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# Equity and the 'Fair Admissions' Practices of HEIs: Mapping the Terrain

MANCHESTER

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## ‘Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy’

*Many universities are developing new ways to use contextual data in their admissions procedures to assess the aptitude and potential to succeed of those from poor backgrounds. We believe this is a valid approach and hope that all universities will consider it. In assessing candidates, universities already expect to look not only at what individuals have achieved, particularly through their exam grades, but also at their aptitude and potential to succeed. While the principle of university autonomy means that Government does not interfere with any university’s admissions procedures, we believe that the use of appropriate contextual criteria can help to ensure that high-potential candidates are not missed by the system.*

‘Middle-class students face university place struggle as  
Mandelson backs giving poorer students two-grade  
‘headstart’ - *Daily Mail*, 4 November 2009

*Middle-class pupils at good schools face being bumped out of prestigious university courses under plans to give youngsters from poor homes an A-level ‘head start’ . . . Lord Mandelson backed schemes which involve lowering entry requirements for students from disadvantaged backgrounds . . .*

*Asked whether middle-class children could miss out if such schemes are extended, Lord Mandelson said: ‘Entry to university has always been competitive . . .*

*Andrew Grant, chairman of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference, said: ‘What Lord Mandelson really needs to do is increase the pool of well-qualified candidates from schools maintained by his government . . .*

*David Willetts said: ‘Students and their parents will lose confidence in the integrity of the university admission system if it is used for crude class warfare.’*

## Fair admissions & apple pie

- Everyone agrees admissions should be 'fair'
- Problems only arise when we try to a) define it  
b) follow this through with research, actions and policies
- Two key knowledge gaps:
  1. Do we have an adequate empirical understanding of *what* is going on?
  2. Do we have an adequate theoretical understanding of *why* HEIs are taking particular positions with regard to fair admissions?

## What I'm not discussing . . . .

- Whether 'fair access' is the biggest or only issue facing HE. There is a WP agenda that I see as related, but conceptually distinct. I am examining what goes on *after* application to a select group of HEIs
- The rights or wrongs of 'elite' HEIs dominating entry to professions
- Particular "contextual data" indicators

## Definition from Schwartz

Schwartz defines a fair and equitable admissions system as one that

*“provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations.”*

DfES (2004) 'Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice'

## The problem with Schwartz

David Watson raises an issue with Schwartz's notion that might be familiar to those working at the sharp end of admissions policy and practice:

*“it assumes, absurdly, that if everybody behaves appropriately, the number and quality of the places available will match the number and quality of the applicants” (p. 93).*

Watson, D. (2006) 'New Labour & Higher Education'

## Schwartz's conundrum

Schwartz identifies the problem with defining equity and fairness in admissions although cannot himself solve it

*“everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to determine it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant’s achievements and potential”.*

DfES (2004) ‘Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice’

## And more recently

For Mandelson, merit can be defined by:

*“academic attainment, aptitude and potential”*

## 2. What is going on? Mapping the terrain

- Arises as part of some early Doctoral research I am undertaking\*
- Looking first and foremost at two Mission Groups – Russell Group and 1994 Group
- Possible to identify 3 key ‘positions’ HEIs are taking with respect to fair admissions and contextual data
- These positions can help to build *explanatory models* for why different HEIs take particular ‘positions’

\* Skyrme, J. (2009a) *A contextualised analysis of social justice in ‘fair admissions practices’*. Unpublished research paper presented to the School of Education, The University of Manchester  
Skyrme, J (2009b) *Contextual Data and ‘fair admissions’ in leading higher education institutions: a social justice and policy scholarship approach*. Unpublished research proposal paper presented to the School of Education, The University of Manchester.

**RELATIVE  
ACADEMIC  
CRITERIA**

Allow adjusted academic  
criteria via  
'differential' offers

**EXTENUATORS**

**RENOVATING  
MERITOCRATS**

**INDIVIDUAL  
MODEL**

Not using socially  
contextual data

**SOCIAL  
MODEL**

Using socially  
contextual data

**TRADITIONAL  
MERITOCRATS**

**SOCIAL  
MERITOCRATS**

Only standard academic  
criteria allowed

**ABSOLUTE  
ACADEMIC  
CRITERIA**

## From *what* to *why*?

- What factors impinge on why some HEIs take different positions to fairness in admissions?
- In pilot work case study work with one HEI taking a 'renovative' approach to admissions the policy scholarship approach of Sharon Gewirtz & Alan Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz & Cribb 1998; Cribb & Gewirtz 2003, 2005) has been applied to help begin to illuminate such questions

## Policy scholarship

- Attempts to rise to Jenny Ozga's challenge to

*“Bring together structural, macro-level analysis of the education systems and education policies and micro investigations, especially that which takes account of people's perceptions and experiences” (1990, p. 359)*

## Dimensions of equity

- For Gewirtz (2006) equity must be understood as
  - Multi-dimensional & conflictual
  - Mediated
  - Level- and Context- dependent

## Case Study application

- Used in-depth interview with Director of Admissions and documentary analysis at one highly selective HEI known as 'Russell University'
- Helps frame larger case piece of research looking at 3 contrasting HEIs
- 'Unit of analysis' is the *phenomenon*: that of fair admissions practices formed and enacted in particular contexts.
- Such a case study analyses are useful when seeking answers about 'how' and 'why'. Help to build explanatory models of 'fair admissions'

# 1. Equity as multi-dimensional

## A) Distributional Justice (e.g. Rawls)

*“ There are clearly winners and losers in society . . . This is largely to do with family and school background . . . After coming here our students have access to some of the most privileged economic life chances and opportunities. But we were concerned that we were only offering this to a narrow social base. It was clear unless we did something proactive we wouldn’t be able to draw from the full talent pool . . . and some might see us as some kind of ‘finishing school’ for the rich and privileged . . . So I see what we are doing at this university as very much contributing to a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities in society.”*

# 1. Equity as multi-dimensional

## B) Cultural Justice (e.g. Fraser)

*“ We know that students from less advantaged backgrounds don’t present as well at interview. You can be coached in interviews. You can practice. In terms of how you come across as motivated and encouraged you can get this from having greater knowledge and opportunities such as getting a Duke of Edinburgh award, leadership, entrepreneurship. This is all very much about social background determining this. If you have a father at home or disabled siblings . . . these are equally valid life experiences but aren’t always as recognised in the admission process. The system isn’t always fair to these students.”*

# 1. Equity as multi-dimensional

## C) Associational Justice

*“ Some people do not have this awareness of University because nobody goes from their school. It’s also about peer support, awareness. We have some students here who say they didn’t know you went to university straight from school – they thought you went out to work first.*

*The independent school sector . . . associate themselves around networks. They have power to further or maintain their interests and are absolutely more powerful given their small size and I’d say this power comes from the parents . . . They are networked into all of the important political, social, business networks in the country”*

# 1. Equity as multi-dimensional

## Conflictual Nature of Justice

*“ The instruments we use . . . are inevitably blunt by drawing conclusions from certain indicators . . . we target students from lower achieving educational contexts; first in family to entry & local students . . . in theory equality of opportunity sounds great. In practice it is always more difficult as you need to implement measures or approximations for things that are more complicated and not everyone agrees with the different indicators we use . . . I [also] think the word ‘non-traditional’, deprived, disadvantaged etc can be problematic. Students do not want to be labelled in such a way. I think this can also lead to students dropping out – this sort of thing can lead to a lack of sense of belonging.”*

## 2. Mediated Nature of Equity

- Other norms and constraints likely to impact on pursuit of equity in admissions
- For Gewirtz “*justice concerns are always in practice likely to be mediated by other kinds of concerns that motivate actors. There are two kinds of concerns . . . . a) other norms that are not concerned with justice concerns but which might in practice compete or conflict with justice concerns; and b) constraints over which agents have little control, for example dominant discourses or power relations, or legal or economic constraints*” (2006 p. 70).

## 2. Mediated Nature of Equity

### A) Other norms

*“ One of the biggest challenges is the devolved power of universities. For someone like me sat overseeing a corporate policy it is difficult to produce policies that are agreed and consistent between the ‘university’ and its constituent parts. The devolved nature of universities does reduce your power, absolutely.”*

*“ Let’s say you’re sitting at home and you’ve got you’re a for Maths, A for Physics, A for Chemistry and you’re thinking where can I apply and you look at our prospectus and it asks for Bs and another one asks for As, the assumption is that’s a better course. So it’s in these less competitive areas it’s problem.”*

## 2. Mediated Nature of Equity

### B) Constraints on Equity in admissions

- Class power constraints
- Political-economic constraints
- Discursive factors

*“ [The media] perpetuate these stories to maintain their readership. Their readership wants to hear this. It’s not necessarily the journalists themselves. They’re being framed by the agenda of their readers it would seem. They seem to want to play up that we are discriminating against the independent sector. This wasn’t the case but it’s difficult to get your message across – often they ignore what you say if it doesn’t fit with what they want to convey.”*

### 3. Level and Context Dependent Nature of Equity

- For Gewirtz (2006) what counts as justice is “level- and context- dependent . . .and need to be dealt with differently from the different vantage points of policy makers, managers, teachers or social workers” (p. 70).
- Also there will be variance in “what is possible and/or desirable according to different national, regional, and/or local contexts” (p. 70).
- Importance of understanding local context e.g. culture and organisation of the HEI

## Conclusion

- Highlights that what counts as justice in fair admissions cannot be resolved by abstract theorising alone.
- Complexity of equity in admissions can only be understood in real empirical contexts that emphasise its *multi-dimensional, mediated and level- and context-dependent* nature.
- Study of Russell HEI has helped pave way for wider empirical case study to develop an explanatory model outlining various enabling and constraining factors impinging on particular conceptions of fairness in HE

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