CALL FOR EVIDENCE

UNIVERSITIES UK REVIEW OF FAIR ADMISSIONS

STAFF AT UK HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Please use this document to help prepare your responses before submitting online at:

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/fair-admissions-review.aspx

PAGE ONE: ABOUT THIS SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey, conducted by Universities UK.

We are seeking your views about the fairness of undergraduate admissions in UK higher education.

This survey, which is for staff at all UK higher education providers, includes questions about:

- the key issues and challenges relating to transparency and fairness in admissions
- the strengths and weakness of recruitment and admissions practices from the applicant perspective
- whether the Schwartz review (2004) principles remain fit for purpose.

Please do include examples of your own provider's practices as part of your response.

The information gathered in this survey will inform Universities UK's evidence base for its Fair Admissions Review. Please note that all responses will remain confidential and findings will only be presented at an aggregated level. The Universities UK privacy notice can be found on our website.

The deadline for responses is Friday 29 November 2019. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions, please contact us on + 44 (0)20 7419 4111 or daniel.wake@universitiesuk.ac.uk.

PAGE TWO: RESPONDENT DETAILS

1. Please enter the name of your higher education provider:

   Imperial College London

2. Please select the location of your higher education provider:

   England

3. Please enter your job title:

   Strategic Planning Officer (College response prepared by)

4. Please enter your email address:

   a.stevenson@imperial.ac.uk

PAGE TWO: RESPONDENT DETAILS

PAGE THREE: INTRODUCTION

In June 2003, an independent steering group reviewed the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses. The group was also asked to report on the high level principles underlying these options. The steering group, chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, published a report in September 2004 on its findings, which included a set of five principles for the basis of fair admissions:

1. A fair admissions system should be transparent
2. A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
3. A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
4. A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants
5. A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

Further reviews have followed, including developments in Scotland where, in 2016, the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) published a report called 'A blueprint for fairness', which included recommendations for universities relating to areas such as transparent admissions policies, delivering a coordinated approach to access and basing entry requirements on a strong educational rationale, and included challenging targets on access. The higher education sector responded through Universities Scotland's 'Working to widen access' report, which had actions on admissions, articulation and bridging programmes.

However, the focus of this survey relates to principles outlined in the Schwartz report. While the report's terms of reference were focused on English institutions, it included over-arching principles that could be adopted by all UK higher education providers. With this in mind, we recognise the distinction of admissions systems across the UK nations and encourage all providers to respond in the context of their own admissions processes and policies.

PAGE FOUR: INFORMED CHOICES

The Schwartz report recommended that universities and colleges should provide, consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make informed choices. With this in mind:

5. What key information do applicants need in order to make informed choices about higher education during the different stages of the admissions process (pre-application, application, post application, and transition to higher education)?

   Notes:
   - *Pre-application stage: This covers an individual's consideration of higher education study, including all pre-application activities and interactions with a higher education provider prior to starting a course of study.*

     a) Programme and award details, including duration, start/end dates and academic terms/semesters.
     b) Number of places available and/or application-to-place ratios.
     c) Module information, credit bearing structures, teaching and assessment methods.
     d) Academic requirements, typical offers and/or entry standards, including English language requirements and appropriate subject choices at KS4 and KS5.
     e) Information and guidance on how to apply including: relevant policies and procedures, terms & conditions, deadlines and selection processes.
     f) Information on facilities for both programme and institution, including: teaching facilities, campus facilities, and accommodation.
     g) Information on other development opportunities within the programme, including work placements, year abroad, and the undergraduate/international research opportunities programme.
     h) Information obtained at Open Days and other pre-application visits, involving communication directly with staff and/or students, and presentations.
     i) Information on potential benefits of Higher Education alongside other post-school routes.
     j) Professional accreditations and graduate destinations/opportunities and earning potential.
     k) Admission information related to contextual admissions, mitigating circumstances, disability advice/services, criminal convictions and equality of opportunity.

l) Relevant financial information including but not limited to; tuition fee costs, accommodation costs, other programme costs, estimated living expenses, scholarship, bursary and loan provision.

m) Information on different types of university experience (including independent study, location and culture), campus life, and the student body (e.g. nationalities, ethnic diversity, male to female ratio).

n) Other internal or external data sources that can assist applicants in making informed choices, including: key information sets, sector agreed metrics on teaching, information relating to research excellence, where applicable, staff-student ratios.

- *Application stage: This covers activities from the point a prospective student decides to complete an application to university up to the point where the application is considered by the institution(s) applied to.*

  a) Information/guidance on how, where and when to apply.
  b) Application requirements.
  c) Application process, including interviews and tests where applicable.
  d) How to write a personal statement.
  e) Information on mitigating or extenuating circumstances.
  f) Application policies and deadlines.
  g) Admissions contact information.
  h) Information on immigration processes (for international students).

- *Post-application stage: This covers activities surrounding an institution's consideration of an applicant's submitted application, from the point the application is submitted to when an applicant has been confirmed, or guaranteed, a place of study.*

  a) Admissions policies and procedures.
  b) Selection process, requirements and timelines.
  c) Application outcome details and where relevant, admission terms & conditions and deadlines.
  d) Information and guidance on accepting an offer of admission and the fulfilment of admission terms & conditions (e.g. submission and receipt of academic results, guidance on DBS, ATAS and/or other relevant application processes required post-offer).
  e) Information obtained at post-applications visits (e.g. when attending offer holder event or interview day) from staff and/or students, or presentations.
  f) Information relevant to post-offer application processes relevant to admission to a HEI, including: scholarships, bursaries,

accommodation, and fee payment.

- *Transition to higher education: This covers post-confirmation activities, from the point an applicant's place has been confirmed through to (and potentially beyond) the commencement of higher education studies.*

    a) Student policies and procedures and Terms & Conditions of enrolment.
    b) Where relevant, information, guidance and support on UKVI processes for studying in the UK.
    c) Fee payment processes, deadlines and options.
    d) Information related to studying at the HEI, including: facilities, student access (e.g. campus, ICT), extra-curricular activities, mentors/buddies, student union & societies, student benefits (e.g. council tax exemptions, travel, discounts, NUS), campus details, travel options, study locations & timetables, reading lists, equipment required for study, induction, enrolment, registration, welfare & student services, including bursaries and other financial support, accommodation.

6. How does your provider ensure that applicants have access to the right information, at the right times, in order for them to make informed choices?

Imperial makes every effort to publish the information that we believe is necessary for applicants (at all stages) openly in the public domain via our website, printed materials, social media content, prospectus and UCAS profiles, so that this is accessible to all individuals/stakeholders (e.g. applicants, school, counsellors, parents) at the pre-application stage. This enables individuals to research fully the information that they need regarding applying, selection and study at Imperial before committing to an application choice via UCAS.

Imperial also engages in outreach and recruitment activities to ensure candidates of all backgrounds can make informed choices, including fairs, presentations, offer holder events, and campus open days. Prospective applicants can contact relevant staff with queries via social media, email and telephone. Applicants can also get insights from current students through blogs and speak to them directly through pilots such as the Ask a Student scheme.

Imperial liaises with the Russell Group to provide information on the Advancing Access portal to support teachers, parents, applicants and other stakeholders on applying to highly selective universities. Legislative changes are monitored at both school and HE level so applicants can be

informed of subsequent changes to the admissions procedures.

Imperial assists applicants throughout the process by making available relevant information at each stage, ensuring that the information given is also relevant to the specific applicant. This is achieved via various communication channels such as; email, hard-copy postal communications, and applicant/student portals. Demonstrable examples include but are not limited to:

a) Making clear where admissions policies, complaints procedures and similar key processes can be accessed on receipt of an application.
b) Making clear relevant terms & conditions when issuing a contract of admission or enrolment and ensuring that this is available in a durable format.
c) Providing guidance on the accommodation application processes and deadlines for applicants when they accept an offer.
d) Providing guidance on UKVI requirements and application processes/support contacts for non-EEA Tier 4 applicants who have their place confirmed.

7. On balance, how transparent are the ways that higher education providers use applicants' qualifications and experience to assess potential?

☐ Very transparent

☐ Fairly transparent

☐ Not very transparent

☐ Not at all transparent

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer:

With consideration to HEPs across the sector, Imperial would answer this question as 'varied' – not a response option initially detailed by UUK. The variation between HEPs partly arises from the fact that it is difficult to establish common practice on how to determine potential; in order to account for contextual factors, judging potential cannot solely be a quantitative, procedural exercise.

Imperial makes every effort to be as transparent as it can with respect to admission requirements and selection processes and considers applications in line with these. An example of a practice that increases transparency is the publishing of minimum entry requirements and indicating to applicants at what level a high proportion of potential offers are made.

PAGE FIVE: ASSESSING APPLICANTS

The Schwartz report recommended that the ability of an applicant to complete a course must be an essential criterion for admission. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, institutions may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including: the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability; and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment. With this in mind:

8. What types of information do higher education providers need in order to fairly assess an applicant's potential to succeed on a course?

Information related to:

   a) Academic achievements (completed, pending-completion qualifications and grades achieved/predicted).
   b) Personal Statement
   c) Reference
   d) Extra-curricular activities
   e) Social/community undertakings
   f) Previous educational establishments
   g) Personal information related to mitigating factors
   h) Disability information
   i) Information that may inform contextual admission/widening participation (e.g. sociodemographic information, school performance data, outreach programmes).
   j) Work experience – in most areas this is not required but is usually supportive of the application
   k) Admissions test (in some areas)

9. To what extent does the use of personal statements to assess applicants support fairness in admissions?

   ☐ To a great extent

   ☐ To some extent

   ☐ Very little

   ☐ Not at all

   ☐ Unsure

   Please explain your answer:

   Imperial places value on personal statements and will consider these in informing decisions of admission. It is an opportunity for an applicant to outline their motivations and interest in their chosen subject area and to outline their experiences to date: academic, personal and otherwise. However, we are aware of the limitations of the use of personal

statements in admissions; it is appreciated and understood by admissions tutors that applicants may receive different levels of support with this part of their application and, depending on their background, may have had more opportunities to engage in extra-curricular projects. It is for these reasons that the personal statement is not considered in isolation of all other materially available information, with the widening participation flagging system an important factor.

Personal statements can help inform the basis of discussion at interview, providing a personal point of reference for discussion which also affords a further framework of evaluation around the congruence of the statement submitted. Personal statements are particularly important for mature or non-traditional applicants, as it provides an opportunity to articulate from their perspective how their previous experiences have prepared them for the course that they which to pursue. Personal statements provide a mechanism for applicants to articulate how particular experiences may have impacted them in the context of their achievements to date. Personal statements also provide a fraud/plagiarism check at the application stage via the UCAS similarity and detection service.

PAGE SIX: SUPPORTING APPLICANTS

The Schwartz report recommended that admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. vocational or academic). With this in mind:

10. What are the key admissions challenges for the following applicant groups, and how do / can higher education providers best support them?

   a) Part-time applicants

Imperial does not offer part-time provision. It is understood that the key challenge for applicants seeking part-time provision is typically determining whether they can practically balance the undertaking against their other life commitments as determined by the attendance and examination requirements.

   b) Mature applicants

The key challenges faced by mature applicants are:

   a) Access to support in the application process as they are no longer at school.
   b) Difference in education background: syllabi, materials, grading, reforms since schooling.
   c) Balancing life commitments against new educational undertakings.

HEPs can support the above by making reasonable adjustments in the application and selection process, for example accepting professional references in lieu of academic references. HEPs can take a holistic assessment of a mature applicant's profile and suitability. A mature applicant's suitability can be considered in the context of their individual application and potential, and not to necessarily 'benchmark' this against traditional school leaver applicants considered within the same round of admission, without compromising principles of fairness.

   c) Disabled applicants

Challenges faced by applicants with a disability will vary depending on the nature of their disability. Challenges may include accessibility, travel, support availability, and fulfilment of particular 'general entry requirements'. At Imperial, we ensure that all applicants that disclose their disability have access to the Disability Advisory Service throughout the application/selection process to ensure that they are appropriately supported. This is a cornerstone of ensuring equality of opportunity. We also make reasonable adjustments with respect to process, selection or requirements as appropriate in order not to disadvantage such groups and to ensure that any required adjustments are factored in prior to the individual's commencement of study.

   d) Estranged students

Estranged students often do not have the same support mechanisms during the process that other individuals may have. This may include but not be limited to; support in the application process, support in educational undertakings, emotional support, and financial support. Such applicants can be supported with appropriate consideration/adjustment under the auspices of their contextual admission, equal opportunity and mitigating circumstances procedures.

e) Applicants applying through non-traditional routes

The key challenge for non-traditional applicants is access to information at a pre-application stage as to whether they are suitable for the course in which they are interested. Whilst we make every effort to publish clear guidance, not every applicant background/profile can always be covered and by virtue of this group presenting non-traditional backgrounds, access to information is often the key challenge. These groups can be supported by:

a) Making clear whether non-traditional backgrounds are considered and if they are considered whether they are subject to other processes within the selection/consideration phase.

b) Providing clear points of contact/support where an individual can discuss their suitability/background prior to making an application.

PAGE SEVEN: OFFER-MAKING

The Schwartz report recommended that admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. The report adds that criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit. With this in mind:

11. Please outline the key strengths or weaknesses of using the following offer types, and where there might be room for improvement to promote greater fairness and transparency for applicants:

    a) Contextual offers

The key strength of contextual offers is that they afford a HEP the opportunity to make a reasonable adjustment to requirements in acknowledging that achievement does not necessarily equate to potential on a one-to-one basis. This can be paramount to supporting individuals that may be disadvantaged, disabled, from non-traditional backgrounds or who have valid mitigating circumstances.

The challenge or 'weakness' with respect to contextual offers is the variation between HEPs both with respect to requirements and practice, which can make this aspect of admission practice difficult for an applicant to navigate, determine or understand. Transparency and availability of information is key here, if formal policies and processes are in place.

    b) Unconditional offers

Unconditional offers should be reserved for post-qualification applicants who already fulfil the admitting HEPs requirements. The use of unconditional offers for pre-qualification applicants will always pose a risk to the potential attainment levels for both the learner and their current educational establishment. Where attainment is detrimentally affected by their use, it may impact the individual's future potential and opportunities. Where this is the case, it will ultimately bear implication for the admitting HEP also.

    c) Conditional unconditional offers

Conditional-unconditional offers represent unfair and confusing terms to applicants. They also have the potential to limit or prohibit other legitimate application routes that should be available to a learner, for example the ability to adjust via UCAS should they do better than expected in their examinations.

12. In which ways can higher education providers' use of incentives support fairness and transparency for applicants? Are there any ways in which incentives would not support fairness and transparency?

Imperial has a number of measures in place in order to support applicants, for example, financial support such as bursaries/scholarships or expense schemes to reimburse costs associated with the application/selection process for disadvantaged individuals (e.g. traveling to interviews or undertaking additional tests). HEPs can publish any such schemes available to ensure that they are transparent.

PAGE EIGHT: PROCESSES

The Schwartz report recommended that universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified. The report also outlined that a fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid. With this in mind:

13. How might higher education providers best monitor and evaluate the impact of their admissions processes on applicants?

   a) Annual review of applicant data, applicant trends and analysis of educational attainment of Year 1 cohort. This should inform whether the admission requirements and selection practices are effectively supporting the recruitment of individuals with the correct potential.
   b) Annual review of applicant demographics in the context of admission offer making and acceptances.
   c) Participation in WP outreach programmes or similar initiatives and progression to HE.
   d) Applicant feedback and surveys.
   e) Engagement with schools and counsellors via outreach and ensuring that appropriate feedback mechanisms are in place to continually improve processes.

14. To what extent do the processes of Clearing and Adjustment support fairness in admissions?

   ☐ To a great extent

   ☐ To some extent

   ☐ Very little

   ☐ Not at all

   ☐ Unsure

   Please explain your answer.

   The clearing and adjustment mechanisms may be considered fair in the context of applicants within the respective clearing and adjustment pools. There is an argument that the processes could be considered not to support fairness in the context of the consideration of those admission decisions not being taken with consideration to all other applicants who had applied at other points in the cycle (on-time, late, extra and confirmation). Clearing and adjustment does afford post-qualification application windows

that are important for both HEPs and applicants. Without these, a number of individuals who secure university places may otherwise have to wait an additional year in order to enter higher education.

PAGE NINE: SYSTEMS

Some parts of the admissions system operate differently in different UK nations.

What would be the relative advantages and disadvantages for applicants, providers and schools of the following features of an admissions system?

15. System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider can make offers to applicants before they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, applicants may apply, receive offers and have their places accepted before receiving their qualifications.

Advantages:

a) Learners are at school and supported when making their applications, receiving their offers and deciding on their choices.

b) Aspirational offer making practices can motivate learners and enhance their levels of attainment.

c) Learners have a long lead-time to consider their choices and to make appropriate preparations for university life.

d) Does not prohibit a post-qualification application.

e) High degree of flexibility for learners offered under the current UCAS system and available application routes.

f) Learners can prepare and undertake interviews and admissions tests outside of their main examination window.

g) Allows offers and replies to be processed at an earlier stage, enabling universities to determine their potential intake and plan accordingly.

Disadvantages:

a) Reliability of predicted grades and their use in informing admission decisions. The complete de-coupling of AS levels has further exacerbated these challenges.

b) Disadvantaged students are more likely to be under-predicted grades, presenting another barrier to higher education.

c) Resource cost for institutions on interviewing applicants who do not go on to achieve predicted grades.

d) Sector use of unconditional and conditional-unconditional offer making can be of detriment to the learner and their school.

e) Applicant trajectory of attainment can change between point of application, receipt of offer and confirmation of place.

16. System B: Post-qualifications confirmation (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider confirms all applicant places after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply and receive offers before achieving their qualifications, but their place will not be confirmed until they have achieved their qualifications.

System B would afford the same advantages of system A, but would address disadvantages a) and b) but not c) as outlined in system A. Disadvantages d) and e) are not relevant to System B.

17. System C: Post-qualifications offer-making, whereby the higher education provider only makes offers to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply before achieving their qualifications, but will not receive an offer until they have achieved their qualifications.

Advantages:

a) Applicant attainment is known at the point of offer, removing the reliability issue of use of predicted grades.

b) Learners can prepare and undertake interviews and admissions tests outside of their main examination window.

c) Sector use of conditional-unconditional offer making would be removed.

d) Would still afford universities to commence processing and selection activities related to applications at an earlier stage in the process (i.e. vs post-qualification application model).

Disadvantages:

a) Would likely require a restructuring of timetable for examination boards, schools and universities.

b) Learners may not be at school when receiving their offers and university decisions, thereby lacking a source of support.

c) Aspirational offer making practices that can motivate learners and enhance levels of attainment would be removed.

d) If examination timetables in the UK were re-structured to support this model this may lead to increased non-alignment with non-UK examination periods, adding complexity to management of recruitment and student numbers for universities.

18. System D: Post-qualification applications, whereby applicants apply after they

have achieved their course entry requirements. Under this system, applicants cannot apply until they have met the conditions of the course.

Advantages:

a) Applicant attainment is known at the point of application, removing the reliability issue of use of predicted grades.

b) Sector use of conditional-unconditional offer making would be removed.

Disadvantages:

a) Would require a significant restructuring of timetable for examination boards, schools and universities.

b) Learners would not be at school when making applications and receiving university decisions, thereby lacking a source of support.

c) Aspirational offer making practices that can motivate learners and enhance levels of attainment would be removed.

d) If examination timetables in the UK were re-structured to support this model this may lead to increased non-alignment with non-UK examination periods, adding complexity to management of recruitment and student numbers for universities.

e) Learners may need to prepare for interviews and admissions tests while also studying for their main examinations.

19. Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline).

20. On balance, which of the above features might best operate in the interests of fairness and transparency for applicants while guaranteeing an efficient and effective admissions process? (Tick all that apply).

☐ System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making

☐ System B: Post-qualifications confirmation

☐ System C: Post-qualifications offer-making

☐ System D: Post-qualifications applications

☐ Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline)

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Post-qualifications confirmation or offer-making admissions systems (B and C above) best support the principles of fair admission whilst addressing the current limitations or disadvantages experienced by relevant stakeholders in the admissions process.

System B is the most closely aligned to the current system which affords a high degree of flexibility for applicants, schools and universities. Arguably, it wouldn't require any significant restructuring for stakeholders in order to be achieved but would address some current unfair practices (e.g. conditional-unconditional offers and unconditional offers).

However, under system B there is still the challenge of accurately determining potential where actual attainment is not established at the point of offer. If there are specific limitations to fairness in the context of UK HE admissions, it would be beneficial to identify mechanisms to specifically address those issues and resolve them rather than restructuring the process in its entirety.

PAGE TEN: PRINCIPLES

Based on your responses and experiences, please suggest whether each Schwartz report principle is still valid or needs to be amended:

21. Principle one: A fair admissions system should be transparent.

☐ Still valid

☐ Needs to be amended

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

A fair admissions system should be transparent with respect to both requirements and process. Institutions should provide relevant admissions transparency data that is in the public interest and support individuals in making informed choices (HEPs are already required to provide data in response to the OfS transparency condition). Wherever possible, this data should be contextualised to give the most useful information to applicants. Transparency should support and uphold the principle of fair admission whilst not compromising:

- The use/processing of applicant data submitted for its agreed purpose
- The academic judgment of selectors.

22. Principle two: A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential.

☐ Still valid

☐ Needs to be amended

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

23. Principle three: A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid.

☐ Still valid

☐ Needs to be amended

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

24. Principle four: A fair admissions should seek to minimise barriers for

applicants.

☐ Still valid

☐ Needs to be amended

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

25. Principle five: A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

☐ Still valid

☐ Needs to be amended

☐ Unsure

Please explain your answer.

26. Are there any other principles that should be considered?

END OF QUESTIONS