

Conceptualisations of merit in university admission: a transatlantic comparison

1. Executive summary-nature of the project, main approaches taken and main conclusions reached.

The project aimed to document differences in conceptualisations of merit among those responsible for admitting new undergraduate students. Specifically, the research addressed how selective higher education institutions in the UK (England) and the U.S. (East Coast) differ in their construction of the meritorious student deserving of a place for undergraduate study. The study found that the US discourse is, perhaps counterintuitively, more based on creating a class that is diverse and thus aggregate 'group characteristics' whereas the English discourse focuses only on individual achievement or merit. There are also further avenues of work to explore with regards to thinking of university admissions as resembling more closely a 'gym' or a 'model agency' selection model. In my findings from the project, I argue that whereas the US uses a discourse of 'compensatory sponsorship' in admissions, England uses one of 'adjustment sponsorship'. Further work is planned to investigate whether different conceptualisations of merit lead to different social stratification outcomes in the UK and the U.S..

2. Summary of project aims and objectives

Meritocracy is a key concept for explaining stratification processes in advanced democracies. Economies compete globally on added-value, skilled professional services in an interconnected labour market, societies aim to maximise their human talent. Meritocracy, then, is the tool by which the selection of the best should be ensured. Such a society can be compatible with welfare states and social justice objectives as the privileged chosen should be working towards common goals intended to increase every citizen's quality of life.

The proposal sought to answer how the meritorious individual worthy of a place for undergraduate study at selective universities is constructed in the UK and in the US. Universities were chosen as the last stage in the process whereby educational institutions certify merit as qualifications. It is also an education a stage at which equal opportunity battles are particularly strongly fought.

While I choose undergraduate admissions as the focus of my research, it has emerged in the rapidly moving world of higher education admissions, that the discourse is increasingly shifting to postgraduate access and some interesting new research is emerging in this area of research in both the UK and the US with notable new scholars in this field being Dr Paul Wakeling – York University, now seconded to HEFCE for an evaluation of postgraduate bursaries and Prof Julie Posselt who is working on this topic from the University of Wisconsin. Undertaking research on undergraduate admissions has given me an opportunity to connect with these scholars and to talk about the overlap of issues between under- and postgraduate admissions.

3. Outline of methodology and project timetable

The methodology entailed mixed methods combining documentary analysis of recruitment and admissions material from websites from leading universities in England and the US. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with admissions staff in both England and the US. The research consisted of a total of 18 interviews and contents analysis of the admissions statements of Russell Group universities in England and the statements of Ivy League colleges in the U.S.. Half of my research interviews were conducted in the UK and half were conducted in the US. Some interviews were conducted using telephone, skype or e-mail interviewing.

An element of ‘serendipitous’ data collection occurred with unexpected opportunities to participate in national and international events related to the topic of admission to university. I was able to attend the launch of Trinity College Dublin’s Holistic Admissions programme which featured the Dean of Admissions at Harvard as keynote speaker. I then had an opportunity to conduct an interview with him afterwards as well as benefitting from the interesting debates that occurred in Dublin as the merits of changing an admissions system were debated. I also had an opportunity to present and attend the First World Congress on Access to Post-secondary education in Montreal, which offered unusual insights into the world of university admissions and the issues raised in different national contexts. A final opportunity arose to participate in the invitation-only Sutton Trust summit on universities and social mobility. This event was held in London in November and featured presentations focused on admissions values and objectives from Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, and Cambridge. The serendipitous research element here was particularly that, because the event was recorded, it is one of the few occasions in this project where I am now able to attribute comments to particular universities and do not

have to keep the identity anonymous. As I am moving into the final stages of my analysis, I hope that direct quotes from this event will make aspects of the writing even more accessible.

Timeline

Months	Task
1	Initial literature review and first sweep of contents analysis of admissions websites; Identification of suitable cases and confirmation of participation
2-3	five interviews in the UK (Some via skype, telephone) <i>Publication of my co-edited special issue on access to post-secondary education in the journal 'comparative education review'</i>
4-5	Nine interviews in the USA (Via skype, telephone) Serendipitous research opportunity to interview the dean of admissions for Harvard in Dublin
6-7	Four interviews in the UK
8-9	Transcribing and further contents analysis of admissions websites Serendipitous research opportunity to present and participate in the EAN World Congress in Montreal
10	Serendipitous research opportunity: The Sutton Trust Summit on Social mobility in the US and the UK
11-12 (Dec 2013)	Analysis, preparation of conference poster and presentation for the SRHE newer research conference
11-12	Start writing of book 'how the meritocracy works' under contract with Bloomsbury
Ongoing	Submission of abstracts from this project to BERA and CHER, preparation of presentations, further analysis, preparation of journal submission, writing of book
Dec 2014	Planned presentation of newer research award research findings at the SRHE main conference

4. Analysis of results

When I started the project, I wished to show similarities and differences in the discourse of merit selection and link those to different philosophical models of merit, worth virtue and notions of fairness and social justice. I then planned to link characteristics of the meritorious individual to the structure of society with regards to ethnicity, gender, socio-economic position and secondary schooling.

In undertaking the content analysis and conducting the interviews, further research questions emerged. One of these questions was: are universities selecting on potential or demonstrated ability? And, even when a discourse of potential is used, can it actually be measured in a way that is separate from demonstrated ability? This raises the more fundamental question whether universities are acting to certify and finish the education of those who are now chosen to enter professional and managerial employment in society – I call this the ‘model agency model of selection’ – or whether universities act like a gym. In a gym, depending on how users make use of the facilities and fitness opportunities, different outcomes are possible. In actual fact, both respondents working in admissions in England and the US seemed to say that they aim for the gym model in selecting undergraduates, but reality pulls them to the model agency model of selection.

Another fundamental question raised in the work was whether university admissions in general in England and the US is ‘fit for general purpose’, I call this the ‘Sternberg question’. I develop this idea from Sternberg’s work on university admissions where he argues that a more fundamental rethink of admissions is necessary to avoid simply reproducing the current leadership of a country, let it be the model used in England or in the US. The reproductive tendencies of systems risk systematically excluding new ideas, creativity, and leadership styles that he argues are vital for the economic survival of nations. He argues that as the Western banking elite was educated in the most prestigious national universities, this raises the question of whether universities fail to teach and instil the sort of ethical behaviour that benefits not only individuals in their returns to education but their communities and nations.

These questions may, at some level, seem quite remote from the process of admissions, but they are things individuals in strategic positions within university admissions think about when designing systems for selection: what is the effect of selection on undergraduate experiences, degree outcomes, and then wider outcomes for society? These wider issues are now something I want to integrated in my analysis of the different and similar admissions discourses of admissions in England and the US.

In doing the analysis and write up of the research, I have also clarified that my work really compares selected institutions in England and on the US East Coast, thus, the previously envisaged title of comparing the UK and the US is toned down in the actual presentations and the emerging papers.

5. Project conclusions/outcomes

One of the tentative conclusions from the project is that both England and the US admit more like a ‘model agency’ than a ‘gym’. I have also developed a new concept which I currently call ‘adjustment sponsorship’. This is developed from the ideas of ‘sponsorship mobility’ proposed by Ralph Turner and the idea of ‘compensatory sponsorship’ introduced by Eric Grotzky. Adjustment sponsorship is the idea to adjust admissions discourses based on evidence of the future ability of students to achieve highly. I argue that this

happens in selective UK admissions and I contrast this with the US model of ‘compensatory sponsorship’ whereby adjustments in admissions decisions are made based on the idea to ‘compensate’ for past structural inequalities experienced e.g. through membership of a particular ethnic group.

6. Summary of next steps planned

I plan further dissemination through presentations, blog-posts, and a peer-reviewed journal article. I currently have £876.70 unspent funds remaining from the NR award which I intend, subject to SRHE approval, to spend on presenting at two conferences- BERA and CHER. I enclose my budget as appendix 2 to this report. I have never presented at BERA or CHER before, so both opportunities would have externalities for me in terms of embedding myself in existing scholarly networks.

6.1. Presentation of work

I am planning to present my work for the newer researcher award at four forthcoming occasions:

1. A workshop on US-UK education hosted by the University Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. I was personally invited to speak here by the organiser, Dr Sarah Pickard. Attendance at this workshop is funded through my employer.
2. The British Educational Research Association Annual Conference in London, held from 23 -25 September 2014 (subject to the paper being accepted). As I live in London, I only have to pay the member’s rate conference fee of £270 and I am hoping to use some of the remaining funds from the Newer Researcher Award for this.
3. A presentation at the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) in Rome (8 to 10 September 2014). Subject to my paper being accepted, I would like to use the rest of the remaining funds from the Newer Researcher Award for this event with the fees set at EURO 400, I will meet any remaining costs from private funds.
4. SRHE 2014, annual conference, main conference. While I have already presented the early findings from the NR award at the newer researcher conference, I wish to present the findings at the main conference in 2014. Attendance at the conference, is likely to be funded through my employer, subject to approval.

6.2 Publication of work

I am currently working towards a stand-alone journal piece from this research to be published in an international peer-reviewed journal such as ‘Studies in Higher Education’ or the ‘Sociology of Education’, ‘Sociology’ or the ‘British Journal of Sociology’. I intend to accompany such a publication with a press

release and a blog on the LSE British politics blog to which I have contributed a couple of times in the past year.

All presentation and publication of this work will acknowledge to the SRHE support and mention the Newer Researcher Prize specifically.

6.3. Any plans to continue with the work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project.

I seek to develop a grant application to the ESRC (UK) and / or the Spencer Foundation (US) to conduct further quantitative work to confirm the findings from the content analyses, interviews, and access to some socio-demographic monitoring data within institutions. The finding here suggests that the social stratification outcomes / student profile at enrolment is similar in the US and the UK whereby the most privileged strata in society are massively over-represented among those attending the most selective institutions. In other words, the discourse put on elite admissions only matters in terms of whether some 'compensatory sponsorship' is applied to race (in the US) or to poverty (in the UK), but this only changes who is admitted at the margins of the admissions process with overall reproduction of privilege. The rules of the game might be slightly different in the US and England, but those in privileged socio-economic positions are most able to navigate the system into elite higher education in both countries.

The envisaged follow-on project will specifically seek to produce robust data to show the similarities and differences in elite admissions for different social groups. This could be done by exploiting longitudinal national data sets such as the Youth Cohort Study in the UK and the Study of Youth in the US to model entry into selective higher education taking into account background characteristics such as ethnicity, gender and socio-economic position as well as the type of secondary schooling and prior attainment.

Last week, I also submitted a grant for £60,000 to the HEA to study aspirations for postgraduate study. This topic is related, although perhaps not as directly as the emerging ESRC/ Spencer idea, to my newer researcher award. The submission to the HEA is jointly with the University of Durham, a research connection that happened at the dinner table at the SRHE 2013 – a welcome externality of the NR Award!



Inside the Curious World of University Admissions



SRHE newer researcher award 2012
Anna Mountford-Zimdars, King's College London

The issue

It matters where students attend university (effectively maintained inequality argument, Lucas 2001). Admission to the most selective universities in England and the USA is particularly high and soaring year on year. In this context, this SRHE funded project investigated:

- 1) What is the philosophical framework and discourse universities use for selecting undergraduates?
- 2) Has this transatlantic discourse converged or are there still distinct 'contest' (USA) and 'sponsorship' (England) models for admission as described by Turner in 1966?

Method

- literature review
- interviews with over 20 admissions staff in the US and England
- content analysis of university web-pages in the US and England
- the research uncovered a surprising new question:

Are undergraduates admitted akin to a... model agency?



Figure 1: Models inspired by Barbie and Ken

...or...



Figure 2: Homer Simpson and the gym

Model agencies (figure 1) take applicants who have the look they wish to promote. In contrast, a gyms (figure 2) offer a 'right to exercise'. Gym-goers may have a transformative experience depending on the support they receive and their use the opportunities on offer. The experience itself is key.

Findings

Admissions staff perceived admitting undergraduates as a balancing act between already demonstrated ability (like the model agency) and potential to achieve (like the gym model). There were differences and similarities in the discourses used in undergraduate admissions in England and the US as shown in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3: Word Frequency in US admission



Figure 4: Word Frequency in UK admissions

Analysis:

1. US and English 'selection modes' have converged, both countries now use a 'contest norm' (Turner 1966). There was no longer evidence of systematic 'sponsorship' in the UK as described in Turner's original research.
2. Discourses in the US and England however, diverge when it comes to the purpose of selection. US institutions envisaged 'crafting a class' of future leaders across a range of functions in society whereas admissions in England was solely based on individual criteria predicting individual academic success at university.
3. Universities in both England and the US struggle with the issue of admitting like a 'model agency' or gym. Both countries privilege the 'model agency' mode of selection. This raises wider questions about the purpose of contemporary university education, especially as access to selective institutions continuous to be effectively maintained in both countries.



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KING'S COLLEGE LONDON - RESEARCH SUPPORT SECTION**MONTHLY REPORT TO GRANT HOLDERS**

Report to

Date : 30-Nov-13

Run Date : TBC

Project Title SHRE -

Grant RTVTA

: Zimdars

Code : FR

		<u>Total</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Unspent</u>
		<u>Budget</u>	<u>to 31-Oct-13</u>	<u>For Month</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Budget 30-Nov-13</u>
A80	Consultancy Payments	1,450.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Total Staff costs		1,450.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1,450.00
M27	Office Costs (Research)	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Total Consumables		100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
K02	Travelling Costs - Overseas	1,000.00	272.96	0.00	272.96	
K03	Travelling Costs - Others	0.00	153.56	0.00	153.56	
K10	Conference Expenses	450.00	87.67	155.00	242.67	
Total Travel		1,450.00	514.19	155.00	669.19	780.81
L03	Other Professional Fees	0.00	1,454.11	0.00	1,454.11	
Total Other		0.00	1,454.11	0.00	1,454.11	(1,454.11)
Total Directly Incurred		3,000.00	1,968.30	155.00	2,123.30	876.70
Directly Alloc and Indirect		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total for Grant		3,000.00	1,968.30	155.00	2,123.30	876.70

References:

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