area does not have a high rate of progression to university. Teachers are normally expected to recommend students for the course.⁴⁹

The University of Manchester has been running a similar programme since 2005 - The Manchester Access Programme (MAP). Targeted at bright lower sixth form students in the Greater Manchester region, this scheme offers students the opportunity to show their potential through a series of activities and tasks that include mentoring, a residential conference, academic skills workshops and an assessed academic assignment. Students who successfully complete the programme develop a portfolio of additional evidence which the university uses when making a MAP student an offer of a place at Manchester. If after successfully completing the programme students decide that they would like to attend a different university, Manchester will support their application through a letter of recommendation.

The University of Leeds also runs a similar initiative targeted at a similar group of students. As its prospectus explains: "Successful applicants will receive two offers, the standard offer as published in the University prospectus, and the alternative Access to Leeds offer, two grades or 40 UCAS points lower than the standard offer. The Access to Leeds alternative offer is conditional, and requires the applicant to attend a two-day study skills module and complete and pass two written assignments set by the University."⁵⁰

Sometimes completion of such schemes merely guarantees an interview, such as Sheffield's Outreach and Access to Medicine Scheme (SOAMS). Yet this can still be an important form of assistance.

Compact 11 initiative

⁴⁹ www.undergraduate.bham.ac.uk/entry/access.shtml. One concern with teacher selection expressed elsewhere is that this could lead to a form of social selection if it were not mediated by more objective measures.

⁵⁰ www.leeds.ac.uk/ace/access/leeds.htm

A group of 11 research intensive universities meanwhile are working together to consider ways of identifying particularly talented young people who may flourish within a research-intensive university. It is hoped that the evaluation of these pilots will provide valuable evidence that can inform and support wider work in this area. Pilots will run from Autumn 2009, leading to the possibility of a nationally available scheme by 2012.

Category 4: Alternative tests

In the US, the SAT reasoning test and the ACT are the most widely used assessments for university entry. But the SAT has faced allegations of social bias from some leading figures in higher education in the US. The latest changes to the test, including a new writing section, with an essay, have added to the concerns that it disadvantages children from less privileged backgrounds. It has been proposed that the SAT might evaluate non-cognitive qualities such as artistic and cultural appreciation, leadership, and interpersonal skills.

As in the UK, the US has witnessed the development of bespoke admissions tests that offer assessment in particular subject areas. American law schools have their own admission test, the LSAT, designed to predict academic success. Researchers at University of California Berkeley have released emerging findings from a long-term project designed to produce tests that could predict candidates' long-term success as lawyers, and not just first-year academic success. The experiment looked at what it takes to be a good lawyer, including personality traits and the ability to judge difficult situations. The study concluded that the LSAT results did correlate with first year academic success, but not with later success as a lawyer, and so the researchers developed an alternative combination of tests which linked to the skills of a successful lawyer whilst ensuring a good ethnic mix of students⁵¹.

The Kaleidoscope programme at Tufts University (US)

The debate about the reliability of SATs in identifying students led Robert Sternberg to pioneer the Rainbow Project, which is being implemented as Kaleidoscope at Tufts University in Massachusetts since 2006⁵². Based on research around SATs, Sternberg suggested that other methods, such as those based on the theory of successful intelligence, could identify leadership

⁵¹ Shultz, M.M., and Zedeck S, 2008, 'Identification, Development, and Validation of Predictors for Successful Lawyering' accessed at www.law.berkeley.edu/files/LSACREPORTfinal-12.pdf

⁵² See <http://pace.tufts.edu/researchAssessKaleidoscope.asp>

potential among candidates by assessing their creativity, practical skills as well as the analytical skills usually tested in traditional academic exams. Sternberg argues that the theory of successful intelligence provides a strong basis for the assessment of the wider range of skills needed for college success and could serve to increase equity for a wider range of students⁵³.

The Kaleidoscope approach has been used alongside SATs to admit students to Tufts and other US universities are closely monitoring the results of the holistic approach being piloted.

SAT trial in UK

In the UK meanwhile, the National Foundation for Educational Research is currently undertaking a major trial of the SAT among English sixth formers, after an earlier research trial suggested the SAT could identify potential among students in below average performing state schools, including some students who performed very highly on the SAT but who had relatively low A level grades⁵⁴.

However, provisional findings in 2008 suggested that the test would only have limited use in identifying students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose abilities were not already reflected in their A-Level results⁵⁵.

The Alternative Entrance Test at Sciences Po, Paris, France

An alternative selection process for pupils from schools in deprived areas has also been piloted in France at the highly prestigious *Institut des Sciences Politiques de Paris* (known as *Sciences Po*), one of France's *grandes écoles*. Since 2002 the Sciences Po has provided a different route in its admissions process for such pupils, on the basis of their school record and an interview, rather than the standard examination (Baccalaureate) all other students must pass to be admitted⁵⁶. As part of the selection process, potential students are interviewed by a panel of academic and non-academic members.

⁵³ Sternberg, R. J. 2006. 'The Rainbow Project: Enhancing the SAT through assessments of analytical, practical, and creative skills', *Intelligence* 34, 321-350. p. 347.

⁵⁴ http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/SAT-Pilot_Report.pdf

⁵⁵ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/pims-data/summaries/use-of-an-aptitude-test-2008-update.cfm>

⁵⁶ <http://admissions.sciences-po.fr/en/node/49>

Sciences Po has identified four major obstacles for pupils from less-privileged areas:

lack of financial resources; lack of specialized information and advice; social bias in standard selection tests; and the 'phenomenon of self-censorship' -- the attitude among some pupils that Sciences Po is 'not for me'. This is a relatively small scheme - there were 33 partner schools in 2005 and 264 students recruited over six years at this stage - but the institute states that the academic results of students once at university are comparable with other students⁵⁷.

Category 5: Admissions using ballots

The Lottery System in the Netherlands

Admission to Dutch Universities is guaranteed to those with the school leaving certificate. Universities must accept all applicants and are funded for them by the Government at a standard rate. The exception to this rule has been medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, where numbers are capped. In those subjects, a weighted lottery was introduced in the 1970s as a way of rationing the limited number of places allocated each year. Students received a lottery number based on their average secondary education grade; the higher the grade the greater their chances of winning a place. The average chance of getting a place was 35%; for those with higher grades, it was 70%. However, a media outcry about a particular case of an unplaced student forced the government to think again. The Drenth Commission led to changes whereby all students gaining top grades in their leaving certificate would be directly admitted, but the weighted lottery would remain for all others, with the option for institutions to select some of the entrants themselves (based on school results)⁵⁸.

As a result, five out of nine medical schools selected around 10% of their intake on the basis of personal statement, extensive tests, and interviews. Two universities also used the selection procedure to allocate places to graduates, ethnic minorities and mature students, who tended to lose out in the lottery system. Recent evaluations found that selected students at three of the four

⁵⁷ http://www.sciences-po.fr/upload/Espace_presse/Dossiers_thematiques/CEP_action_pionniere.pdf

⁵⁸ Goudappel, F, "The Dutch system of lottery for studies" in European Journal for Education Law and Policy 3:23-27, 1999

universities did not achieve better outcomes than those allocated places through the lottery and these institutions have decided to stop selection⁵⁹.

Discussion: Lessons for the UK (more needed here to set out case for the UK)

This brief summary of some of the innovative admissions schemes developed around the world offers some possible lessons for practice in the UK.

The consideration of students' backgrounds when judging academic potential and the use of alternative assessment by leading research universities are not uncontroversial issues outside the UK; however there is a general acceptance in many countries that universities need to adopt different strategies if they are to attract greater numbers of pupils from less advantaged backgrounds who have not demonstrated their full academic potential during school.

In most cases, such students are asked to undertake different courses or tests to demonstrate their academic potential in other ways than through standard exam grades. The backgrounds of prospective students are considered, but this is only one element in a range of evidence sought by institutions when making admissions decisions. This is a key point as despite the allegations of 'dumbing down' or 'social engineering' sometimes made, in fact no leading research university anywhere in the world wants to sacrifice academic standards to achieve more diverse student intakes. Such approaches are already being used in the UK in recognition of the fact that some students encounter a much greater range of challenges than others in secondary school and further education.

Percent schemes in the US offer a different approach to contextual admissions - avoiding direct quotas or positive discrimination for particular types of students, but at the same time taking into account that students may have had less opportunity to reach their full academic potential in schools with lower overall levels of attainment or higher levels of deprivation. Again, it is important to note that even under the percent schemes, students still have to undergo an application process to gain entry to academically selective institutions.

A key advantage that should not be underestimated is the simplicity at the heart of this scheme (and others summarised here): pupils in schools have a clear goal

⁵⁹ Stasz, C and van Stolk, C, "The use of lottery systems in school admissions" (Rand Europe/Sutton Trust, 2007).

to aim for if they are considering higher education, and are guaranteed a place if they pass the university admissions process. Too often in the UK a young person is confronted with an array of different opportunities, often uncoordinated, which offer little in the way of clear outcomes or something concrete to which to aspire.

A further benefit of the percent scheme is that it has the potential to cultivate stronger ties between secondary schools and universities. This connects to a wider point: innovative admissions approaches that seek to recruit students directly to universities are supplementary to wider outreach efforts to raise aspirations among school pupils more generally. Indeed it is critical to the success of such schemes that they combine with outreach efforts - a guaranteed place or a lower offer at an elite university is only useful if the students feel comfortable and motivated to make use of it. So in looking at some of the most innovative approaches which involved modifications and supplements to the admissions process, we should not lose sight of tried and tested core elements.

But for many, the most important litmus test for any innovative admissions schemes is what the outcomes are for the students that take part. It is this question that we address in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: Outcomes

In this chapter we show that there is encouraging evidence from institutions that non-privileged students enrolled at the most academically selective universities through alternative entry routes do as well as other students in their degree studies. More research needs to be commissioned at a national level to evaluate the degree outcomes of students from schools with lower average attainment levels. The success of such innovative admissions approaches, however, should also be measured in the longer term life outcomes of graduates long after they leave university.

Degree outcomes of students from different schools

The most recent major statistical analyses of the effect of different types of schooling on degree outcomes across the higher education sector was published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2003 and 2005⁶⁰.

These established that students from state schools do as well as at university as students from independent schools with up to two grades higher in their A-levels. However, pupils from low performing state schools did not do consistently better or worse at university than students from high performing state schools with the same A-level grades.

The reports discuss some of the possible reasons for these findings. The 'schooling effect' at sixth form level could comprise a temporary 'added value' for pupils in independent schools, perhaps through specific exam coaching or cramming⁶¹. An alternative explanation is that students from independent schools make less effort once they are within HE. Whatever the explanation for the effect, it apparently does not distinguish between pupils from state schools of different average A-level performance. In other words, average A-level scores

⁶⁰ The analyses used data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency to track 18 year-old and 19 year old entrants with A-level qualifications to degree courses in 1997-98 and 1998-99. These entrants were followed through to 2001-02 and 2002-03 and their HE achievement was assessed by whether they had discontinued their studies, whether they had gained a qualification and, if they graduated, the class of degree they obtained. See: "Schooling effects on higher education achievement" www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_32/ ; "Schooling effects on higher education achievement: further analysis - entry at 19", www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_09/

⁶¹ This added value, according to the Hefce report, might include accurate advice as to what questions are likely to come up, identification of examination boards, and syllabuses within those boards, where higher grades are more likely, and more active and effective appeals over the grades first awarded.

of state schools are not a reliable indicator of the academic potential of individual candidates - a pupil from a low performing state school with a certain level of grades will not necessarily do better than their peer from a high performing school.

For the most highly selective universities the effect of having been to a further education college or grant maintained school is unclear, though the analysis still finds that students from the majority of (Local Authority) state schools do consistently better than similar students from independent schools.

Apart from needing to be updated for more recent cohorts of pupils, a key limitation of the Hefce analyses however is that schools (and colleges) are characterised by their average A-level results -- not average GCSE results at age 16. This is a significant omission, particularly in the context of this report. Many pupils change school at age 16 to enrol at a different sixth form centre or college elsewhere, so the average A-level of the sixth form will have little connection or association with the school in which the pupil spent the crucial first five years, from age 11 to 16.

It may well be that pupils from particularly challenging schools during these formative years - characterised by relatively low GCSE averages - do not fulfil their true academic potential in their A-levels, and subsequently perform better during university. This scenario would be completely consistent with the findings from the Hefce studies. Indeed, the evidence identified in Chapter One of this report highlights the high attrition rates of academically able pupils in schools who do well in academic tests in their first five years, but who do less well in subsequent years, or who do not go onto higher education at all.

We believe research should be commissioned to bring up-to-date and extend the work carried out by Hefce on schooling effects. The efficacy of contextual information in predicting applicants' HE achievement should also be investigated. In particular the association between HE achievement and both the overall performance of the school students attended in year 11 and participating in a university access scheme should be assessed. This would help to build a more reliable evidence base on which to develop 'fair access' policies.

Evidence from UK universities

There remains a paucity of data from institutions on the outcomes of students involved in access programmes and outreach activities in the UK and overseas. But what is available suggests that the majority of students on schemes do well once in higher education. One problem is that simple comparisons between degree outcomes of students on schemes and other undergraduates do not take into account the A-level qualifications of the students - the single biggest factor predicting future degree outcomes. Another is that evaluations are not based on the random selection of students on schemes and therefore can not rule out the possibility that the students opting to take such schemes are a self-selecting group, with particular characteristics (high motivation for example) that are determining future HE outcomes, rather than the schemes themselves. Finally in many comparisons it is not clear that consideration has been taken into account of the degree subjects actually taken by students.

Access schemes

Some figures are now emerging on the progress made by students admitted with slightly lower A-level grades who have attended access initiatives at research intensive universities. In Birmingham, the quality of degree achieved by Access to Birmingham (A2B) students for example was found to be broadly similar to those of other students. A comparison of the achievements of A2B students with those of students accepted through the Clearing process⁶² and all degree recipients shows that A2B students were as likely to gain a First in their degree as all other students, and significantly more likely to do so than those accepted through Clearing. They were a little less likely than all students to achieve a 2:1 or 2:2 than all students⁶³ but, the overall achievements were strong, as the table below illustrates.

Degrees awarded to A2B Students by percentage compared to Clearing and the University cohorts

	First Class	Upper second	Lower second	Third/Ordinary
A2B (n47)	10.6	51.1	31.9	4.3
Clearing (164)	3	54.3	34.8	7.3
University (2514)	10.4	60.5	25.7	2.6

Total numbers of students in the three categories are shown in brackets.

⁶² Clearing is the process by which UK students who have failed to gain places on undergraduate degree courses are allocated to remaining university vacancies.

⁶³ Information supplied by the University of Birmingham

Evidence from a similar University of Leeds scheme, which began in 2003, has been collated for the 320 students who have now taken part. The achievements of students admitted through the programme have been broadly comparable with overall student achievement, although access students are more likely to gain a second class degree but less likely to get a Third or Ordinary degree, as the table shows⁶⁴.

Proportion of Access to Leeds students gaining degrees compared with all students

	First Class	Upper second	Lower second	Third/Ordinary
Access 2003	16.6	58.3	25	0
University 2003	11	59.7	25.3	3.9
Access 2004	0	68.0	26	6
University 2004	12.1	60.2	24	0.8
Access 2005	0	59.3	40.6	0
University 2005	15.3	57.1	23.5	3.8

Figures refer to year of entry, graduating three years later. 2005 figures exclude medicine and dentistry.

Retention figures from Leeds suggest that, although the figures vary from year to year, almost as many Access students last the first year as those from the university as a whole. Of 2006 entrants, 9.1% of access students didn't complete their first year, compared with 8.2% for the university overall.

Meanwhile the University of Manchester reported that in 2008 it made offers to 102 of the 139 students on the Manchester Access Programme (MAP). 73 students progressed into Manchester, with 7 others going on to study at other highly selective universities.

Contextual offers

As detailed in the previous chapter, there is also some evidence emerging from the use of contextual information when selecting students. St George's Medical School in London reported that its Adjusted Criteria students scored an average

⁶⁴ Information supplied by the University of Leeds

of 65.41% in their first-year final exams, while standard-offer students scored an average of 65.69%⁶⁵.

Outreach schemes

Other surveys have documented the outcomes of students on outreach schemes. Nearly nine out of ten students (88%) responding to a survey who attended a Sutton Trust university summer school, for example, graduated with a 2:1 or first class degree. This compared with 56% of students achieving these classifications nationally, and 67% in leading research universities (where most summer school students enrol).

While this is likely to be an over-estimate of the proportion of Sutton Trust summer school students gaining top degrees, as those who received higher degree classes were more likely to respond than those who did not, it does suggest that a high proportion of these students do go on to achieve very good degrees. This was backed up by a separate analysis at Nottingham University which found that 78.6% of all summer school students admitted to the university received 2.1s or Firsts in their degrees. This compared with 75.5% of students receiving these classifications at the university as a whole.

In Scotland meanwhile, a tracking project of 2001 entrants on the Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) showed that they had better than average first year completion rates compared with other comparable students⁶⁶. The programme works with students, teachers and parents through student tutoring, student shadowing, workshops, one to one interviews, an annual summer school and a pre-application enquiry service -- 66% of 1509 LEAPs participants went on to university in 2008⁶⁷.

The evidence suggests that LEAPS students perform at least as well as more traditional students. 87% of LEAPS students successfully complete first year and, as expected, the greatest attrition is at the end of first year. The levels of success for LEAPS students are higher than the corresponding Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures for young students from low participation

⁶⁵ See: <http://www.sgul.ac.uk/media/news-archive/2008/widening-participation>. The first year exam results for the five-year medicine course were measured between 2003 and 2006, with 35 adjusted criteria students measured against 555 non-adjusted criteria students.

⁶⁶ P McClements Tracking LEAPS students through their years in Higher Education (available at www.leapsonline.org)

⁶⁷ Figures available at www.leapsonline.org

neighbourhoods (for Scotland) which ranged from 81% to 84% for the academic years in the study.

Overseas evidence

There have been a number of evaluations of the percent schemes in the US. An assessment in 2002 of the impact of the percent plan in Texas concluded that students gaining admission to the University of Texas by gaining a place in the top 10% of their school (and undertaking the university's applications process) outperformed their lower ranked counterparts with significantly higher SAT test scores. It also, in the words of the researchers, provided evidence to "defy predictions that high achieving students from underperforming schools are destined for failure because they are ill-prepared for college level academic work"⁶⁸.

The study also found that the initiative had not led to a feared 'brain drain' to out-of-state universities - a fear not unlike that expressed by critics of contextual initiatives in UK universities who worry that universities will lose able independent school students. Significantly, the study also noted the importance of university outreach programmes in attracting such students. Yet even with such outreach, the programme, while improving the odds of students from high schools with low college-going traditions, had not equalised their chances with their counterparts from typical high schools.

Tienda et al.'s study also suggested that the elite campuses involved in percent plans would have admitted the great majority of students eligible under the plan anyway - at least after the first few years of the scheme⁶⁹. Principally this was because such schemes often do not give direct entry to the most highly-ranked colleges. Although for Texas at least this is not now the case. In early 2009, the flagship University of Texas at Austin raised concerns that students enrolled through the 10 percent plan now make up 8 in 10 of students enrolled, and more recently the Texas Legislature voted for a cap on the number of students let in under the rule at three-quarters of enrolments, giving university officials discretion over the makeup of the last quarter of their student intake⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ Tienda, M and Niu, S.X., "Flagships, Feeders, and the Texas Top 10% Law: A Test of the "Brain Drain" Hypothesis" in *The Journal of Higher Education* - Volume 77, Number 4, July/August 2006, pp. 712-739

⁶⁹ See also: Horn, C. L. and Flores, S.M. 2003. *Percent Plans in College Admissions: A Comparative Analysis of Three States' Experiences*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, p. 59

⁷⁰ See: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/education/31texas.html?_r=2&ref=global-home

More recent research meanwhile has indicated that once in the elite institutions, minority students prosper academically. One study found that minority students in Texas were significantly more likely to graduate if they enrolled at a competitive institution through the 10 percent plan than if they enrolled at a less competitive, and theoretically easier, institution⁷¹.

Outside the US, what evidence is available on the outcomes of students on alternative admissions schemes suggests that once on degree courses they also do as well as other students that have gained entry through traditional routes.

Trinity College in Dublin for example has reported lower non-completion rates of students enrolled through its access programmes (11%) than the average Trinity rate of 16.2% or the Irish national rate of 16.8%. In France, the Sciences Po has reported that the academic results of students once at university are comparable with other students⁷².

Wider benefits

While the focus on academic outcomes - such as degree classes - is important, the international literature suggests that efforts to identify prospective university candidates from non-privileged backgrounds should not be judged solely in these terms. Of course it is absolutely critical that any schemes aimed at attracting pupils with unfulfilled academic potential enrol only those pupils who will prosper in the more intensive academic environments of research intensive universities. However, the ultimate success of the schemes must be what happens to students after they graduate, for example in terms of the role they play in their community or as leaders in their chosen field. Unfortunately, evidence on post university destinations is even more sparse than on academic outcomes.

The case for the wider benefits of widening access to university has been articulated most powerfully in the 1999 book 'The Shape of the River' published in the US by two former Ivy League Presidents, William G. Bowen & Derek Bok⁷³.

The background to the Bowen and Bok publication was the preferences awarded to black pupils by selective colleges in the US in particular. But there

⁷¹ <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/01/12/tenpercent>

⁷² http://www.sciences-po.fr/upload/Espace_presse/Dossiers_thematiques/CEP_action_pionniere.pdf

⁷³ See <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/6374.html>

are clear resonances with the parallel debate in the UK over the extent to which university admissions should take into account different factors - for example school or family background - when considering pupils from less advantaged homes.

Bowen and Bok draw on an unprecedented analysis of data on the outcomes of black and white students across a range of selective US colleges. This found that black students enrolled with slightly lower SAT scores onto degree courses had slightly lower graduation rates than white students⁷⁴. However, it was argued that these academic 'costs' were more than off-set both by the intrinsic value of a diverse student population to all the students' education, and the belief that colleges were selecting those who would become leaders in different walks of life after university. Graduates of the elite colleges, for example, were found to earn more in their careers than college graduates in general, whether they were black or white.

The authors liken university admission decisions to 'long-term investment decisions involving the creation of human and social capital' in which higher risks may be taken, in return for the possibility of a very high social return in the long-term. Following Bowen and Bok's publication, other US studies have also indicated that minority students are no less successful after university graduation than their white counterparts⁷⁵.

While there is no equivalent data on the longer term outcomes of students in the UK, it should be nonetheless recognised that academic results tell only part of the story of student success.

⁷⁴ The six-year graduation rate for those entering a particular set of US colleges in 1989 was 86 percent for whites and 75 percent for blacks. When one takes into account student transfers to other colleges, these rates rise to 79 percent for blacks, and to 94 percent for whites.

⁷⁵ See for example: <http://www.diversity.umich.edu/research/RiverRunsThroughLawSchool.pdf>

CHAPTER FOUR: Piloting a new approach in the UK

Clearly from the evidence presented in this report there is no panacea when it comes to making admissions to highly-selective universities equitable. The approaches examined in this study all have their strengths and weaknesses, winner and losers, and some are more likely to take root in UK higher education than others.

Yet there are certainly lessons to be learnt from innovative practices here and overseas about how we should be identifying and supporting talented students on a pathway to highly-selective higher education courses. It is also the case that there is an imperative to try a new approach in the UK - despite a strong focus on widening participation and fair access for over a decade, the chances of accessing an elite university education are still unevenly spread and there is some evidence that progress has stalled in recent years.

In particular, the analysis presented in this report shows that there is a strong local dimension to the access problem. A staggering eighty percent of disadvantaged young people live within 40 minutes of a highly-selective university, and 50 percent live within 20 minutes travel time; yet just one in 25 of disadvantaged young people enter these universities, compared to one in four of their affluent peers. In fact the presence of elite universities near areas of considerable deprivation seems to have little impact on participation - overall, poorer students in these neighbourhoods are no more likely to go to a selective institution than if they lived many miles away from the campuses.

Of course, the principal reason for this is not inequality in admissions, but in achievement and applications - too few students from poorer backgrounds get the A level grades needed to enter these top institutions and too few apply. But it is not sufficient to say that the answer lies solely in improving secondary school standards; diverting attention to such an intractable and difficult task - important though it is - is a recipe for inaction on other fronts. Rather, we need to consider approaches which start sufficiently early on in school to motivate and support students to high levels of attainment and, intertwined with that, which raise their medium and long term aspirations with a clear and achievable goal in sight.

Applying lessons from overseas to the UK

The Sutton Trust is therefore proposing to trial a modification of a US percent scheme (please see details below) at a handful of highly-selective UK universities, which combines elements of many different programmes. The attractiveness of the percent scheme is the clarity of the selection process (a straight percentage) and outcome (a guaranteed place), which in turn means the system is easily communicable to young people. As a tool for widening access it is also an attractive approach as it is more likely to translate into changes in actual student numbers - the university see the benefits of the scheme in a very direct manner.

While the scheme we propose will select a proportion of students from local schools and offer a guarantee of a university place, in crucial ways it will be different. Firstly, unlike in many US states, the scheme will pave the way to a specific highly-selective university, rather than to any or a range of higher education establishments. Secondly, the initiative will be about more than providing a simple guarantee at the admissions stage for high-performers - it will be combined with a sustained outreach and access programme. This, we hope, will ensure that students are supported to do their very best academically, to make informed choices about their future, and that those from poorer backgrounds - who may, for example, have concerns about fitting in at selective universities - will have the confidence to take up a place. It will also mean, we hope, that the programme has a whole-school impact in terms of raising aspirations and improving information, advice and guidance for those outside the selective few. The final main difference from a conventional percent scheme is that our initiative is targeted rather than universal. With limited resources, there seems little point in providing a package of support to students who are already realising places at highly selective universities and who prosper without any additional intervention.

The pilot programme also avoids imposing simple student quotas based on socio-economic status or school type. While there are benefits to the sort of approach adopted by the Australian Educational Access Initiative and the Trinity Access Programme in Ireland, there are also risks, particularly around the perception of lowering standards and 'social engineering', which are significant in terms of the viability and future scalability of the model. For similar reasons, we do not propose that random allocation of university places is a realistic prospect in the UK at present.

And finally, we have steered the programme away from attempts to find new ways, beyond A levels and other public examinations, of identifying talented students. Young people are already faced with a disorientating array of qualifications - A levels, 14-19 diplomas, the International Baccalaureate, the Pre-U - as well as an increasing number of subject- and institution-specific tests. While the potential of alternative forms of assessment (such as the Rainbow Project at Tufts) is important in the UK access debate, we do not want to further crowd a landscape which already disadvantages those from non-privileged homes by its complexity.

It should also be emphasised that while based on sound evidence, the project is very much intended to be a trial. Although there will be an immediate and direct benefit to those who take part, we will want to see whether the scheme does indeed achieve what it sets out to in broader terms and - critically - whether students who progress do well once at university. The results of this will help to inform the type of access initiatives we and others (notably the government) should be supporting.

The Pilot Scheme - a possible approach

The Sutton Trust Elite Pathways (STEP) pilot scheme aims to support a proportion of academically able students from local schools on a pathway to a highly-selective university, while raising aspirations in the schools more widely. The pilot aims to relay a very simple message early on to bright pupils in disadvantaged schools: achieve highly and you will get a personalised route to a top university with commensurate financial and other support. The Trust is talking to a handful of highly-selective universities about developing a pilot project across a number of sites to begin in the next academic year. Discussions are at an early stage and no firm plans have been made. Below, however, is an outline of how the pilot scheme might look.

How does it work?

In many ways STEP is about joining up existing initiatives in to one clearly communicable and navigable package, underpinned by an admissions guarantee at a leading university, should the student reach a minimum standard of academic achievement and participation. A certain proportion (say five or ten percent) of top performers at each school in the pilot area would be identified.

The scheme would start pre-GCSE - students could be selected on predicted (or mock) GCSE results, teacher nomination, previous test scores or a combination of all of these. Alternatively, the programme might be outlined - and the initial support offered - to a wider group in years 10 and 11, but identification of the targeted STEP students would not happen until after GCSE results were known.

Which schools are included in the pilot would depend on the local context - the formula need not be the same for each of the pilot sites; indeed, one purpose of the pilot is to test which of a number of selection methods is most effective. One university might choose to select a percentage from the schools closest to their campus, for example; another might prefer to target certain demographic or academic characteristics, where support is particularly needed. It will be important, though, that the schools selected are facing disadvantage and have low progression rates to highly-selective universities. The participating university would agree to deliver a series of support and advice sessions for the STEP students, as well as offering them an admissions route, conditional on them gaining a required minimum level of achievement at A level or equivalent, participation in designated activities and demonstration of their potential.

Schools

All schools in the pilot programme would have access to an enhanced programme of information and advice sessions aimed at students at the end of key stage 3. The purpose would be to give young people the information they need to make informed choices about their studies at 14 - and where, realistically, this might lead them in terms of future education and career options. Local schools would also be expected to identify one staff member with responsibility for the STEP programme, who would have access to training opportunities around subject choices and HE applications. A resource pack for participating schools would also be developed.

All STEP students

The selected STEP students would be able to access a programme of advice sessions, mentoring and academic booster and revision classes from year 11 through to year 13. This programme could be similar, for instance, to schemes the Trust has already funded at Leeds (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ace/access/rfe.htm>) and at Nottingham (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/aep/programmeinfo.php>). This may be more light

touch in year 11, providing some basic guidance on subject choices and the transition to FE, and more intensive in years 12 and 13. Eligibility for the programme follows the pupil; for students in 11-16 schools it continues into their sixth form institution.

Targeted STEP students

STEP students from low income homes would also be guaranteed a financial support package which would be clearly communicated from the outset. This need not be new money, but a repackaging in simple terms of the support the pilot universities already offer through bursary programmes.

The Guarantee

An important and distinguishing feature of the programme is that it offers an admissions guarantee to the student, provided certain academic thresholds are met and that participation in certain activities is completed and students demonstrate their potential. It is important that this guarantee is simple enough to be communicated from year 11 as a headline promise (there will of course be specific requirements that can be fleshed out as the student progresses and, for example, their subject choice becomes clear) and that it is of a substantial enough nature to be an effective incentive, or guiding light, to the student. STEP students may, for example, be guaranteed a place on their chosen course provided they meet the minimum standard entry requirements. Or they may be made an alternative offer (for example, an A and two Bs rather than three As), conditional on them completing an extra element of the programme (for example, an extended project).

STEP students who fail to meet their university offer but who show potential maybe given access to a foundation year by the participating university, with the aim of starting an undergraduate course the year after.

Delivery

The programme would be delivered through a partnership of the participating universities with local education authorities, schools and colleges, plus other relevant agencies (for example Regional Development Agencies, Aimhigher) and third sector organisations. The Sutton Trust would play a brokerage,

development and advocacy role, as well as overseeing the evaluation of the pilot.

Gifted and Talented

We plan to discuss with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills and the Department for Children, Schools and Families how best to position the pilot in the context of current policy and initiatives to support fair access and improve gifted and talented education. For example, we would like to explore whether fruitful links can be established between this pilot and the targeted support programme for disadvantaged gifted 14-19 year-olds currently under development in DCSF.

Evaluation and timeline

The efficacy of the pilot scheme would be rigorously evaluated and the STEP students' progress tracked (against a control group if possible).

An important concept behind the scheme is that the prospect of being amongst a selected few on a pathway to an elite university would raise aspirations for all pupils in the school from year 7 upwards. Ideally, therefore, we would want to see the impact of the scheme on an entire cohort of pupils starting secondary school and continuing through to the end of their degrees.

But realistically - bearing in mind funding constraints and the evolving policy landscape - a meaningful pilot could span three years - picking up students in year 11 and continuing to support them in years 12 and 13, until their university destinations were known. Interim results could also be used to gauge the success of the scheme as it developed.

Appendix 1: List of highly selective universities

This list comprises universities in Scotland, England and Wales with over 500 undergraduate entrants each year, where it is estimated that less than 10 per cent of places are attainable to pupils with 200 UCAS tariff points (equivalent to two D grades and a C grade at A-level) or less⁷⁶.

University of Bath
University of Birmingham
University of Bristol
University of Cambridge
Cardiff University
University of Durham
University of Edinburgh
University of Exeter
University of Glasgow
Imperial College
King's College London
Lancaster University
University of Leeds
University of Leicester
University of Liverpool
London School of Economics & Political Science
University of Manchester
University of Newcastle
University of Nottingham
University of Oxford
University of Reading
Royal Holloway, University of London
University of Sheffield
University of Southampton
University of St Andrews
University of Strathclyde
University of Surrey
University College London
University of Warwick
University of York

⁷⁶ For details of these criteria, see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/2008/challenge/>