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Revised Paper

for

Scottish Affairs

Widening Participation at an Ancient Scottish University

**by V.E. Cree, L. Croxford, J. Halliwell, C. Iannelli,
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The University of Edinburgh

October 2005

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Widening Participation at an Ancient Scottish University

Abstract

2004 saw the arrival of an undergraduate student intake to the College of Humanities & Social Science at the University of Edinburgh which had been selected on the basis of a new approach to undergraduate admissions. Changes introduced during the previous academic year brought a standardised system of admissions across the College. Moreover, underpinning the new system was a deliberate attempt to increase diversity in the student body; to 'widen participation'. This paper will outline the process of decision-making which led up to the changes, and in this way, will offer insight into one higher education institution's attempt to face up to one of the biggest challenges confronting higher education today, that is, how to create a 'fair' admissions system.

Key words

Undergraduate admissions, widening participation, diversity, fair admissions

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Widening Participation at an Ancient Scottish University

Introduction

The issue of widening participation is one which has been exercising all universities in the UK in recent years. Initiatives at UK and Scottish government level have forced higher education institutions to acknowledge that something must be done to make admissions 'fairer', more transparent, and above all, to make higher education more accessible to a wider range of applicants. For instance, as a condition of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council core grant, institutions are required to demonstrate satisfactory progress in key priority areas including equality of opportunity and widening participation and to set associated targets for both. In England and Wales in future years, universities must have in place widening participation initiatives as a precondition before charging students so-called 'top-up' fees (Department of Education and Skills 2004).

This paper will outline the attempts of the University of Edinburgh's College of Humanities & Social Science to put widening participation into practice over the last two years, particularly in relation to school-leaver applicants. No comment will be offered about admissions in either of the other two Colleges in the University (the College of Science & Engineering and the College of Medicine & Veterinary Medicine) which are faced with quite different admissions challenges and, in consequence, have adopted different approaches to widening participation. We will also not explore here the admission of mature applicants from Further Education backgrounds to the College of Humanities & Social Science. Whilst the College has made significant progress in this area in recent years, this will be the focus of another paper.

In discussing the introduction of a new admissions system for undergraduate applicants in the College of Humanities & Social Science, it should be acknowledged that what is presented here is an example of one approach to widening participation. We do not seek to offer a blue-print, rather a very individual case-study, which, we believe, offers pointers to other higher education institutions as they confront similar and different issues in relation to the ideological minefield which is undergraduate admissions.

Widening participation: the case for change

The case for widening participation was first made publicly in the Robbins Report on higher education in 1963. This report identified the need for improved links between schools and universities and the need to raise aspirations. Since then, successive government reports (including the Dearing and Garrick reports of 1997 and Cubie Report of 1999) have acknowledged that although there has been a steady increase in the number of students entering university, this increase has not benefited all groups in society equally. During the 1970s, an expansion in higher education and the introduction of student maintenance grants brought a new cohort of students from working-class backgrounds into higher education for the first time. However, in the 1990s, the growth area in terms of entry to higher education was amongst middle-class children. Students from families with professional and non-manual occupations continue to dominate higher

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education enrolments today (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group 2004: 12). Although 40percent of young people in the population come from skilled manual, semi-skilled or unskilled family backgrounds, in 2001-2002 only 26percent of university entrants came from these backgrounds (HEFCE 2003). Moreover, children from independent schools do disproportionately well in the higher education stakes. Although only about 7 per cent of the school population in the UK attend independent schools, those with an independent school background account for 18 per cent of the young full-time university population (Admissions to Higher Education Review 2003: 44). Inequalities do not end here. Higher education is itself diverse, and the learning experience and outcomes for graduates vary considerably between institutions and courses. It is the graduates from the most selective universities and courses who tend to do well in later life, getting good jobs and gaining places on the best postgraduate programmes (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group 2004: 11).

The reasons for continuing inequalities are found to be complex. Children from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to have standard entry requirements and are less likely to apply to university even when they do have the necessary qualifications (HEFCE 2003, Robertson and Hillman 1997, Tinklin and Raffe 1999). They are more likely to be the first family member to apply to university; having a parent who has attended university has been shown to be the greatest single indicator of likely success in applying to higher education (HEFCE 2003, Paterson 1992). Working class students are more likely to apply to universities close to home, because of constraints on travel and finance (Reay et al 2001). They are also likely to make what might be seen as rather limited choices, based on their perceptions of what they see as their 'academic place' (Reay et al 2001: 864). Disadvantaged young people are also more likely to enrol in less advanced or prestigious courses than their more advantaged peers (Forsyth and Furlong 2000). Interestingly, research suggests that there is no absolute connection between high grades achieved at school and high achievement at university. Whilst those who do well at school also tend to do well at university, there are other factors which are found to have a bearing on outcomes, including the gender of the student, the characteristics of the school and the university, the subject studied in higher education, as well as the measure of achievement used (HEFCE 2003).

The position in Scotland illuminates some of the progress which has been made, and yet also highlights the persistent gap which exists in terms of access to higher education. There has been a marked shift since the late 1980s. More pupils are staying on at school and there has been an increase from 24 to 30 per cent in the number of pupils gaining three or more Higher grades (2001 Scottish Social Statistics). Scotland has a higher participation rate in higher education as measured by the Age Participation Index (API) than any other country in the UK. In 2003, some 51.5 per cent of young people entered full-time higher education before they were 21, as compared with only 33 per cent for the UK as a whole (SFCFHE 2004). This figure has fallen slightly in 2004, to much speculation and some disappointment on the part of politicians.

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Looking at the picture more closely, we would suggest that Scotland has some way to go in widening participation. Data from the Scottish School Leavers Surveys (SSLS) (see Annex) show that the proportion of working class pupils entering higher education rose from 7 per cent in 1987 to 19 per cent in 2001, whereas the proportion from managerial and professional families rose from 33 per cent to 57 per cent over the same period. (Figure 1). Thus, the overall 'gap' of 26 percentage points between the participation of young people from working class families and those from managerial and professional families widened to 38 percentage points. However, an alternative way of looking at inequalities uses odds ratios: using the SSLS, we estimate that in 1987, the relative chances of a young person from a managerial and professional family entering higher education were seven times those of a working class student. These relative odds increased to 9:1 in 1993, and have subsequently decreased to 6:1. Figure 2 shows the additional advantage in entry to higher education enjoyed by young people who attended independent schools in Scotland. The relative odds of entry to higher education by an independent school pupil compared with a state school pupil were 11:1 in 1987, but this declined to 5:1 in 2001 as more state school pupils entered higher education. Nevertheless, the gap remains: only 31 per cent of school leavers went directly into higher education from state-funded schools in Scotland in 2002-03, whilst the equivalent figure for private schools was 83 per cent (SFCFHE 2004: 81).

To a very large extent, inequalities in entry to higher education by social class and type of school can be explained by differences in achievement of entry qualifications. Annex Tables A1 and A2 summarise the wide differences by social class and type of school in the percentages of young people gaining three or more Highers passes. The relative chances of a young person from a managerial and professional family gaining 3+ Highers compared to a working class student increased from 6:1 in 1987 to 7:1 in 2001. At the same time the chances of an independent school student gaining 3+ Highers increased from 4:1 to 7:1 compared with a state school student. However, there were further inequalities in entry to higher education among those young people who gained the basic entry qualifications of 3+ Highers. In 2001, just 65 per cent of qualified young people from working class families entered higher education compared with 82 per cent of their counterparts from managerial and professional classes, and those from independent schools.

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Figure 1. Trends in entry to Higher Education in Scotland by parents' social class 1987-2001
Data from the Scottish School Leavers' Survey

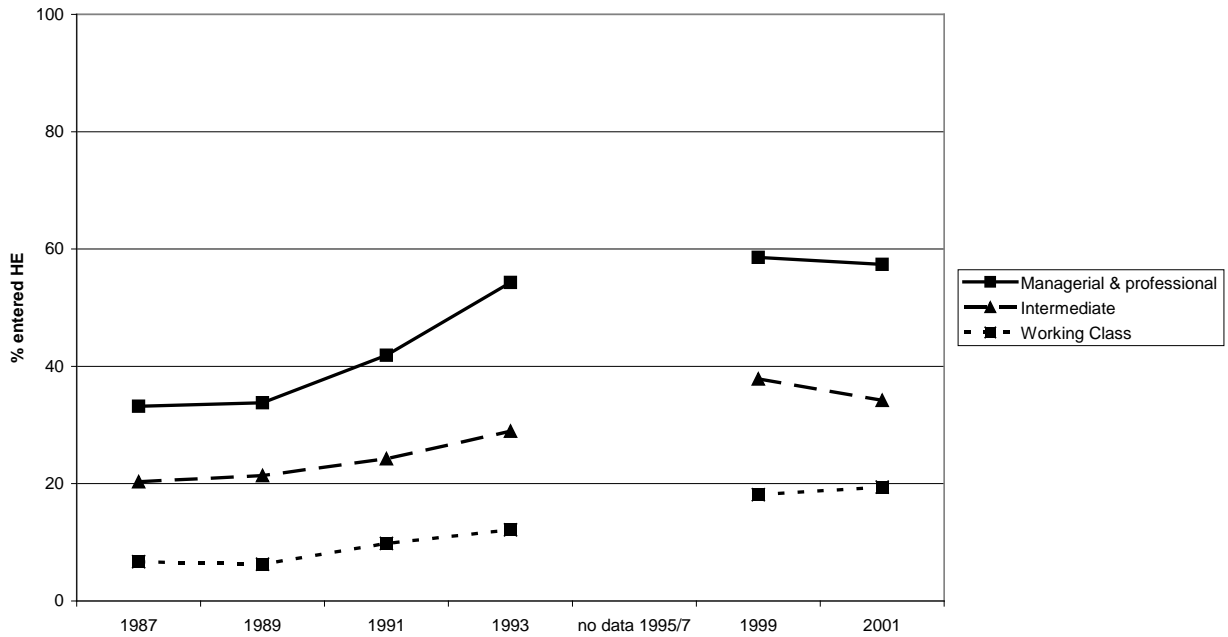
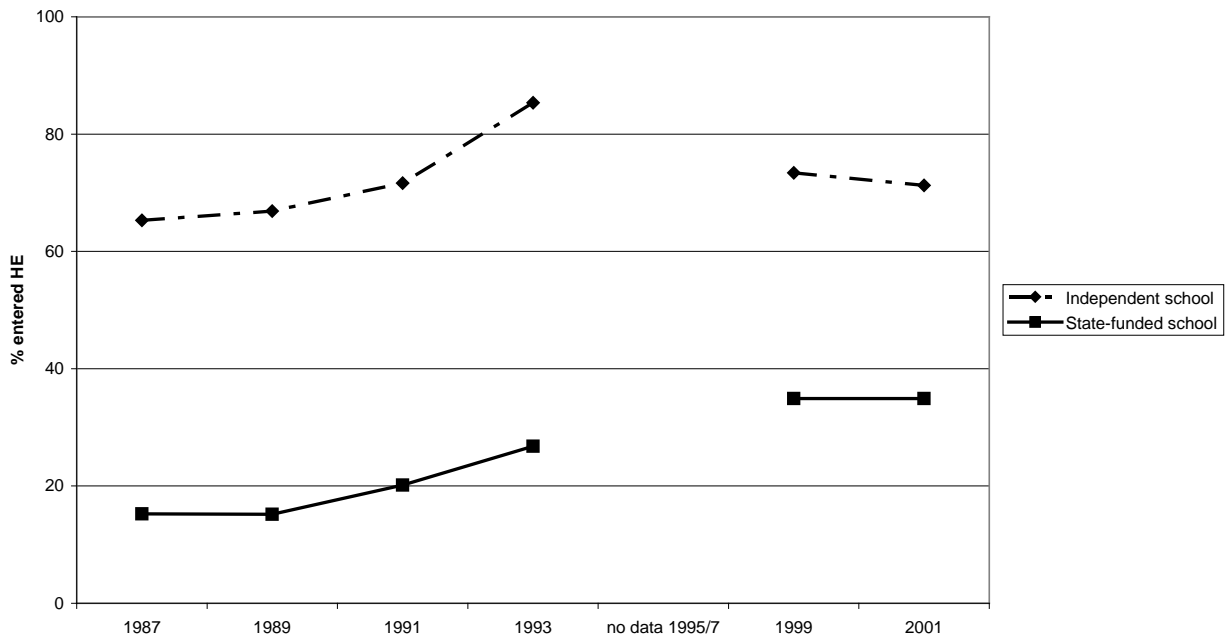


Figure 2: Trends in entry to Higher Education in Scotland by school type 1987-2001
Data from the Scottish School Leavers' Survey



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A recent study provides more detailed information on the Scottish picture. Bartley (2004) undertook research in five schools across Scotland to identify factors affecting pupils' decisions to apply to university. She found, unexpectedly, that pupils from higher socio-economic groups were more likely to be considering university, and that pupils and parents from lower socio-economic groups were largely uninformed about differences between higher education institutions and about student support arrangements. There was a strong belief amongst pupils from both backgrounds that a degree would lead to a 'good job'; this was the key motivating factor for all S4 pupils considering university (2004: 14). For most pupils, proximity to home was the key factor in determining choice of university, primarily because they did not want to miss their family or community; staying at home for financial reasons was secondary to these concerns (2004: 17).

There are further inequalities with respect to the sectors of higher education entered by young people. Scottish Executive figures indicate that about a quarter of all higher education students in Scotland are studying Higher National courses in Further Education colleges (SFCFHE 2004: 91), and it is the Further Education colleges which have had most success in attracting students from a wide range of social backgrounds. In contrast, there are twice as many students in higher education institutions in Scotland from the least deprived 20 per cent of post codes as there are from the most deprived 20 per cent (SFCFHE 2004: 15).

This brief overview of research evidence suggests that there is indeed a pressing claim for the development of strategies to make admissions more accessible to applicants from across the social spectrum, or in the popular terminology of government, to make admissions more 'fair'. The Admissions to Higher Education Review states:

'The Steering Group believes a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations. Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wide view about each applicant's achievements and potential' (2004: 4).

The Review goes on to state that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential; that factors in the social background of applicants can effect their educational achievement. It also states that it is a 'legitimate aim' for universities and colleges to identify 'latent talent and potential', which may not be demonstrated by examination results (2004: 4). It is this approach which the University of Edinburgh's College of Humanities & Social Science has attempted to refine in its new admissions policy. The dilemmas and issues which this has created form the main substance of this paper.

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The institutional context: The University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the UK. It is currently the largest university in Scotland, with around 25,000 students (Annual Report 2004). It routinely attracts a large number of applications from well-qualified students; admissions to most degree programmes have traditionally been concerned with selecting, rather than recruiting applicants, and as a result, entrance qualifications have been high. This has led to some criticism in the past that the university did not sufficiently meet the needs of its local population, relying instead on an intake made up of middle-class, privately educated students, a disproportionately high number of whom came from outside Scotland.

Admissions figures for the 2002-2003 UCAS cycle demonstrate the challenge facing The University of Edinburgh. 25,146 school leavers applied to the university. Of these, 11,271 were domiciled in Scotland, representing just under 45 per cent of school leaver applicants. Moreover, 6,979 school leaver applicants attended independent schools, a figure which represents almost 28 per cent of this group (while only 7 per cent of pupils attend independent schools across the UK as a whole).

Following publication of the Dearing and Cubie Reports, all higher education institutions in the UK have been given targets (also called 'benchmarks') for widening participation. These use Performance Indicators as proxies for wider access, and are published annually by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Indicators include: students from low participation neighbourhoods (based on postcodes); those from social classes IIM, IV and V (that is, those whose parents work in skilled manual, semi-skilled and unskilled occupations); and those from state schools (that is, under the age of 21 years and attending schools and FE colleges.) Targets are also set for mature students, part-time students and student retention. HEFCE Performance Indicators set for the University of Edinburgh suggest that the University has some way to go in increasing participation from students from low participation neighbourhoods, from social classes IIM, IV and V and from state schools.

There has been much criticism of benchmarks, on both pragmatic and political grounds (see for example Universities Scotland report, 2003). Nevertheless, they are now central to decision-making in funding higher education in the UK. Universities must demonstrate either progress in reaching their targets, or at least, offer some kind of explanation for any lack of progress. The University of Edinburgh adopted its widening participation strategy in June 2002, identifying the following priorities:

- To increase participation by students from state sector schools, and especially from areas of low participation
- To increase the proportion of students progressing from Further Education especially by the HNC/D route
- To increase participation by mature students from under-represented groups, and indirectly through all of the above

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- To widen the social class base of the student intake

A university-wide strategy group, chaired by a new Vice-Principal with responsibility for widening participation, was convened in October 2002 with the task of taking this strategy forward within the university structures, and at the same time, an Undergraduate Admissions Committee for the newly-formed College of Humanities & Social Science began the job of developing its own policy and practice in this area.

A case-study of change: the College of Humanities & Social Science

The College of Humanities & Social Science was formed in October 2002 with the amalgamation of the former Faculties of Arts, Divinity, Education, Law, Music and Social Sciences. At this time, very different admissions systems were in place. Some 'high pressure' areas operated on a purely meritocratic basis, setting very high entrance thresholds and selecting on the basis of academic grades alone. Others also had high application rates, but had significantly lower entrance requirements, suggesting that criteria other than academic grades were being taken into account by academic selectors. Some areas in the College interviewed applicants in line with requirements of external professional bodies, and interviews were conducted for some subject areas where this was not a prerequisite. One faculty was concerned to recruit greater numbers of students, and in consequence had lower entry requirements than those of other faculties. In some areas, initiatives to encourage mature and 'non-traditional' entrants had also been pioneered (see Bamber and Tett 1999).

The formation of the College provided an opportunity to review existing admissions systems, and to set up a new system for admissions which might be both 'fairer' and at the same time, standardised where possible, across the College. A level of standardisation was felt to be necessary for two reasons. Firstly, it was believed that an applicant to one degree programme should expect a similar response if applying to a broadly similar degree programme. Secondly, since applicants would henceforth be admitted to the College, there needed to be a way of breaking down barriers to movement between degree programmes, so that students were free to transfer within the College if this was necessary for a continuation of their studies.

In reviewing policy and practice at other universities (including the Universities of Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, London School of Economics, Glasgow, Stirling and Aberdeen), it was evident that many had lower entry requirements than equivalent degree programmes in the College of Humanities & Social Science. It was also apparent that the approach most commonly used to widen participation was to set differential entry levels for applicants, thus making lower offers to a small number of applicants who were seen as disadvantaged educationally or socially. The Russell Group's recent report (2003) on widening access illustrates that this remains the

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conventional approach adopted by 'elite' universities. The University of Edinburgh was already involved in doing this to a small degree. As a member of LEAPS (the Lothian Equal Access Partnership Scheme) for 10 years, the University had guaranteed conditional offers and a place at Summer School for individuals and schools targeted as socially or educationally disadvantaged. The University then allowed those who had dropped grades slightly in their school examinations to come to University on the basis of good Summer School reports. Whilst this was seen by members of the College's Undergraduate Admissions Committee as a positive initiative, it seemed unlikely to achieve the larger goal of broadening the student base. It was therefore agreed that a new system for dealing with all undergraduate admissions needed to be put in place.

Discussions became centred on three main questions:

- At what level did the minimum entrance qualifications need to be set to ensure that students would be able to cope with our demanding degree programmes, whilst not discouraging potential applicants from applying to the College?
- What factors other than academic grades needed to be taken into account so that we had a more thorough assessment of an applicant's potential to succeed at The University of Edinburgh?
- How could we ensure that whatever admissions systems we put in place were fair and transparent?

In answering these questions, the College introduced a new admission system which set as its minimum entry rate for UK school leaver applicants BBBB (SQA Highers) and BBB (A-levels). All successful applicants would be expected to demonstrate in their Personal Statement interest in, and aptitude for, their chosen degree programme, and all would have a positive reference from a teacher or academic tutor.

Although the BBBB/BBB minimum was a significantly lower entry requirement than previous years for some degree programmes, it should be recognised that this was, in fact, the requirement that had been in place for some time in other degree programmes. Because this had been the norm in some areas, it seemed reasonable to suggest that this was the level of qualifications necessary to succeed on our degree programmes. Beyond this, it was not felt feasible or desirable to grade personal statements and references in any detailed, quantitative way. We knew that some schools coach pupils in writing personal statements and that personal statements can be purchased on the Internet. At the same time, references are not robust evidence of future potential at university. Some are fulsome and others sketchy, but this may have less to do with a measure of a pupil's academic potential, and more to do with how well they are known by the referee. It was therefore accepted that these should remain 'soft' data, a matter of professional judgment on the part of the screener, rather than scored in any standardised way.

In setting an entry rate of BBBB/BBB, it was clear that for some 'high pressure' degree programmes (defined in this context as a degree programme where more than eight

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applicants applied for each place), something more needed to be done to control entry numbers. The decision was taken to award additional credit to applicants for 'high pressure' areas as follows:

- Given that many applicants had grades above the minimum, it was recognised that this should continue to be an important part of the screening process and that extra credit should be awarded for this.
- Since it was acknowledged that those from lower income families might not be able to afford to go away to university to study, it was important to affirm that the University should meet the needs of its local community by giving extra credit to local applicants.
- In recognising that students do not all have the same opportunity to excel at school (given schools' differential performance and culture of learning), applicants from schools with little or no tradition of progression to higher education who achieved the minimum should be given additional credit.
- Likewise, those who were first in their family (excluding siblings) to attend higher education would also be given extra credit, since this is known to be one of the key determinants of whether or not students progress to university.

It was agreed that applicants who had experienced serious disruption to their formal education (for health or family reasons, or reasons of disability) would be given special consideration, as had always been the case in previous years. Moreover, some degree programmes would be exempted from the policy for the immediate future, so that they could maintain their existing (lower) entry requirements.

In considering why we chose to adopt these criteria in selection and not others, a number of competing realities are evident. At one level, we were responding to research evidence and were open to the possibility of making decisions on a broader range of factors than simply grades. But decisions were also taken on the basis of a careful assessment of what might be acceptable to the widest possible constituency. The new policy had to be 'sellable' to academic, disciplinary, managerial and administrative interests, as well as to applicants, their parents and their school-teachers. This means that the policy inevitable had pragmatic, as well as ideological roots. So, for example, we chose not to give additional credit to applicants on the basis of their home or school postcodes, because we knew this might lead to large discrepancies in outcome, since a single postcode can include very diverse social groupings, as a recent Universities Scotland report demonstrates.¹ We also decided not to target state school pupils for extra credit, knowing that in Edinburgh, many parents choose to send their children to independent schools. This practice would therefore have alienated many of those who might have supported our policy, inside and outside The University of Edinburgh, while at the same time disadvantaging the children from lower socio-economic groups who attend independent schools.

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This does not claim, however, that we were able to 'fix' all the inevitable tensions in the new policy. By taking additional factors into account, we were hoping to make a more accurate assessment of an applicant's potential to succeed. But we were not naïve about the implications of this. In making the admissions world 'fairer' for some applicants, others would be disadvantaged. Giving extra credit to 'local' applicants would inevitably work against those who were not 'local'. Likewise, giving additional credit to some schools over others, though not a state versus independent school bias, nevertheless meant that schools which had struggled to reach higher performance rates might be excluded from the new policy. These issues became central to our thinking as we moved from policy to implementation.

Modelling the new policy

In order to reach a more detailed understanding of the implications of the new policy, and to find out whether our proposals were likely to lead to the outcomes which we desired, we decided to test out the policy through a modelling exercise, once the 2002-2003 UCAS cycle was completed. We chose to use one 'high pressure' degree programme for this purpose, since the high levels of variability in existing entrance requirements across different degree programmes would have made sampling across programmes very difficult.

In October 2003, the then Associate Dean (Vivienne Cree) re-screened all UK/school leaver applications for 2003 entry to single Honours Economics, using the revised entrance requirements and criteria for selection. This degree programme was chosen because it had a high entrance requirement (ABBBC/ABB) and a sizable number of UK/school leaver applicants: 234 school leavers applied during the 2002-2003 cycle for only 80 places for all applicants. Re-screening by one staff member guaranteed maximum consistency, since Vivienne had screened the UCAS forms first time around for entry in 2003. Data was collected on the new decisions using a web-based application developed by two researchers (Joe Halliwell and Daniel Winterstein) employed to work on the project.

This was necessarily an artificial exercise, for two main reasons. Firstly, there was no way of telling how many potential applicants were discouraged from applying by the high entrance requirements that had been set for 2003 entry, and how many more might apply on the basis of the new (lower) entry requirements and revised criteria. Secondly, only data from the 2003 cycle was available for examination. Thus, it was impossible to assess the effects of natural variations between years. Nevertheless, data collection produced some interesting results. Most crucially, there was a large change between the original decisions and the revised decisions for 2003 entry: 29 percent of total offers changed.

Much of the change can be explained in terms of the introduction of a new category, that is, 'hold'. It was quickly realised that in implementing the new policy (especially in its

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first few years of operation), there needed to be room for maneuver. Whilst some decisions could be made quickly (some applications were clearly 'accepts' and 'rejects'), a buffer was needed which would allow us to hold onto the marginal applications which would later become either accepted or rejected, depending on the level and standard of applications as the cycle unfolded. This serves as a reminder that admissions practice remains primarily about judgment. Admissions staff are routinely required not only to exercise judgment in relation to individual forms, but also to make decisions about when and how to move thresholds on offer-making. The admissions process is effectively a rolling programme of adjusting thresholds, since decisions are taken throughout the cycle, rather than all at once at the end of the cycle. Table 1 demonstrates the significance of the new 'hold' category.

Table 1 Breakdown of original and revised decisions by type of decision

Type of decision	Original decision	Revised decision
Unconditional offer	47 (20%)	52 (22%)
Conditional offer	126 (54%)	94 (40%)
Rejected	61 (26%)	50 (22%)
Placed on 'hold'	0	38 (16%)
Total	234 (100%)	234 (100%)

There was only a slight increase in numbers of unconditional offers in the new decisions. The increase can be explained on the basis of applicants from local schools who had been given conditional offers first time around, but who now reached the lower minimum academic requirement. Fewer conditional offers were made in the revised system, mainly because a significant number of applications were placed on 'hold'. These applicants tended to have predicted AAB/ABB grades from 'high-performing' schools outside Scotland. Some applicants who were originally rejected because they did not meet the high entry requirement (AABBBC/AAB) would have got an offer (unconditional and conditional) on the basis of the new minimum requirement of BBBB/BBB. However, some applicants from high performing schools outside Scotland who had been made offers (unconditional and conditional) first time around were rejected in the new system in order to make space for those with BBBB/BBB from 'lower performing' schools. It is difficult to assess how many of the applications placed on 'hold' would have been given an offer later in the cycle. It is probably fair to suggest that many would have been rejected in the end. However, the 'hold' category was deliberately conceived as broad, thus providing operational flexibility during the admissions process in the first year of operation of the new system.

Academic requirements and offer-making

Ninety-one per cent of applicants achieved or were predicted to achieve the minimum requirement of BBBB/BBB. Almost half (47percent) were performing at top grades of

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five SQA Highers at A or three or more A-levels at A grade. Given the paucity of other information on applicants, academic performance remained the most significant single factor in determining who was offered a place; this was the reality for both the original and the revised selection system.

Personal statement, academic reference and offer-making

In reviewing all the personal statements and academic references, two key points emerged. Firstly, there was very little variation between personal statements. All those applying tended to state interest in their chosen subject, and describe similar activities beyond this (such as school sport and music, voluntary and paid work activities). The outstanding statements came from those who had had exceptional opportunities, for example, one applicant was head boy, played in the school orchestra, played cricket and rugby for the school, had a gold Duke of Edinburgh award and was now training to be a scuba-diving instructor. The applicants who noted fewer achievements tended to come from low performing schools. Secondly, academic references did not provide clear evidence of differential abilities or potential. As a general observation, references from independent boarding schools tended to be more informative and more effusive than those from lower performing or state schools. On the whole, state schools generally had less to say about their students than independent schools. There was only one reference in the whole sample which could be said in any way to be critical of a pupil, but this was qualified by the statement that the applicant 'was now working hard to catch up'.

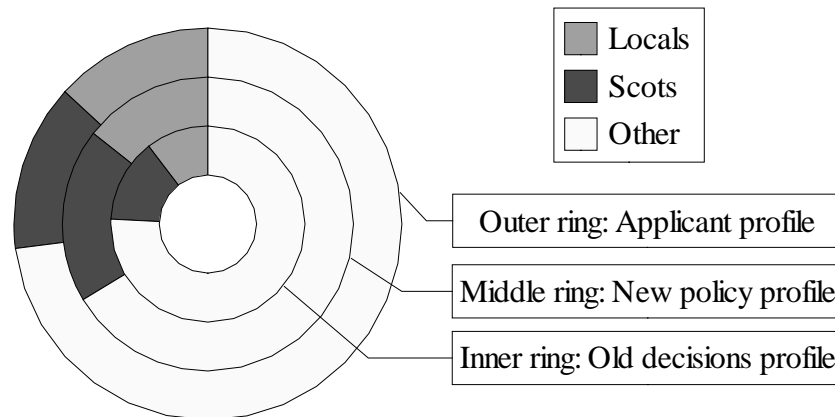
Locality and offer-making

Before re-screening began, it was decided that 'local' should be defined as Edinburgh City, Midlothian, West and East Lothian, Borders, Fife and the East-Central belt. Figure 3 shows how the reassessment altered the profile of accepted applicants with respect to their home localities: many more Scottish and 'local' students would be successful in their applications if extra credit were to be given on the basis of locality. However, of the applications received for this degree programme, 171 (73 per cent) were from applicants attending schools outside Scotland. Only 63 (27 per cent) came from Scottish schools, and of these, less than half (31 applicants in total) were 'local'. These figures suggested that for this degree programme at least, there would need to be significant weighting towards 'local' for this criterion to have any impact on the undergraduate student population. However, a degree programme such as Law, with high numbers of Scottish applicants, has the opposite problem; giving too much consideration to 'local' and Scottish applicants would not only mean that no non-Scots would ever gain entry, but that Law numbers might overshoot their overall target. The end-result was a compromise, giving some additional credit to 'local' and Scottish, but not such that this outweighed all other factors.

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Figure 3

Nested pie charts showing student/applicant demographics, based on Economics course data.

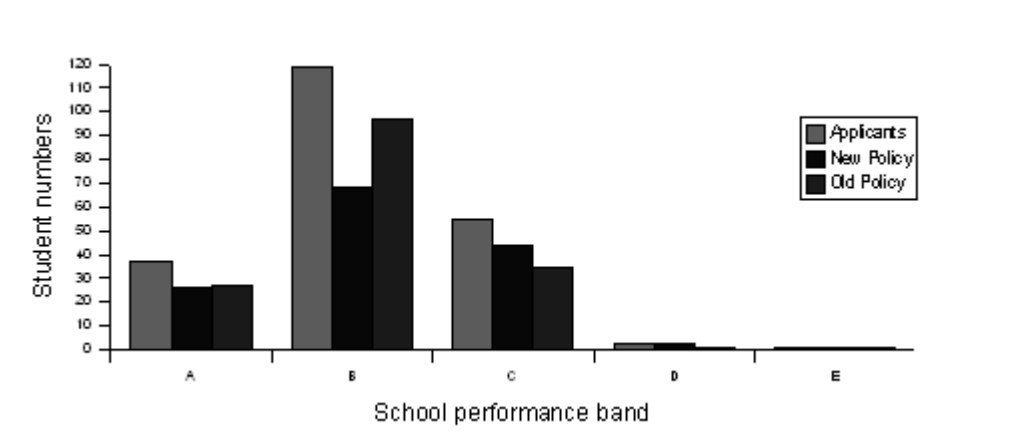


School performance and offer-making

In order to allow us to give additional credit to 'low performing' schools, a university admissions tool was created. This tool drew on progression data for schools in Scotland and A-level point scores in England over a three-year period, which was normalised and then split into five bands, from band A (where 80 per cent and over progressed to higher education) to band E (where 20 per cent or less went on to higher education). Differential credit was given to the three lower bands (C, D and E). The type of school (that is, state versus independent) was not taken to be a factor, since some state schools do well in relation to progression to higher education. Where data was found to be missing, information on the UCAS form was used for guidance on school progression rate. Figure 4 demonstrates the ways in which school performance impacted on applications and offers in the old and new admissions system.

Figure 4 Breakdown of Economics applications and offers by school band

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It should be noted that the distribution of applicants is not representative of the general population. There are disproportionately many more applicants from bands A and B schools, and very few applicants from the lowest performing schools (that is, those in bands D and E). This means that the policy of giving extra credit to under-performing schools had little impact in this modelling exercise. Also, it suggested that a change in admissions policy alone cannot broaden participation alone, since The University of Edinburgh, in common with all ancient universities, simply does not receive enough applications from those who attend low-performing schools.

But other, equally serious logistical problems impacted on our ability to use school performance as a reliable tool in admissions decision-making. Firstly, we did not have progression data for English schools, only UCAS point scores. We had data on grades and progression for Scottish schools, and because there was found to be a strong correlation between the two, we agreed to assume that English results would be similar. It should be acknowledged that whilst this was a reasonable, and, we believed, defensible position to take, there was an assumption here which we could not test in practice. Moreover, we had no data from Wales or Northern Ireland, and because of this, had to fall back on individualistic assessments of the information provided (or not) on UCAS forms. We considered giving Northern Irish students additional weighting on the basis of locality to make up for this, but this seemed a rather crude approach, given the care with which we had gone about other decisions.

'1st generation' and offer-making

We could only be sure that an applicant was '1st generation' to higher education in two instances, in both when this was noted on the academic reference. This suggested that schools must be encouraged to provide this information in the future, but that any weighting given to this criterion should be relatively low, given that we cannot be certain that we have accurate information on this.

Serious disruption to formal education and offer-making

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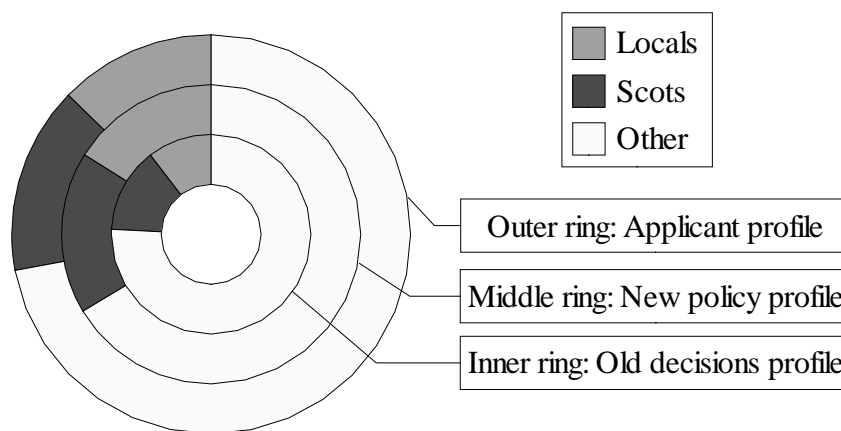
Eleven applicants out of the total of 234 applicants had special circumstances which were taken into account in selection, in both the original and the revised selection systems. These were most frequently described as illness experienced by the applicant or serious illness or death of a close family member. This was the only criterion which resulted in the minimum entry requirement being set aside. In a small number of cases where the academic referee argued convincingly that the applicant had been unable to achieve her or his potential because of serious disruption at or around the time of examination, the applicant was made an offer in both the original and the new selection systems.

Evaluating the modelling exercise

In order to test the reliability of the findings and recommendations, another 'high pressure' degree programme in the College was scrutinised: single Honours Architecture, with entry grades of AABBC/AAB and 360 UK/school leaver applicants. Although there was a slightly higher percentage of Scottish applicants for this programme (33 per cent as opposed to 27 per cent), the findings showed a very similar picture to that already gained for Economics. This provided some degree of reassurance that the revised admissions system might produce the similarly positive effects in other 'high-pressure' degree programmes and hence could be operationalised across the College. The effects of the new admissions system on the data gathered are shown in figures 3 and 4. These show positive changes to the profile of the student intake: a more even distribution of school backgrounds (though still falling short of a 'fair' distribution), and an increase in the proportions of 'local' and Scottish students. Since these effects are consistent across both courses, we projected that they will also hold across other 'high-pressure' degree programmes.

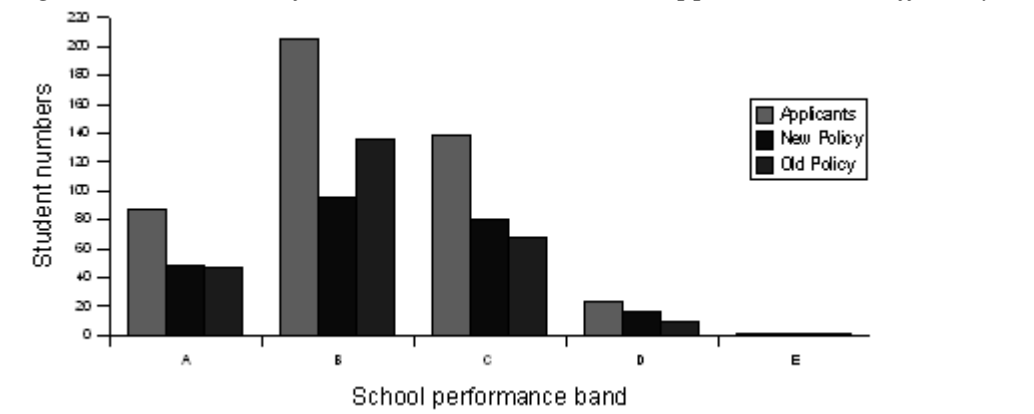
Figure 5

Nested pie charts showing student/applicant demographics, based on Economics and Architecture course data.



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Figure 6 Breakdown of Economics & Architecture applications and offers by school band



Discussion

We have argued that the introduction of the new admission system in the College of Humanities & Social Science was a compromise between ideological assumptions, which were to a large degree based on research evidence concerning the profile of undergraduate students in the UK and practical exigencies forced by the creation of the College. In seeking to put widening participation imperatives into practice, our decisions were affected by the information we had (and did not have), and by the pressures of different interest groups involved in undergraduate admissions. We have tried in this paper to take a step back and reflect honestly on the processes we have gone through in our attempt to make admissions 'fairer'. But we are realistic about the gap between policy and practice, and we are acutely aware of the inevitable approximations and negotiations which we have had to make along the way.

We have now reached the end of the second cycle of the new admissions system, and are faced with the reality that changing the student population is a long term project. Whether or not we can claim to have made any real progress in this area, three issues remain outstanding.

- Firstly, it is self-evident that we can make a difference only with the applications we receive. Unless the university is able to change the perception (held by some) that The University of Edinburgh is 'not a place for me', we will be unable to make significant changes in the student population. This requires further targeted work in schools and colleges, as well as the creation of welcoming environment for students from all backgrounds once they arrive at the University.
- Secondly, it must be acknowledged that its location in Edinburgh means that The University of Edinburgh will never have the same high numbers of disadvantaged

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- local applicants as its neighbour, the University of Glasgow. Edinburgh's unique social and economic situation suggests that there should be a different way of setting a benchmark for The University of Edinburgh in terms of its social class intake.
- Finally, we would suggest that more could be done within the University to ensure that its degree programmes are attractive to a wide cross-section of the population. This means that more attention should be given to vocational courses, part-time routes and links with Further Education colleges. A 'fair' admissions system can have little impact unless there is examination of this wider picture.

There is, however, one final issue for consideration. The whole operation of an admissions system assumes certainty; that in operating the policy, one trained admissions officer or academic selector will make a broadly similar decision to another, and that this decision can be held up to public scrutiny, that is, it can be transparent. Although we have aimed throughout at greater standardisation and transparency, we would suggest that the 'real world' of admissions is much less settled than this seems to imply. The decision to make an offer is, at core, a matter of judgment. In deciding what factors we will, and will not take into account in admissions, and what weighting we will give to one set of considerations over another, we are drawing on moral and ethical judgments about rights and entitlements, about equality, and above all, about 'fairness'.

Even this is not the whole story. The decision to make an offer concerns more than the 'facts' of a UCAS form. It is also fundamentally about the wider context into which the application is received, and this means the specific and changing situation affecting individual degree programmes, including the numbers and backgrounds of those who apply, and decisions taken elsewhere about the number of places which should be available on a given programme. Admissions decision-making is, then, ultimately about managing risk, uncertainty and change. We do not know who will apply, and in what numbers. We might 'under-shoot' or 'over-shoot' on our anticipated numbers, irrespective of any actions taken to manage the admissions process. University (and indeed government) planning decisions can force a re-focus or change in direction on particular degree programmes from year to year. This suggests that it is impossible to remove risk. Beck (1999: 6) asserts that in the 'risk society' of today, human experience is characterised by unintended consequences and that greater knowledge does not ease this state of affairs; instead, more and better knowledge often leads to more uncertainty. Given that this seems to offer an accurate representation of our current position, we would argue that the admission system we seek to create should be as robust as possible, given the constraints within which we are working. Meanwhile, all those involved in admissions must be prepared to examine their practice from a moral and ethical perspective and remain open to change and to challenge.

Conclusion

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We began by suggesting that we did not offer a blue-print for 'fair' admissions; if we have achieved anything, it will have been to make the undergraduate admission system in the College of Humanities & Social Science 'fairer', in line with our stated strategy objectives. We hope that by being open about the assumptions and processes which we have worked through over the last three years, others will reach a more deep-rooted understanding of some of the complexities and difficulties in widening participation in an ancient Scottish university. We would like to finish by noting that the initiatives discussed in this paper relate only to UK/school leaver applicants. There has also been considerable work in recent years in building links between the College of Humanities & Social Science and Further Education Colleges so that students undertaking other courses of study including Higher National Certificate and Diploma programmes are able to progress to our degree programmes. This work remains to be analysed in the future.

Annex: The Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS)

The SSLS is a nationally-representative general purpose survey of young people in Scotland, conducted by postal questionnaires. It is commissioned by the Scottish Executive. Data used for the current analyses have been derived as part of an ESRC-funded project *Education and Youth Transitions in England, Wales and Scotland 1984-2002* (ESRC reference R000239852). For further information see Croxford (2005a). All estimates described in the text are subject to sampling error, and care should be taken not to over-interpret small differences in estimates.

Social class variables are based on the highest occupational status of mother and father. Details of the construction of social class variables are given in Croxford (2005b).

Variables describing attainment at Higher grade, and entry to higher education have been derived from young people's responses at the second sweep of the surveys, approximately three years after the end of compulsory schooling. The data include young people entering higher education straight from school, but not later entrants such as those who took gap years. For further information see Iannelli (2005).

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¹ This report argues that measuring 'low participation' on the basis of postcode is flawed because of the so-called 'ecological fallacy' which hides disparities between households, that is, not all people living in the same postcode area share the same levels of either income or deprivation. 'Social class' as a category is also viewed as problematic in this report because information about social class is derived from UCAS forms where applicants are asked about the occupation of a parent. Information relating to school attended is also derived from UCAS forms, and the report argues that there is again an issue about individual differences being masked by the global figures (Universities Scotland 2003).