Advancing Access and Admissions

The Sutton Trust Summit
November 2013

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Improving
social mobility
through education

Introduction

The Sutton Trust's two-day summit on university access and admissions to leading universities around the world drew more than 80 academics and senior administrators to London. Delegates heard from two ministers, underlining the importance that governments attach to access issues. The summit took place in the week that David Cameron made widely-reported comments on universities and social mobility, while Michelle Obama embarked on a new role trying to raise aspirations among disadvantaged young people in the United States.

Opening the conference, Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, said that universities recognised that fair access was important, but social disparities remained on both sides of the Atlantic. "I think we need a more level playing field," he said. "It is not just about fairness. It is about the national interest and basic economics. We are not using all the most talented people."
The sessions showed striking similarities in the difficulties faced by the top universities in different countries in trying to widen access to their institutions. Even with needs-blind admission removing the financial barriers to admission at some Ivy League institutions, the underrepresentation of students from poor backgrounds was comparable on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, the presentations also highlighted important contrasts, particularly between the British and American systems, that help to explain key differences of approach. These extended into academic as well as financial areas.

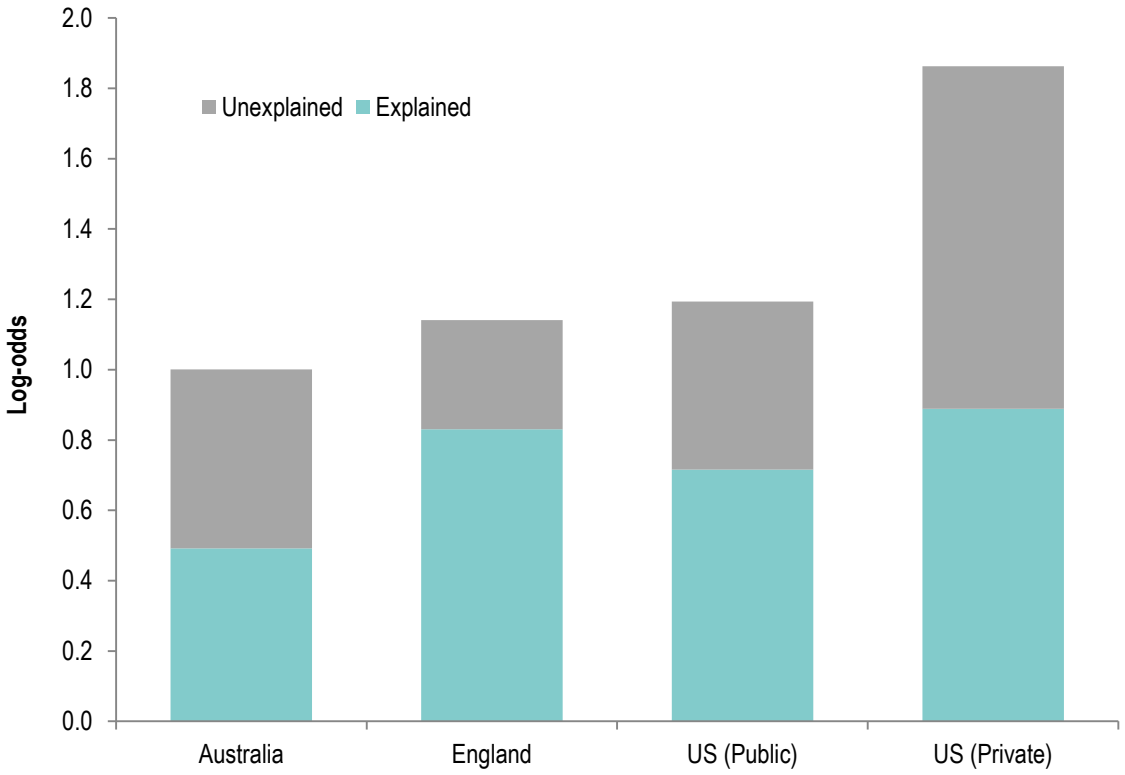
Above all, the summit demonstrated how seriously the leading universities take access issues. Among those making presentations were the heads of admissions at Harvard, Yale, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Oxford and Cambridge, all of whom spoke candidly about the challenges they faced in trying to broaden their intakes.

Background

Research by Dr John Jerrim, of the Institute of Education at the University of London and commissioned by the Sutton Trust for the summit, showed that children with professional parents in the UK, Australia and the US are approximately three times more likely to enter a high-status university (rather than one with lower status) than those with working-class parents. While attainment in secondary education accounts for most of the gap in participation at the top universities, more than a quarter of the difference remains unexplained. “This suggests that there are significant numbers of working class children who, even though they have the academic ability to attend, choose to enter a non-selective institution instead,” his report said.

Dr Jerrim found that a smaller proportion of the gap between rich and poor was unexplained in England than in Australia or the US. While 73 per cent of the difference could be attributed to prior attainment in England, the equivalent figure for the leading US private universities was only 48 per cent. However, the research showed that the social composition of the student body at elite universities was similar in the US and England. The universities that make up the Sutton Trust 13 had rather more students from middle-income families, but the proportion from the poorest homes was well below 10 per cent in both countries.

Figure 1. Social class differences in access to ‘high status’ universities across selected countries



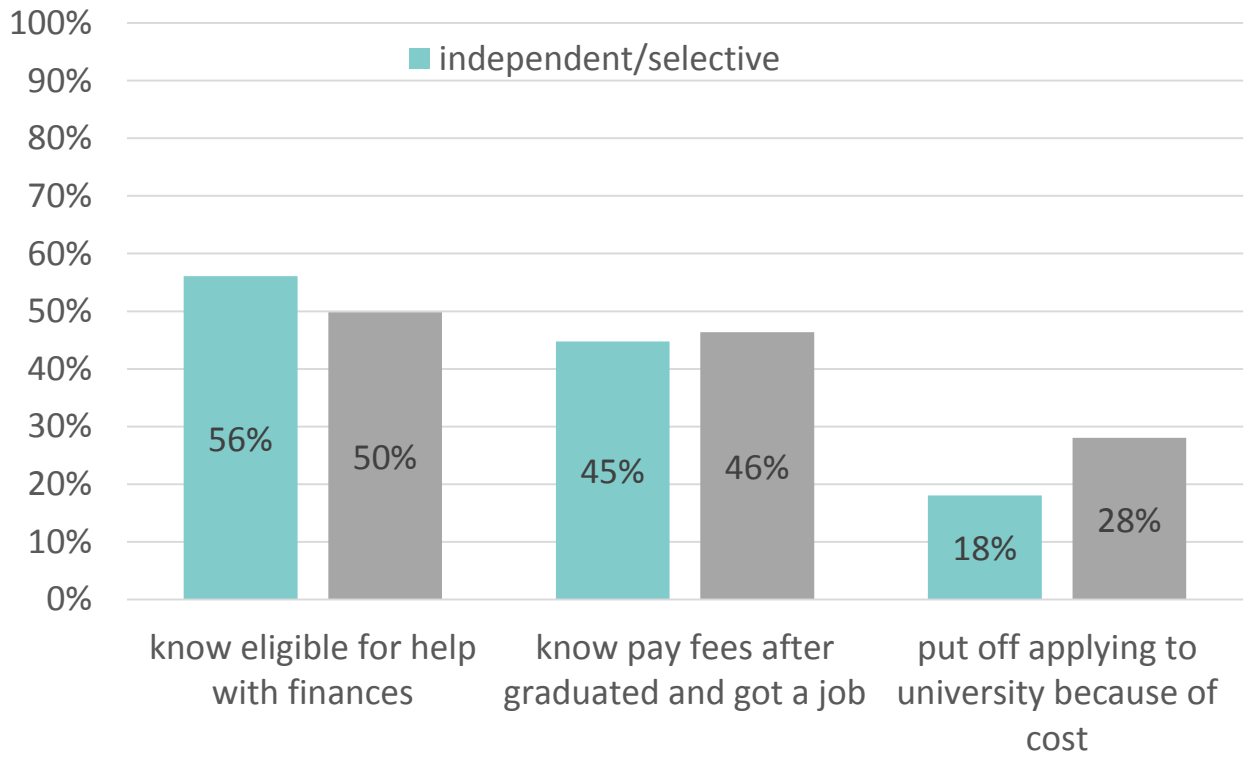
Notes: Source = Jerrim, Chmielewski and Parker (forthcoming). Definitions of ‘high status’. England = Russell Group. Australia = Group of Eight. United States = ‘Highly selective’ (Carnegie classification)

Cost comparisons later challenged by David Willetts, the Universities Minister, suggested that the plentiful financial support available at American Ivy League universities made a degree there less expensive for students from poor backgrounds than one from a leading UK institution. Including living costs and tuition, the ‘sticker price’ of going to Oxford, for example, is £16,600, compared with £37,333 at Harvard. But means-tested support at Harvard brings the cost down to little more than £2,000 a year with a work-study programme, whereas even with some of the most generous bursaries in the UK, a student with the same family income would face costs of £11,300 at Oxford. Dr Jerrim conceded that the availability of income-contingent student loans made it hard to compare the true cost of higher education in the two countries.

Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, said applications by 18-year-olds to undergraduate courses were near record levels and the highest ever among disadvantaged groups, despite the introduction of £9,000 fees. “I think the reason that this has happened is that we have been successful so far in explaining that what we have in fact introduced is a form of graduate tax,” Dr Cable said, although he acknowledged that enrolments by part-time and mature students had dropped since higher fees were introduced.

Research by Dr Gill Wyness, research officer at the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, supported Dr Cable’s contention that the basics of the new fee arrangements were well understood by teenagers. Interviews with 15-year-olds showed that most knew the level of fees they would have to pay and a high proportion thought that a degree would lead to higher earnings, although 28 per cent of state school pupils were still put off by the cost. More than a third of independent school interviewees and almost 60 per cent of those at state schools thought their choice of university would make no difference to future earnings. Similar numbers thought the same about their choice of school subjects, although several speakers at the summit confirmed that poor advice on subject choices was narrowing sixth-formers’ university options and thereby limiting their career prospects.

Figure 2. What do students know about the cost of HE?



15 year olds, n=12,244, 2010/2011
Source: Gill Wyness, Centre for Economic Performance, 2013

Dr Jerrim’s research demonstrated the importance of both these factors. In both the United States and England, graduates from leading universities enjoyed a salary premium of at least 6 per cent over those from other universities, although David Willetts, the Universities Minister, argued that some salary differences could be traced back to class differences, rather than higher education.

Mr Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, mounted a passionate defence of £9,000 undergraduate fees, describing critics of the system as “plain wrong”. He said the UK system of income-contingent loans was much fairer to poor students than the American equivalent, in spite of the range of scholarships and bursaries available there.

Outreach or financial aid (or both)?

Debates at the conference suggested that while leading universities on both sides of the Atlantic employ both outreach activities and financial aid programmes to attract more students from low-income homes, there is a growing difference in emphasis between the US and UK approaches. While the effectiveness of bursaries and scholarships has been questioned in the UK, where loans cover the cost of tuition, many American undergraduates would be unable to afford the much higher fees at Ivy League institutions without significant support.

Rebekah Westphal, Director of International Admissions at Yale University, said her institution had no doubts about the importance of means-tested financial aid, which went to 60 per cent of its students. Admission has been 'needs-blind' since 2001 and Yale spends $120m (£73m) a year supporting students from less affluent families.

However, Yale also has an extensive outreach programme, which extends to international students as well as the domestic market. Yale makes particular efforts to recruit students from rural areas, who are traditionally underrepresented, and subscribes to the QuestBridge scheme, which matches promising students from poor homes to leading universities.

Stuart Schmill, Dean of Admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), said all access measures were expensive. At MIT, less than a third of the students paid the full undergraduate fees of $43,500 (£26,500). Those with a family income of less than $75,000 (£45,700) paid nothing. Students graduate from MIT with average debt of $18,000 (£11,000), but enjoy average starting salaries of $67,000 (£40,800).

MIT in Numbers

Tuition fee (sticker price):	$43,498
Percent receiving need-based financial aid:	61%
Average MIT need-based scholarship:	$33,697
Net tuition for families that earn $75K or less:	$0
Percent of student body paying $0 tuition:	32%
Total MIT scholarship support:	$87.1M
Percent of graduating students with debt:	41%
Average total debt on graduation:	$17,900
Average starting salary:	$66,900

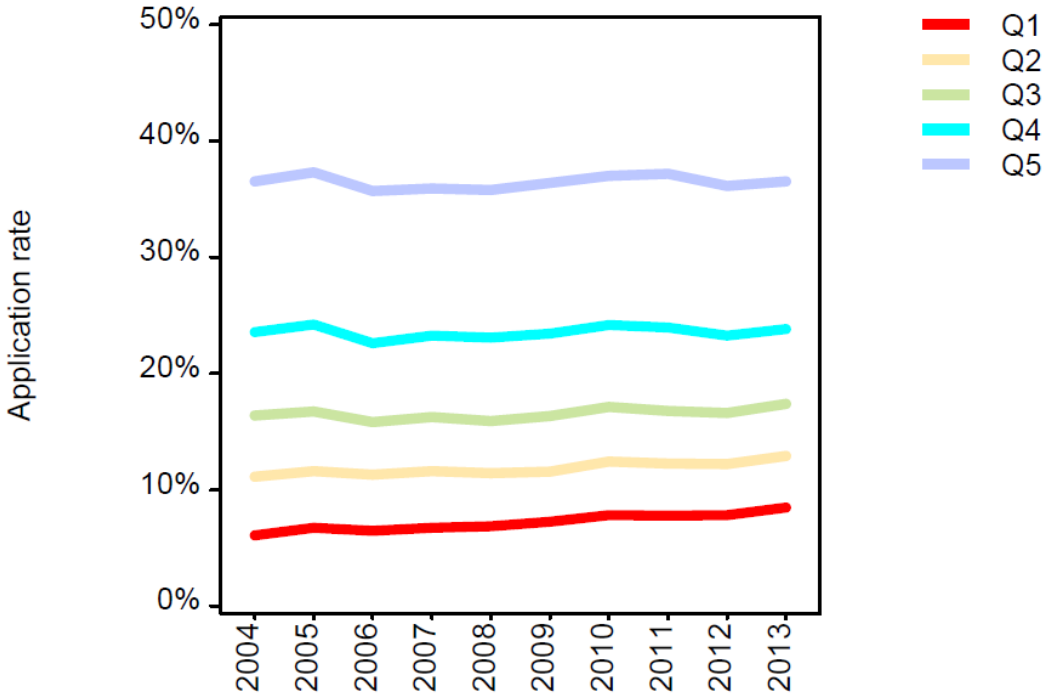
Mr Schmill said that MIT prices its degrees according to what it believes families can afford, rather than what they are prepared to pay. Even those students who were charged the full fee were paying only half the true cost.

Professor Les Ebdon, the Director of Fair Access, said research evidence in the UK and his own experience as a vice-chancellor suggested that outreach activities were by far the most effective method of engaging young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and yet universities continued to spend more on bursaries and scholarships. "Good outreach starts in primary schools and is particularly important for selective universities because one of the key things they need is to grow the applicant pool," he said.

Professor Ebdon said there had been a "mixed story" on widening participation since undergraduate fees had been increased in England. "Across the whole sector, there has been a significant increase in applicants from low-income families, albeit from a very low base," he said. "But there are still

problems with the most selective universities, where children from the wealthiest families are up to eight times more likely to win places than the most disadvantaged."

Figure 3. Application rates for English 18 year olds to higher tariff institutions



*POLAR2 classification
Source: UCAS publication, Demand for full-time undergraduate higher education (2013 cycle, March deadline)

A forthcoming strategy for widening participation in higher education would stress the importance of partnerships between schools and universities, as well as greater engagement with parents. Professor Ebdon urged universities to make more use of students as ambassadors to encourage more applications from groups that have been least likely to consider higher education.
More than £800 million has been spent on access measures in recent years, Professor Ebdon said. "I am not asking for more spend from universities in this area, but I am asking for a smarter spend based on what works."

Dr Sally Mapstone, Pro Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, challenged the growing consensus, supported by Professor Ebdon, that bursaries and scholarships were ineffective in widening participation. Particularly in an intensive teaching environment like Oxford's, it was essential to give students the time to focus on their course, rather than taking termtime employment. Both Oxford and Cambridge ban termtime jobs because they consider their terms too short to allow any distractions. At American universities, by contrast, part-time campus jobs form a central role in making a degree affordable for students from low or middle-income families. At Harvard, for example, one British student, earns £144 for a 12-hour week working in the finance office.

Dr Mapstone said Oxford's outreach activities were focused on schools, whether in the state or independent sectors, that had little tradition of sending students to Oxford, with programmes directed at teachers as well as pupils. "Teachers' views can be transformative for pupils' impressions of Oxford," she said.

At Cambridge University, the budget for outreach activities was £2.7m, according to Jon Beard, the Director of Undergraduate Recruitment. Of the 12,000 young people attending outreach events, 35

per cent subsequently applied to Cambridge and 25 per cent of those who applied won a place. He said financial support for students from low-income homes was now generous, although he was "less convinced" about provision for those from middle-income families.

Cambridge has a particular focus on "singletons", bright pupils in low-performing schools who do not have like-minded peers with whom to discuss university applications, who are usually the first in their family to consider higher education and whose teachers are not used to dealing with students at this level. About 1,700 young people are involved in consortia put together by the university to enable them to meet others in the same position, as well as attending masterclasses and receiving curriculum enrichment.

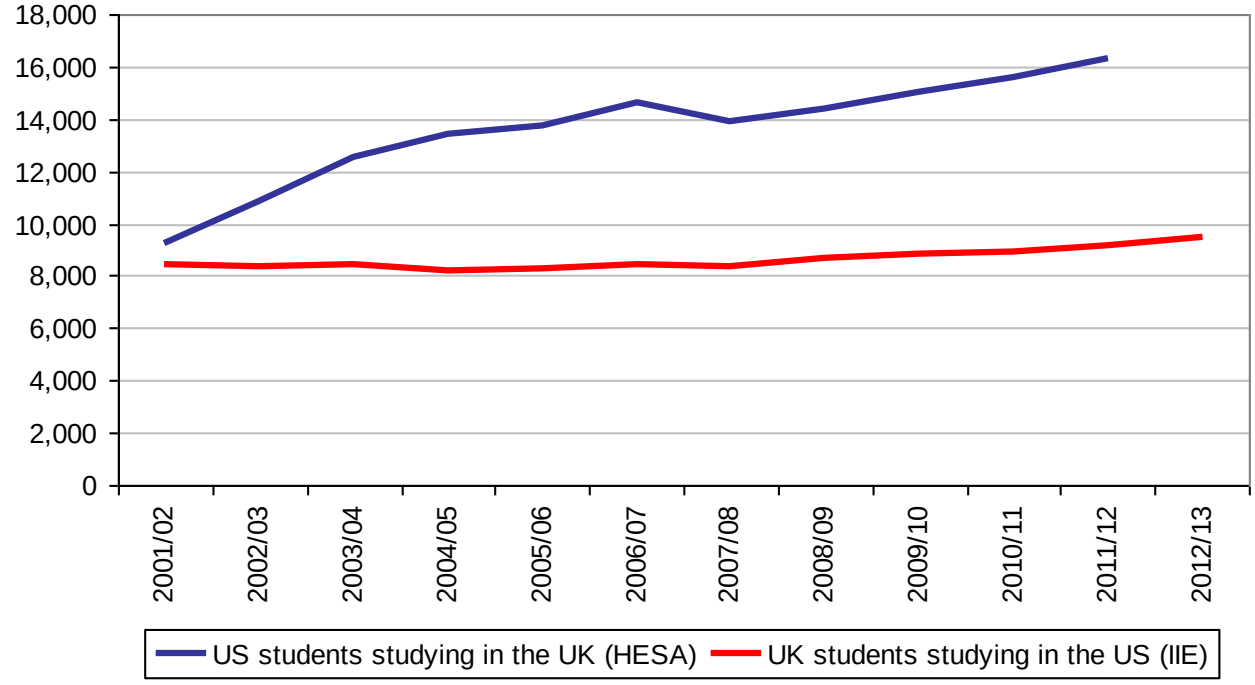
Other outreach activities now started at a young age. "You need sustained engagement with younger pupils to really influence their decisions," Mr Beard said. But he was critical of the likely impact of the Governments reforms at A and AS Level. "We are deeply concerned that the loss of choice and flexibility at A level will result in students making the wrong choices that they cannot later correct," he said.

In France, fees are much lower, if they are charged at all, but there is little financial support for those from poor backgrounds. Aline de Salinelles, Director General of the Fondation Dauphine, said the government had set up a programme to fund local initiatives building bridges between schools and universities. She explained how high school students were identified and supported, but that there was no consideration of the financial circumstances of applicants from other parts of the country.

Three breakout sessions focused on the detailed operation of outreach schemes, including those run by the Sutton Trust itself. Despite attempts to achieve the widest possible coverage, there was evidence that some schools and colleges were receiving a disproportionate share of outreach activity while others were still relatively untouched. It was also difficult to trace the outcomes from all of the Trust's activities – something that was also noted in relation to university schemes.

In his speech, Mr Willetts supported the Trust's efforts to stimulate interest in the leading US universities, as well as those in the UK, among disadvantaged young people. He said: "I see such student exchange as entirely positive. It is not something we should be ashamed of or embarrassed by." There was no evidence of a brain drain from the UK to the US, Mr Willetts argued, adding that he hoped to see more student mobility in both directions. "At present, very few British students study abroad," he added. "For every 15 foreign students studying in the UK, there is just one UK student studying abroad. In an increasingly global economy, this means we are missing out on vital skills, which is why we are encouraging our young people to study overseas as part of our International Education Strategy."

Movement of Students between UK and the US



Source: David Willetts presentation, November 2013

A separate session on the professions suggested considerable willingness to address access issues, however. Property firms had donated £500,000 to support a 'Pathways to Property' scheme in an area where 70 per cent of entrants traditionally come from independent schools and a limited range of universities. In the legal profession, firms were beginning to broaden their search for talent, partly due to the demands of their clients for more diverse representation.

Selection

Differences between leading US and UK universities in the methods – and perhaps even the aims – of selecting candidates were laid bare in several sessions. American universities were able to 'talent spot' in high schools and approach potential recruits in a way that data protection legislation would not permit in the UK.

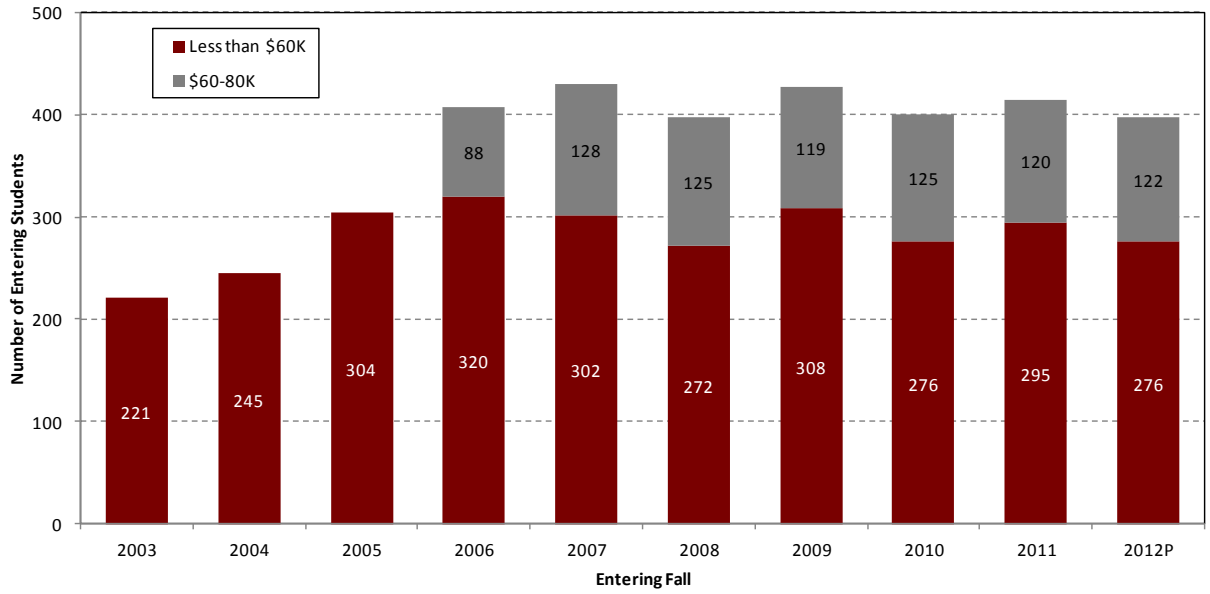
More significantly, perhaps, the specialist programmes followed by undergraduates throughout degree programmes in the UK required different selection processes to the broader degrees offered in the US. Academics were needed to judge the suitability of candidates for the UK model, whereas professional admissions staff could use broader criteria for admission in America. Possibly as a result of this, US universities often speak of searching for future leaders and those who will have outstanding careers, whereas in the UK the search for talent is more often couched in terms of potential excellence as students.

Mike Nicholson, Oxford's Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, said the need to recruit for specialist courses posed additional problems for widening access. In medicine, for example, 75 per cent of the applicants were state-educated, whereas for other degrees, such as classics, the proportion was much lower because relatively few state schools taught the subjects. Oxford's selection system was now much more open-minded than in previous decades. Some 1,600 academics were involved, half of them educated outside the UK and most not Oxford or Cambridge graduates. Three to ten people read each application and a basket of measures was used to set each one in context in order to find the best candidates, regardless of background.

Mr Nicholson said there was no difference in application rates between independent and state schools among candidates who achieved three As at A level. "You can't expect universities to sort out schools," he said.

Dr Marlyn McGrath, Harvard's Director of Admissions, said she shared a "sense of inadequacy" on the question of widening access, but the university was spending $162m (almost £99m) a year on scholarships and now took a third of its students from schools with a high proportion of low and middle-income families' children. She said Harvard was "open to talent, not wealth and privilege."

Change in low income students after the introduction of Harvard Financial Aid Initiative
The number of students who qualified for HFAI by Income



(Zero Parental Contribution (PC) up to $40K and reduced PC up to $60K for Entering Fall 2004 and 2005, up to $60K and $80K for Entering Fall 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011 and up to $65K and $80K for Entering Fall 2012)*
Source: McGrath, November 2013

Like other speakers from American universities, Dr McGrath took for granted the use of contextual information in judging applications. She said that the correlation between test scores and parental income was strong, so they were used sparingly in admissions decisions. Dr McGrath said Harvard's approach to selecting students regarded quality and access as part of the same goal. For more than a century it had been committed to increasing access to all segments of American society, as well as improving the quality of entrants. While the use of contextual data remains controversial among some opinion-formers in the UK, leading American universities are open about its use.

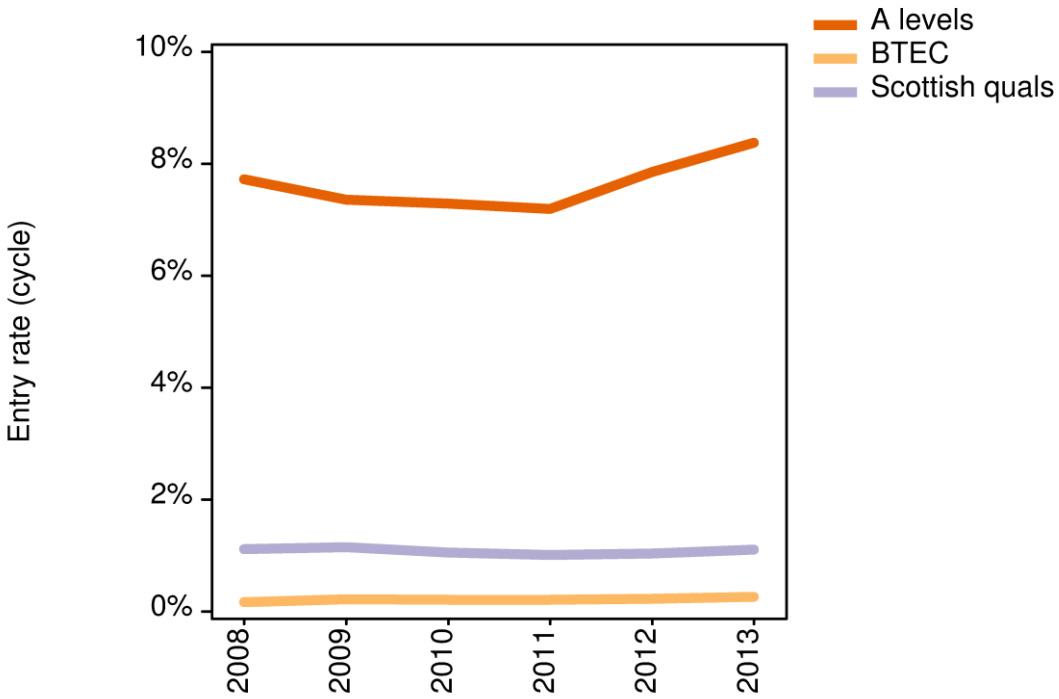
Another difference in approach between US and UK universities that was apparent at the summit was the greater American emphasis on extra-curricular activities in assessing applications. "We know that non-academic accomplishments may be surrogates for success in college life," Dr McGrath said. "Character and personal qualities matter, although we don't have a crystal ball." Like most of the leading universities on both sides of the Atlantic, Harvard had seen large increases in the numbers of international students, as well as more students from families in the bottom half of American income. Harvard costs no more than a state university for 93 per cent of Americans, Dr McGrath said.

Research by Caroline Hoxby, of Stanford University, and Sarah Turner, of the University of Virginia, showed that high-achieving students from poor backgrounds often applied to less selective colleges that would cost them more than an Ivy League education because of a lack of information about the opportunities and support available to them. The complexity of applications processes was one of the barriers to wider participation mentioned by several speakers.

In the UK, tens of thousands of teenagers are denying themselves the opportunity of studying at the top universities by taking vocational courses in the sixth-form or at college, Mary Curnock Cook, the chief executive of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, told the summit.

Ms Curnock Cook said the number of students admitted to higher education with vocational qualifications had increased fivefold in a decade, but few were accepted by the most selective universities. Because BTEC and other vocational qualifications were concentrated in the comprehensive schools and further education colleges attended by most young people from poor families, this was adding to the barriers facing those groups.

UK 18 year old entry rate to Higher Tariff HEIs by qualification held
Day 28 after A level results



Source: Curnock Cook, November 2013

Only 1 per cent of independent schools – which were the most tightly focused on admission to the top universities – were offering BTEC courses, compared with 82 per cent of non-selective state schools and colleges. Ms Curnock Cook said she expected the take-up of vocational courses to rise if A-level reform made the academic route tougher, making the extension of access to leading universities an “uphill struggle”.

Ms Curnock Cook also highlighted the widening gender gap in higher education, with more women entering university than there were men applying. She said if nothing was done to redress the balance, a similar conference in ten years’ time would be dominated by gender issues. However, Harvard and Oxford both reported that men still outnumbered women at their institutions.

The summit was reminded that the traditional methods are not the only means of selecting students when Olle ten Cate outlined the lottery approach used in the Netherlands to distribute medical school places. With 9,000 applications for 3,000 places, candidates are weighted according to their academic performance so that those with the best results have three times the chance of admission of those with average scores. Below a pre-determined score, candidates are rejected, but the rest are placed in the draw.

The system has been used since 1975 and was the sole method of selection until 1997, but it is being dropped from 2016 after a public outcry over a particularly well-qualified candidate who failed to secure a place. Dr ten Cate said he regretted the decision. “Schools will be in the firing line,” he said. “A weighted lottery is the fairest system for applicants.”

Beyond admissions

While much of the summit was concerned with selection and outreach, Sir Michael Barber, Chief Education Advisor to Pearson Worldwide, urged universities to focus on success, rather than just access. He argued that more emphasis should be placed on retention instead of simply on recruitment, and on academic and social support rather than just financial aid.

Although, as John Jerrim pointed out, the drop-out rate at elite universities is much lower than at lower-status institutions, Sir Michael said many students from non-traditional backgrounds needed academic, financial and social support to fulfil their potential. A fear of social isolation is one of the factors that is said to discourage potential candidates from applying to Oxford and Cambridge, as well as some of the leading Ivy League universities.

“Thinking about access without also thinking about success is a big mistake,” he said. “They must be considered together.” In particular, those from low-income families needed support in the employment market, where differences in background still have an effect even among those who graduate from leading universities. “Students are thinking about the labour market,” he said. “If you are paying now or racking up big debts for the future, you can’t help but think about employment prospects.”

Other speakers were concerned about access to postgraduate, as well as undergraduate programmes. Dr Mapstone, for example, said Oxford had the most generous support for low-income undergraduates at any UK university, but postgraduate support was allocated on merit alone. The university was aware that this was a growing problem. It had raised £30 million for postgraduate scholarships, mainly through match-funding schemes, but there was a “very long way to go” if the university had to address postgraduates’ needs in this way.

Dr Cable said postgraduate courses had become the Government’s top priority in widening access to higher education. “There are undoubtedly major barriers to postgraduate education, and this matters because growing numbers of professions require postgraduate qualifications” Dr Cable said. Three-quarters of postgraduate students financed themselves and had no access to loans. Talks were under way with the banks to try to introduce a new loan scheme.

Concerns about the accessibility of postgraduate places were part of a wider debate on the leading universities’ contribution to social mobility that was a recurring theme of the summit. Dr Cable questioned whether social mobility really came from higher education, or whether it was influenced more by pre-school education. “What are the interventions that really matter?” he asked. “I am not sure the academic literature is clear.”

Dr Cable said social mobility often involved relatively small steps of the type that might be provided by further education qualifications rather than degrees from world-class universities. He gave his own father as an example. He had been “obsessed by social mobility” but for him this involved a move from a terraced to a semi-detached house and going to work in a suit rather than overalls. The summit showed that social mobility has become a concern in many parts of the world. Aline de Salinelles said the issue was a “hot potato” in France, for example, and Mr Cameron’s comments urging broader access to the professions demonstrated the same in the UK.

Jim O’Neill, a Sutton Trust board member and former chief economist at Goldman Sachs, said in a speech at the conference dinner that world-class universities were increasingly seen as drivers of economic and social progress. He cited South Korea as an example of what could be achieved, moving from wealth on a par with poor African countries to matching Italy and Spain. “One of the reasons they have done that, I am sure, is that their educational environment is top-class.”
Mr O’Neill said the broadest possible access to the leading universities would be essential for the UK to compete successfully at a time of accelerating change. “Unless we have more of this kind of initiatives, we are not going to get more people of all types going to the top universities and make the world a better place,” he said.

Sir Peter Lampl said: “Access to elite universities is a real issue across the globe, and we hope that by discussing it at the summit, we can learn from each other on what can work to improve access for bright low and middle income students.”

Key Points

In the final session, delegates identified a number of key points drawn from the two days of discussion for advancing access and admission to leading universities. They were:

1. The vital – and generally unrecognised – role of further education colleges in broadening access to the most selective universities.

2. The importance of devoting sufficient funds to retaining, as well as admitting, disadvantaged students. Supporting more post-admission activity might require the reallocation of some existing access funds unless new sources of funding could be found.

3. There should be a greater focus on teachers, both through their initial training and continuing professional development, to improve the advice provided to pupils.

4. A continued focus was needed on outreach during both primary and secondary education. Extra attention should be given to those attending 11-16 schools, who risk losing support after transfer to a new institution.

5. More evidence should be collected on the impact of BTECs and other vocational qualifications regarding students' chances of admission to leading universities, assessing the rigour and currency of different qualifications, as well as the transparency of admissions decisions and the information available to students.

6. More work is required on the geographical reach of outreach activities to ensure that there are no hot or cold spots and parents are as well-informed as possible about the opportunities for their children.

7. The difficulty faced by universities in trying to identify high achievers at an early age remains a barrier to broader access. Greater access to data within the provisions of data protection legislation would improve the effectiveness of outreach activity.

8. A 'matching service' between schools and universities of the type used in the US should be considered.

9. Student loans should be available for UK students choosing to study overseas, whether for part or all of a degree.

10. The pupil premium should be deployed for access and career guidance work. In this and other areas, thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of access measures is essential.