

Fair Admissions and the Elite University: An examination of the practice of 'contextualisation' in the undergraduate admissions process

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the response to a new admissions policy at an elite UK university. It looks specifically at the attitudes and practices of individual selectors to the practice of contextualisation in light of recent policy recommendations in this area (DfES 2004). A mixed-methods approach is taken, involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with a small sample of selectors at the case study institution. The findings underline the complexities of the admissions assessment process, and the variation in practice amongst selectors. The data tentatively suggests that differences are not just a matter of personal judgement and value, but are also linked to subject discipline and prior educational experiences. Most selectors are broadly accepting of the concept of contextualisation, but how this is reflected in their practice varies considerably. Whilst some view it as an integral part of the selection process, others believe it to have no bearing on an academic assessment. The study finds that the response to the contextualisation policy is broadly positive, though variation in practice demonstrates how it has become refracted in the process of implementation. The study concludes by suggesting that, in an institution where individuals are making individual judgements about individual applicants, the idea that this approach will lead to fair and consistent outcomes is questionable. Nevertheless, the contextualisation policy has had the result of embedding the discourse of contextualisation within an elite institution.

INTRODUCTION

The stereotypical image of the traditional academic is an enduring one. Whilst the UK higher education sector has evolved beyond all recognition over the past century, the myth of the elite academic locked away in his ivory tower, detached from the world outside, persists. Shielded from change by the institution of which he is a part, he continues to recruit students in his own image, thus replicating and reinforcing the existing social make-up of his institution. This image is at odds with today's concerns for social justice and widening participation in higher education. The degree to which elite universities engage with widening participation is seen to have significance not just for the higher education sector but for society as a whole. Despite being a highly policy-relevant issue, little empirical research has been conducted into the social processes at work amongst individuals within the context of an elite institution¹. This study takes a first step towards filling this gap by examining aspects of the aims and implementation of a new admissions policy at an elite institution.

This study will examine the use of contextual information pertaining to the personal background and circumstances of undergraduate admissions candidates at an elite university. The use of such information has been endorsed as a means of establishing a fair system of admissions in higher education (DfES 2004; and more recently BIS 2009).

Specific attention will be paid to the attitudes and practices of individual admissions selectors, with the aim of assessing the actual policy outcomes against those intended by the policy-makers, as well as considering the extent to which the policy can be said to achieve its broad aim of realising fairness in the process of admission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Promises and limitations of widening participation policies

National higher education policy has been the focus of much recent debate. Consecutive New Labour governments made higher education a policy priority (e.g. Blunkett 2000), presenting education as a means to reduce existing social inequalities and promote social mobility, a theme routinely present in successive higher education policy documents (DfES 2003; BIS 2009). However, critics of this position point to the difficulty in reconciling the fact of expansion of the HE sector and the desire to widen access to all social groups:

The government's target [...] is concerned primarily with getting students through the HE door, and not with which, or what, HE door they enter.

(Callender and Jackson 2005, p.510)

Despite an overall increase in progression to higher education by 18-30 year olds over the last ten years (BIS 2010; HEFCE 2010), participation has not been widened in equal measure across different groups². Studies find that the gap in participation between advantaged and disadvantaged students has in fact increased in recent decades, whether advantage is classified as parental occupation and income (Archer et al. 2003), postcode (Galindo-Rueda et al. 2004) or parental income (Blanden and Machin 2004). The issue becomes all the more acute when considering progression to the most prestigious institutions, in which advantaged students are over-represented given the overall participation rate across the sector (Boliver 2006; Sutton Trust 2007; Vignoles and Crawford 2009).

Whilst definitions of an 'elite' or 'prestigious' institution are various, distinctions in terms of institutional rankings, research funding and reputation tend to relate to the status of an institution at undergraduate level (Palfreyman 2008). Prestigious institutions confer significant future employment benefits on their graduates (Sutton Trust 2005a; Sutton Trust 2006; Milburn 2009; Sutton Trust 2010). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that the greater premium associated with attending one of the elite universities of Oxford or Cambridge remains (Chester and Bekhradnia 2009; Williams and Filippakou 2010). In light of this evidence, elite universities are central to the debate on widening participation and fair access.

Barriers to participation

The reasons why students from different backgrounds do not progress to higher education in equal proportion are complex and wide-ranging (Gorard et al. 2006). However, in a sector where institutions determine their own admissions criteria, which, to a large extent,

assess current ability and predicted future success on the chosen course of study through achievement in formal examinations (UCAS 2010), prior attainment is the single largest factor in differential patterns of access to higher education (Galindo-Rueda, et al. 2004; Blanden and Machin 2004; Vignoles and Crawford 2009). Students from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to be studying academic qualifications, such as A-levels (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003, p137; see also Sutton Trust 2008), and are more likely to attain higher grades in post-compulsory education (Bekhradnia 2003).

The picture is less clear-cut when considering progression to prestigious universities in particular. On the one hand, the evidence suggests the root of the problem is at the point of application rather than selection (Sutton Trust 2004; Sutton Trust 2005b; Vignoles and Crawford 2009; Sutton Trust and BIS 2009). However, differential patterns of success cannot be explained by examination success alone: studies by Boliver (2006) and Zimdars et al. (2009) discover that unequal admissions rates to Russell Group universities and the University of Oxford respectively exist by social class and ethnicity, even after controlling for prior attainment.

Paczuska (2002, p. 139) argues that focussing on the structural causes of the difference in participation rates neglects “social and cultural inequalities that are produced and maintained outside of education”. The interaction between tutor and candidate is explored in recent studies which focus on the variations in distribution of particular forms of ‘cultural capital’ amongst admissions candidates (Zimdars et al. 2009) and the process of homophily (i.e. unconsciously looking for those who are socially similar to oneself) on the part of the selectors (Zimdars 2010). Other studies point to the variance of the practices, dispositions and values of individual admissions tutors or administrators when making admissions decisions (Fulton 1988; Thompson 1997; Allen 2005; Greenbank 2006).

The Schwartz Report and fair admissions

Such emerging concerns over admissions processes and practices form the backdrop to the independent review undertaken by the Admissions to Higher Education Committee, known as the Schwartz Report (DfES 2004). The report endorses an “holistic” process of assessment of admissions candidates (DfES 2004, p.30), making the case for assessing achievements, talent and potential in the light of a candidate’s background and contextual factors, whilst at the same time stressing that such consideration should not amount to any form of social engineering or move towards quota places for those from particular groups (DfES 2004, p.23).

The report leaves us with two unresolved contradictions, which point to the problems in defining the concept of fairness. The first complexity in the idea of fairness is that it fails to capture the fact that candidates enter into a competition for admission. Even if candidates are considered as individuals, they must still be compared against others in order to be assessed for the places available (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). A second complexity arises out of the fact that the Schwartz Report (DfES 2004, p.6) advocates contextualisation, a necessary condition of which is consideration of background characteristics, whilst nevertheless claiming that “a legitimate aim for universities and colleges [is] to recruit the best possible students *regardless of background*” (my emphasis). There is significant

linguistic ambiguity here which leaves the recommendations open to interpretation. Merit is, in the current educational context, conceptualised as ability defined by educational attainment (Stowell 2004; Hale 2006). Even if we accept the case made for differential treatment as a precondition for equality of opportunity (Stowell 2004; Bibbings 2006), the basis on, and extent to, which the influence of a disadvantaged background should be measured remains problematic.

Deconstructing policy

In spite of differing approaches to fairness, the Schwartz Report (DfES 2004) is the first step to embed contextualisation as the norm in the ‘discourse’ of admissions policy (as its mention in *Higher Ambitions* (BIS 2009, p.10) demonstrates). In this context, it would be difficult, both politically and from the point of view of public relations, for an institution not to accept such practice. However, the notion of fairness is a matter of interpretation, and it is to be expected that institutions, and the individuals within them, respond to such a policy in different ways³. Decisions made by academics are shaped by personal and professional ideology, which can change over time as changes in context interact with these factors (Becher and Trowler 2005, p.16). In such cases, the scope for “creative social action” (Ball 1994, p.19) is curtailed by the acceptance of a collective need. However, the degree of change is in part dependent on the relative position of the institution in which individuals are situated (Ball 2003). If we are to extend this hypothesis to the higher education sector, it suggests to us that academics in elite institutions are given more scope to respond to policy in a way which fits their personal dispositions. Naidoo and Jamieson (2006, p.877) contend that elite positions are conferred through ‘academic capital’, so identified by the strength of intellectual or cultural assets and resources of an institution. Whilst there is little research on policy implementation in an elite setting, evidence from related literature would suggest that such institutions can draw on their resources and academic capital to protect themselves, and their members, from ‘undesirable’ policy imperatives.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study addresses the following research questions:

- What information do selectors use in the admissions decision-making process?
- To what extent do contextual factors inform and influence admissions decision making?
- How has the implementation of the institutional policy on ‘contextualisation’ influenced the practice of selectors?
- How far does the use of contextual information complement institutional and national widening participation initiatives?

The case study institution

The research takes the form of a case study of an elite UK institution. The institution is collegiate in structure, meaning that the undergraduate admissions process remains the responsibility of the individual colleges, with the subject tutors selecting students on behalf of their department or faculty, and by extension the University. Each college has a Tutor for Admissions who is responsible for overseeing the process, though this official role does not carry any decision-making powers. The central administration of the University has no formal authority in how decisions are reached; the system relies on the academic judgements of subject specialists. This devolved arrangement affords responsibility to a large number of tutors, all of whom have a direct input into the decision-making process.

In 2007, the institution implemented a Common Framework for Admissions, to ensure parity in admissions processes in all subjects across all colleges. This Common Framework recommended that all colleges be provided with contextual information for use in the selection process. Consequently, for the past two years, the institution has systematically included information on the UCAS form relating to particular educational and personal contextual information about UK candidates⁴. This information is provided as a series of ‘yes/no’ boxes on the first page of the candidate’s UCAS form, with a ‘yes’ in cases where the variable indicates ‘disadvantage’. Provided that a candidate meets the required academic criteria⁵ and ticks at least 3 of the 5 contextual data boxes, it is strongly recommended that the candidate be invited to interview. The policy states that the contextual information should not be used beyond the interview shortlisting stage⁶.

Data collection methods and choice of sample group

A mix of methods was considered the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions, with questionnaires and semi-structured interviews offering two complementary forms of data collection in order to provide more than one perspective on the research topic (Denscombe 2007, p.118). The purpose of the questionnaire was two-fold: firstly, it provided data from a larger number of people across both subjects and colleges, encapsulating the potentially different cultures inherent in the different disciplines and colleges; secondly, it served to identify participants for the in-depth interviews, which provided a rich body of data to underpin and elaborate on the findings from the questionnaire.

In order to ensure a representative sample of tutors from across the University, 14 of the 30 colleges were approached to participate in the research. These colleges were selected to represent a spread of all those in the high, medium and low brackets for admissions rates⁷, and in the top, middle and bottom section of the list of colleges based on final degree rankings⁸, two factors deemed to have a bearing on college attitudes towards admissions and subsequent academic success of selected students. Selecting participants in this manner reduced the risk of bias “from non-response stemming from non-contact” (Denscombe 2007, p.23). Given the sensitivity of policy-related research (Cohen et al. 2007, p.123), the questionnaire was distributed to all those involved in the admissions process through the ‘official’ channel of the college Tutors for Admissions. Participation was voluntary, rather than based on specific recommendation. The intention was to open

the research field up to tutors of all groups and dispositions, though the aforementioned factors cannot rule out the possibility of bias in the sample due to “non-response through refusal” (Denscombe 2007, p.23)⁹. It also means the exact size of potential sample group and rate of return of the questionnaires is unknown.

Nine of the 14 colleges selected participated in the research¹⁰. In total, 32 individuals completed the questionnaire, from a broadly representative spread of colleges and subject areas¹¹. Fourteen of the questionnaire respondents provided their contact details for the purpose of a follow-up interview, of which six were approached. Although selection of the interviewees was initially undertaken on the basis of their questionnaire responses, secondary consideration was paid to personal and college characteristics. Additionally, an admissions representative from the central university administration was notified of the project and agreed to be interviewed to provide an administrative perspective on the research area.

Analysis process

Data collection took the form of an opt-in procedure of informed consent from participants. All data was anonymised, and no details have been reproduced in a way that makes it possible to identify individuals in the findings. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected in the questionnaire. Particular characteristics of respondents were cross tabulated in order to test how far particular response patterns were more or less prevalent amongst respondents of particular groups (to the extent that it is valid to do so, given the small sample size). Once key ideas emerging from the qualitative questionnaire data and interview transcripts were identified, particular comments and quotations were extracted and grouped together thematically. These coded pieces of data were then arranged into broader categories and themes, or “hierarchical pyramids” (Denscombe 2007, p.293), in order to move towards identifying the key concepts underpinning the findings. A process of triangulation through comparison of the two sets of data allowed for a rigorous analysis of the findings.

Ethical considerations

Issues of power potentially arise in both forms of data collection by virtue of the relative professional positions of the researched and the researcher. Whilst it is important to be mindful of the extent to which the research is open to bias on the part of the researcher through her own experiences (as a former applicant to the institution from a ‘disadvantaged’ background, and current admissions administrator at the institution), the research benefits from her position of the “insider-researcher”, with access to “naturally occurring data and situations” (Trowler 1998, p.92) and possession of a set of cultural norms in common with the researched. The limitations of aspects of the methods notwithstanding, the overall advantages of the approach taken far outweigh the disadvantages. The strategy employed here provided a rich corpus of data which sheds light on the complex social practices at work in an ordinarily exclusive setting.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Constructions of academic potential

The published aim of the institution's selection process at the institutional level is to "ensure that the best candidates are selected", 'the best' in this context defined as candidates who "are well qualified and have the most potential to excel in their chosen course of study". Implicit in this formulation is the suggestion that candidates with the highest qualifications do not automatically gain a place. Rather, it would appear that the aim of the exercise is not to look solely at the achieved and current level of ability of candidates as determined by qualifications alone, but also to use all the information available during the application process to assess a future realisation of academic ability: that is, academic potential.

The survey and questionnaire data demonstrate that there are significant differences in the way individuals use the evidence available to them to assess academic potential, as shown in Table 1. Aside from test performance for the social sciences and sciences, no other factor has the unanimous backing of all respondents, either overall or within a subject discipline. Whilst the small sample limits the extent to which we can investigate associations between these factors and other variables, an interesting pattern emerges when performance at interview is cross tabulated with tutors' academic experience of the institution. Table 2 shows that whilst performance at interview is considered an important factor by a high proportion of tutors in both categories, those who have experienced the institution as an undergraduate student (i.e. having successfully negotiated the application process) value the importance of the interview to a greater extent to those who have experience of the institution as the tutor, but not as the tutee (93.8% vs. 76.9%).

	GCSE grades	A-level grades	Performance in subject test	Performance at interview	Submitted written work	Subject-relevant extra-curricular activities	Other
Overall n = 32 % of respondents	17 53.0%	12 37.5%	21 77.7% **	26 81.3%	1 6.7% *	2 6.3%	2 6.3%
Humanities n = 13 % of respondents	6 46.2%	5 38.5%	8 72.7% **	10 76.9%	1 7.7%	2 15.4%	1 7.7%
Social Science n = 8 % of respondents	5 62.5%	3 37.5%	5 100.0% **	6 75.5%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 12.5%
Science n = 11 % of respondents	6 54.5%	4 36.4%	8 100.0% **	10 90.9%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%

Table 1: Factors considered the strongest predictors of future success at the institution by tutors' subject discipline *

* respondents were invited to select up to three choices. ** calculated as a percentage of the total number of respondents to whose subject the specific category is applicable

Respondents' academic experiences of the institution (respondents were asked to tick all that apply)			
	The factors deemed the strongest predictors of future success at the institution (respondents were asked to tick up to three)		
Answer Options	GCSE grades	A-level grades	Performance at interview
Undergraduate study n = 16 % of respondents	10 62.5%	5 31.2%	15 93.8%
Academic teaching position (but not undergraduate study) n = 13 % of respondents	6 46.2%	7 53.8%	10 76.9%
Academic teaching position (including those with undergraduate experience) n = 28	15 53.4%	12 42.9%	24 85.7%

% of respondents			
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Table 2: Comparison of strongest factors for success at the institution and academic experiences of the institution

Interesting associations also emerge when we look back to tutors' prior schooling experiences (for those educated in the UK). Table 3 shows that a higher proportion of those educated in selective schools value academic qualifications (both GCSE and A-level) compared to those with experience of non-selective educational environments. By contrast, those educated in the independent sector believe the interview to be amongst the strongest predictors of success, as opposed to 82.3% of those educated in the maintained sector (with an even lower proportion of 77.78% amongst those from the non-selective maintained sector). This could imply that the social engagement in the interview is more highly valued by those who have experienced a narrow social mix in their prior schooling, and the worth attached to qualifications is greater in the case of those who have experienced a narrow (and high-achieving) academic mix in class. Whilst further research in this specific area is needed to fully understand the potential influence of background on admissions decision making, these findings suggest that patterns exist in relation to background, both social and educational, and relate to the findings of Zimdars et. al (2009) and Allen (2005).

Respondents' school background (respondents were asked to tick all that apply)			
	The factors deemed the strongest predictors of future success at the institution (respondents were asked to tick up to three)		
Answer Options	GCSE grades (or equivalent)	A-level grades (or equivalent)	Performance at interview
Selective independent school n = 10 % of respondents	6 60.0%	4 40.0%	10 100.0%
Non-selective independent school n = 2 % of respondents	1 50.0%	0 0.0%	2 100.0%
Selective maintained sector school n = 8 % of respondents	5 62.5%	6 75.0%	7 87.5%
Non-selective maintained sector school n = 9 % of respondents	4 44.4%	1 11.1%	7 77.8%

Table 3: Comparison of strongest factors for success at the institution and tutors' schooling

In addition to potential academic ability, weight is also placed on the disposition of the student to want to work hard and engage at university level. This raises the question of how potential to develop such qualities can be assessed. This interviewee is aware of the complex process of disentangling background influences from future disposition once the candidate arrives at university:

There aren't many people who show that evidence of existing aptitude for hard work, or ability to just work hard without being told to do it all the time. It's hard. That's *the great intangible thing*

(humanities interviewee 1, my emphasis)

In a similar vein, the tutor's approach to the subject has an influence on the way he or she assesses candidates. A number of interviewees made the point that the subject selection criteria are sufficiently broad to allow for differences in interpretation, which can correspond to how the tutor approaches the subject (a phenomenon discussed by Trowler 1997, pp.312-3 and Trowler 1998, p.101). In this way, tutors are not only assessing a candidate's ability and potential, but also looking for evidence of an approach to the subject which corresponds to their own.

In sum, the challenge faced by the tutor in the selection process is how to assess the information available to them in order to ascertain academic potential. Many of the tutors readily admit that they find this a difficult process, "because almost by definition the criteria for entry here assumes that a student has already been very... has achieved very highly already. So to then say how much on top of that they can still go is a really tricky thing to do" (humanities interviewee 4). Tutors are required to piece together a jigsaw, the pieces of which do not necessarily correlate with future performance in a precise way. The elucidation of potential is dependent on the awareness and judgement of the tutor to pick up the clues demonstrated by the candidate. However, humanities interviewee 1 was not assured of his abilities in this regard, describing the process as "subjective and impressionistic". The contradiction here is that tutors are aware of the limitations of the interview, but yet it is still considered an important part of the process.

Contextualisation: levelling the playing field?

The vast majority of the questionnaire respondents are open to the idea of contextualisation. Indeed, nearly all questionnaire respondents (93.5%) think it appropriate to take into account the educational background of a candidate¹², and the majority deem it appropriate look at personal background (58.1%). However, the extent to which contextual factors are assessed alongside evidence of ability and potential identified through other elements of the application process is a matter of individual judgement, and one which individual tutors conceptualise very differently.

Many tutors pointed to the use of contextual information as a crucial tool with which to help them identify potential amongst candidates. Some respondents and interviewees framed this argument in terms of the impact of a disadvantaged educational background may have had on a candidate's academic progress. Resultantly, a notable method tutors use

to factor contextual data into the equation is by assessing achievement in relation to the average level of achievement of a candidate's school¹³. Many tutors speak of using contextual information in positive terms, as a means of "increasing the chance of good candidates from poor schools to get the credit they deserve" (questionnaire respondent). This does not match with previous studies on widening participation in admissions, which have shown 'non-traditional' applicants to be the objects of "discourses of derision" (Thompson 1997).

Whilst tutors are comfortable with differential treatment in relation to educational disadvantage, many do not believe that such a practice should hold for other factors or characteristics. The factors of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, which were provided as examples of personal context in the questionnaire, were deemed irrelevant by many respondents. Some tutors are wary of putting too much emphasis on contextual information for fear that "knowledge of that background is never adequate", and that individual value judgements "would involve too many assumptions and even prejudices" on the part of the tutor called on to make such a judgement. There is a strong sentiment amongst tutors – and indeed, enshrined in admissions policy documents – that admissions processes should be based on academic judgements and decisions. For some, the systematic use of contextual information falls outside the realm of the 'academic', so defined by subject discipline.

There is a strong belief amongst a significant number of respondents that the process of "establishing potential" in the interview neutralises the affect of background factors. Furthermore, when asked whether selecting for diversity were a laudable goal, many respondents were of the opinion that selecting applicants on the basis of academic ability and potential will in itself lead to a diverse student body:

If [the institution] selects 'the most academically able individuals, irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic or national origin' in accordance with the Framework, it will *naturally* achieve a diverse student body.¹⁴

(my emphases)

This evidence also presents us with a standard response to a normative discourse on achievement, that it does not mirror ability, giving rise to a self-belief on the part of the respondents on their ability to "*discern their native ability* and thinking skills, *underneath* the veneer of formal achievement (which can, of course, depend a great deal on the quality of their school teaching)" (original emphasis and parentheses). There are conflicting messages here between the discovery of potential (not achievement) through the admissions process and a reliance on formal qualifications which are "necessary but certainly not sufficient".

Policy implementation

The two policies of the Common Framework and Contextual Data Flags were, in part, implemented as a direct response to the Schwartz Report recommendations for fairness and transparency. The admissions administrator explained that the policies were constructed in order to redress the potential for idiosyncratic behaviour on the part of individual college

tutors in the admissions process. The questionnaire data shows that the vast majority of respondents feel ‘very’ (34.4%) or ‘fairly’ familiar (59.4%) with the policy on contextual data, which has been in use for the last two admissions cycles. Many feel confident in interpreting the information provided by the flagging system (87.1%), and nearly three quarters (74.2%) are satisfied with the level of information the flags provide.

Table 4 shows the stages at which the respondents use the data flags. The majority of respondents (87.1%) use the information at the shortlisting for interview stage.¹⁵ However, only a third of all respondents (32.3%) use the information strictly as outlined in the policy: that is, *only* at the shortlisting stage. Many of the respondents go beyond the parameters of the policy in making use of the information available to them at other stages in the process. For some, the use of contextual information comes into play “at the margins” – that is, when considering which candidates will be awarded the final one or two places in the subject’s quota. This suggests that tutors might be likely to look more favourably on flagged students who demonstrate a similar level of achievement as others. Rather than such ‘non-traditional’ applicants being considered an admissions “risk” (Zimdars 2010), the presence of flags can act as a further piece of evidence to indicate future potential. One interviewee outlined how he uses the contextual information as the basis on which to identify candidates for the process of second interviewing in his subject (*humanities interviewee 1*), thus using the information in a “creative” manner to get around other procedural inadequacies (Ball 1994, p.19).

	Stage(s) at which the contextual data is used (respondents were asked to tick all that apply)				
	At the shortlisting stage ONLY (respondents ticked no other boxes)	At the shortlisting stage	At the interview stage	When offering a place	At confirmation in August
Total n = 31 % of respondents	10 32.3%	27 87.1%	15 48.4%	18 58.1%	11 35.5%
Humanities n= 13 % of respondents	3 23.1%	13 100.0%	9 69.2%	9 69.2%	8 61.5%
Social Sciences n = 8 % of respondents	4 50.0%	7 87.5%	0 0.0%	3 37.5%	1 12.5%
Sciences n = 10 % of respondents	3 30.0%	7 70.0%	6 60.0%	6 60.0%	2 20.0%

Table 4: Stage(s) at which the contextual data flags are used by respondents

A majority of respondents (60%) identify that the policy has changed the way they assess candidates. Notably, 38.7% of respondents identify a change in their consideration of all candidates, not just those identified through the flagging system. However, many tutors

felt that the strength of the admissions system in its current form is the “attention to each candidate”. Respondents were aware that a growing commonality of approach through the Common Framework was underpinned by a greater emphasis on statistical methods of assessment. Many tutors expressed ambivalence to this, for it has trimmed the potential “waywardness” of other tutors whilst at the same time limiting the capacity for tutors to “back a hunch” themselves. In spite of these concerns, one respondent believed that the Common Framework still gave him the freedom “to judge candidates and to lead an interview as I think best.” Whether concerns about the implementation of the Common Framework arise out of a care for the fair treatment of candidates through the “detailed look” or a desire to retain autonomy in the selection of one’s own candidates, the policy is broad enough in its scope to accommodate both positions. As one respondent put it:

No individual or body directly constrains my decisions, but those decisions are now part of a changed collective ethic and set of expectations, so the constraints are internalised and positive.

Whilst the waywardness and idiosyncrasy of the system may be curtailed by the policy, tutors are not put under pressure to adhere to it in a prescriptive way.

DISCUSSION

The findings present a complex picture of the admissions practice at an elite university. Many factors come into play in the course of selection. The findings suggest that the weight placed on each of these elements may vary along the lines of subject, and also of the tutors’ prior educational experiences. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the individual approach taken by tutors to their subject discipline may subsequently influence the assessment they make of candidates, implicitly or explicitly favouring those with similar approach to the study of the subject as themselves.

The practice of contextualisation is no less complex. Whilst most tutors are responsive to the principle, they rationalise it in different ways. Contextualisation is seen to both help to assess a candidate whose future ability may be masked by poor educational opportunities, and also help identify the products of good teaching but who do not have the latent potential to do well. Whilst many tutors display “multi-positional practice” (Thompson 1997, p.109) in this regard, they tend to emphasise one approach over the other based on personal values. The extent to which context (notably, personal background features) is judged to be within the scope of the academic admissions judgements is contested by some tutors in the study, though many of them feel that the interview provides them with an impartial way of assessing the potential of candidates of all backgrounds, which would “naturally” lead to a diverse undergraduate intake.

The data shows a broad acceptance of the contextualisation policy. The policy has raised awareness of the issue amongst tutors, and, despite the broad measures encompassed by the data flags, many tutors take time and effort to investigate the background of their candidates in order to make a more nuanced assessment. However, the practice of contextualisation, even in light of the policy, remains varied. The process of change is more difficult to identify, and there is evidence to suggest both acceptance and resistance.

Although some respondents express the losses and gains of moving towards a more coordinated and centralised approach to admissions, with a perceived greater emphasis on quantifiable methods of assessment, the personal judgement of the tutor has not been eroded.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to take a first step in understanding the processes involved in the implementation of admissions policy at an elite university. Whilst its findings, based on a small sample, are tentative, they nevertheless point to varying and complex practices of the individuals involved in the process, and indicate avenues of further enquiry at the study institution and beyond. The Schwartz Report (DfES 2004) recommended an holistic approach to assessment based on the abilities and potential of the individual. Whilst holistic assessments are part of the fabric of the institution's admissions process, the idea that such an approach will lead to fair and consistent outcomes for all candidates in an institution where individuals are making individual judgements about individual applicants does not quite characterise the reality. Greater transparency may have resulted from the Schwartz recommendations, but it remains the case that "admission is a multi-player game where individual chances of success are dependent on the decisions of powerful institutional gatekeepers" (Zimdars 2010, p.308).

The study has identified potential directions for future research. The tentative link between tutor judgement and prior educational experiences needs to be explored more fully to understand the social patterns at work. At an institutional level, further understanding of the differing educational and personal backgrounds of candidates amongst tutors would be helpful, as would a better understanding of the processes which take place during the interview process (cf. Zimdars 2010, p.320).

The broad detail of the new policies, coupled with the retention of a system in which the academic judgements of individual tutors are paramount, affords much scope for retaining ideological positions and "evading the judgements of the 'technicians of transformation'" (Ball 2003, p.225). As one interviewee light-heartedly observes:

The easiest thing to do in [the institution] if someone tries to give you an instruction is to ignore it. I mean, I wouldn't cause a fuss about it; I just wouldn't do it.

(social sciences interviewee)

The primacy of the academic judgements remains, allowing individuals to exercise autonomy in their admissions practice. That said, the Schwartz recommendations and resultant institutional policy have served to embed and legitimate the discourse of contextualisation at the institution. Whilst the future impact on widening participation of current discussions on student fees and funding (Willetts 2010; BIS 2011) remains unclear, the fact that the accepted norm to assess ability and potential in light of background is nevertheless a significant step for this elite institution.

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¹ But see Tapper and Salter (1992) and Palfreyman and Tapper (2008) for historical examinations of change in Oxbridge at the institutional level, and Soares (1999, chapter 2) for a survey of the Oxford admissions process through the centuries.

² The differences in and limitations of classifying social class are outlined by Archer (2003) (see also Power and Whitty (2006) for discussions for the heterogeneity of the middle class).

³ As the recent sector-wide review of the Schwartz principles highlights (McCaig et al. 2008a; McCaig et al. 2008b; McCaig et al. 2008c)

⁴ The five factors considered are:

- (1) the performance of the applicant's school or college at GCSE
- (2) the performance of the applicant's school or college at A-level
- (3) the postcode that an applicant gives as their home address
- (4) if an applicant has been looked after/in care for more than three months
- (5) if an applicant has participated in an institutional widening participation scheme

⁵ The candidate must be predicted AAA at A-level or equivalent, and score in the top 80% of the relevant subject test (if applicable).

⁶ It is noted here that, following an internal review, the policy on contextual data flags changed in June 2010. However, we are interested in the attitudes of the selectors towards their previous and current practice (i.e. up to the admissions period in 2009), this research design is based on, and makes reference to, the earlier policy.

⁷ Admissions rates for making offers to maintained sector candidates.

⁸ As determined by their admissions offer rates for maintained sector candidates and examination results for final year students for the most recent three years, based on data available from the institution. Colleges were divided into the three categories in equal measure (except in cases where the percentage differences between colleges on the borderline were too slight to warrant placing them in different categories).

⁹ Or even non-contact through only partial or selected circulation by gatekeepers.

¹⁰ A further five colleges were represented by virtue of the fact that some respondents hold joint appointments between two or more colleges.

¹¹ The respondents represented all subject areas, with 13 respondents in the humanities (41%), eight in the social sciences (25%) and eleven in the sciences (34%).

¹² Of the two respondents not to consider educational background, one commented that it would be legitimate to consider "not school type, but school's weighted record of achievement," suggesting an openness to the idea of a more nuanced approach to contextualising school background. One of the respondents to tick 'no' to consideration of educational background ticked 'yes' to personal background, which may again indicate a willingness to consider an individual context but not to make assumptions based on school background alone.

¹³ In some subjects this is provided to tutors systematically as a formal contextualised GCSE score.

¹⁴ This final respondent touches on the contradiction inherent in the Schwartz Report (DfES 2004), and also in the Common Framework policy at the institution. In this case, he is able to use the linguistic ambiguity of the phrase "irrespective of" to fit his own value judgement on the non-use of context in his selection decisions.

¹⁵ Of those who do not, only one respondent did not provide a reason for this, thus claiming not to use the flags as the detail of the policy intended. One respondent explained that the faculty is in charge of shortlisting for the subject, and two noted that it is not necessary to use the flags at the shortlisting stage in their subject as nearly all candidates are still invited for interview.