

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

*Markets, Selection and Equity: How Reputation and Popularity  
Influence Student Admissions and Recruitment in Universities in  
England*

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the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor  
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## Abstract

This research investigates how university selection practices vary according to institutional reputation and course popularity through an examination of English university admissions and recruitment policies and practices. It seeks to evaluate what implications this has for equity in terms of student access to higher education.

The research examines data from semi-structured interviews carried out in 2008/09 with admissions and recruitment from staff working at four case study institutions, selected to reflect some of the diversity in the HE market. Admissions policies and practices using information given on University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) forms, interviews, conditional offers and after A Level results have been published, are analysed.

This is complemented with a multivariate analysis of UCAS data for students seeking to enter higher education in 2006/07 to test the generalisability of the qualitative findings. Quantitative analyses show how the use of discretion in conditional offers is associated with student background characteristics, course popularity and institutional reputation.

Following this, institutional recruitment practices are analysed, first through an examination of 'general' recruitment policies and practices aimed at the consumer market as a whole, followed by an examination of the case universities' widening participation programmes. This includes an analysis of the institutions' access agreements.

Finally, the motivations underpinning the behaviour of admissions and recruitment staff working at the case universities are discussed. Whether self-interest or altruism influences staff behaviour is analysed, alongside a consideration of the role that government incentives play in regulating university behaviour.

The thesis concludes that, while some admissions and recruitment practices are likely to further equity of access for students from different social and educational backgrounds, changes can be made to increase equity of access to higher education.

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## Introduction

This research comes at a time of great change for the British welfare state, and higher education is no exception. Since 2008, resources have become increasingly scarce as the economy suffered from the impact of the recession. Patterns of higher education expansion seen since the Robbins Committee reported in 1963 are now being rethought, and university selection in particular is the subject of current reform.

There is concern that increased access to higher education has not benefitted all social and ethnic groups equally. Chapter 1 provides evidence to show that, since the 1960s, the more affluent classes have continued to dominate higher education, particularly at more prestigious universities and for more popular courses such as medicine.

There have been some attempts by the government to increase equity of access to HE and promote social mobility, for example through the creation of polytechnic institutions and the funding of widening participation initiatives. However, as is discussed more fully in Chapter 2, there is some concern that other reforms, particularly in relation to student finance, may work contrary to this objective.

The aim of this research is to investigate to what extent university reputation and course popularity influence student selection to English universities and to determine how this affects equity of access. The research also examines how far university selection behaviour is influenced by government policy and why, particularly where these initiatives are reinforced with rewards and sanctions.

This is addressed by answering the following research questions which examine university selection behaviour. Both direct selection via admissions decisions, where candidates' application forms are assessed to determine entry, and indirect selection via recruitment programmes which aim to encourage potential students to apply to the institution, are examined. The chapters in which these research questions are addressed are also indicated:

1. To what extent are university admissions policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access? (**Chapters 4-6**)
2. To what extent are university recruitment policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access? (**Chapters 7 and 8**)
3. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies shaped by government policies and why? (**Chapters 8 and 9**)

The research explores data collected from four case study institutions in 2008/09 and, where possible, seeks to test hypotheses developed from the qualitative case studies via multivariate data analyses of administrative data from the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for students seeking to enter HE in 2006/07.

First, a background to the development of higher education from the introduction of polytechnic institutions to 2008/09 is presented in Chapter 1 to highlight the differences between old and new universities and different courses according to levels of popularity. Chapter 2 reviews the literature regarding university behaviour and motivation to highlight gaps in knowledge which the research questions aim to address and develop hypotheses which can be tested, before developing a definition of 'equity of access' for higher education. Chapter 3 discusses the methods used to collect and analyse the data underpinning the results, giving an overview of case study selection, the qualitative interviews and quantitative data which were made available for this work.

Following this, the results of the research are presented. First looking at university direct selection behaviour is explored via student admissions. Chapters 4 and 5 evaluate the use of candidates' application forms by universities and the subsequent selection stages such as interviews, conditional offers and clearing respectively. Chapter 6 presents an analysis of national UCAS data looking at the use of conditional offers, to examine whether conditional requirements are varied systematically between different applicants.

This is followed by an evaluation of university indirect selection policies and practices through an examination of institutions' recruitment initiatives. Chapter 7

considers recruitment activities aimed at all potential students by the four case study universities. Chapter 8 discusses the universities' widening participation policies, combining an analysis of interview data with data from access agreements and institutions' bursary schedules.

The final chapter presenting empirical results looks at interview data from admissions and recruitment staff at the four case universities. Chapter 9 examines whether self-interest or altruism influence university selection behaviour and how government incentives delivered via the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Office for Fair Access and following the Schwartz report publication, interact with intrinsic motivations.

The Conclusions discuss whether university selection behaviour is influenced by market conditions, and what impact this has on equity of access. From this, implications for policy which arise are examined. This thesis concludes that, although institutions' recruitment behaviour is consistent with equity of access, this is less true for admissions behaviour. The thesis closes with a brief consideration of the consequences future changes to higher education may have for these findings.

## Chapter 1 **Admissions, Recruitment and Incentives at Different Institutions**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter looks at the development of higher education from the introduction of polytechnic institutions, later ‘new universities’ in the 1960s to 2008/09 when fieldwork for this research was carried out. Earlier developments to the HE sector have been examined in detail (see Trevelyan 1944, Berdahl 1959, Layard et al 1969, Trow 1973, Wiener 1981, Matterson 1981, Shattock and Berdahl 1984, Sanderson 1988, Gordon et al 1991, Anderson 1992, Ainley 1994, Simon 1996).

This chapter discusses the development of the university sector in England in terms of institutional reputation, student access, government finance and control. Policy developments are examined via an analysis of primary and secondary sources, official documents and statistical data.

This chapter concludes that, despite the merger of the two sectors in 1992, there are considerable differences between old and new universities in terms of their perceived reputation, and between courses in different subject areas. There is also variation between the old and new university sectors in their clientele and their reliance on undergraduate student recruitment due to funding mechanisms.

### **2. The Binary System: Universities and Polytechnics 1966-1992**

According to Anderson (1992), higher education in the 1960s can be described as a stage of *massification* where HE ceased to cater for a very small proportion of highly affluent students and was accessed by a greater number and wider range of individuals. Increased access to secondary education and population change led to increased demand for HE until it outstripped supply, necessitating reform to the sector (Chitty 2009, Layard et al 1969, Robbins 1963).

In order to accommodate more qualified students, new universities were created and built and a new type of institutions, polytechnics, were introduced into the market (Ainley 1994, Pratt 1997). Polytechnics, introduced in the late 1960s, were set apart from the university sector. They were given much less control over their finances (Pratt 1997) and less academic independence (Ainley 1994).

This section gives an overview of the differences between the university and polytechnic sectors in terms of student access and institutional prestige, institutional finance and increased attempts by government to control the HE sector and admissions mechanisms.

### ***2.1 Student Access and Institutional Prestige***

It was intended that the excess demand for HE places would be catered for solely by the university sector (Robbins 1993). However, there was concern that universities' student populations were disproportionately dominated by the higher social classes (Egerton and Halsey 1994). As a result, Anthony Crossland, secretary of state for education in the ruling Labour Government, introduced polytechnic institutions<sup>1</sup> in a White Paper published in 1966. It was hoped that these institutions would provide higher education opportunities for students who were not expected to enter the university sector, such as pupils from non-selective secondary schools and from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Ainley 1994).

More specifically, polytechnics were designed to provide locally-based students with practical, work-related skills in contrast to the abstracted theoretical learning students attending established universities were characterised as receiving (Pratt 1997). Catering for local students also meant polytechnics were a cheaper option than universities, where students generally moved away from home to halls of residence.

Thus, the two different types of HEI were originally designed to cater for very different clienteles. Universities were dedicated to educating affluent students of high socio-economic status (SES) who sought a theoretical education whilst polytechnics were designed to accommodate low-SES students wishing to study vocational courses.

In accordance with the original aims behind the creation of polytechnics, the two sectors did enrol different types of student. According to Pratt (1997), polytechnics varied considerably from universities in terms of clientele: on average, the university sector taught more postgraduate students, particularly research students, than the polytechnic sector. This displays the divide between the two different types of

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<sup>1</sup> Polytechnics were associated with the ideology of the left. The word polytechnik was originally coined by Karl Marx and meant learning through work (Ainley 1994).

institution in terms of focus on teaching and research. Part-time students were also more likely to be studying in polytechnic institutions, as shown by Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Enrolments at Universities and Polytechnics 1969/70 to 1979/80<sup>2</sup>

Year	University			Polytechnic		
	FT	PT	Total	FT	PT	Total
1969/70	90.6	9.4	203,454	42.3	57.7	41,076
1970/71	90.9	9.1	210,806	41.4	58.6	144,068
1971/72	91.0	9.0	216,699	46.0	54.0	162,852
1972/73	91.1	8.9	220,622	48.4	51.6	159,292
1973/74	91.1	8.9	226,049	50.2	49.8	156,704
1974/75	91.0	9.0	231,664	52.1	47.9	159,109
1975/76	91.1	8.9	242,209	55.1	44.9	177,801
1976/77	91.1	8.9	252,707	59.8	40.2	189,828
1977/78	90.9	9.1	261,995	59.3	40.7	198,954
1978/79	90.9	9.1	269,910	58.8	41.2	204,188
1979/80	90.4	9.6	275,823	59.3	40.7	203,123

As well as being designed to cater for different types of students, universities and polytechnics were also subject to different quality control mechanisms. Polytechnic degrees were awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) while universities continued to award their own qualifications and monitor their own standards (Ainley 1994). This suggests that the state placed a greater degree of trust in universities to produce a high standard of education in comparison to their polytechnic counterparts, demonstrating the greater level of prestige or reputational power of the university sector.

According to Matterson (1981) criticisms levelled at polytechnics betrayed the lower status of these institutions compared to universities in the popular consciousness. The university sector in particular accused the Labour government of aiming to provide “secondary modern schools at the higher education level” (Matterson 1981: 63), demonstrating a deliberate attempt to portray polytechnics as lower-quality institutions. This conveys a perception that polytechnics would be less rigorous and challenging than universities, despite the increased guarantee of standards given through the external monitoring of the CNAA.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Pratt (1997: universities 40; polytechnics 32); university figures from UCG data and polytechnic figures from DES/DfE data. Number of polytechnics is: 1969, eight; 1970, 26; 1971-80, 30.



There is some evidence to suggest that the academic attainment of accepted students differed between universities and polytechnics. Pratt (1997) shows that university applicants needed to have achieved higher results in school-leaving qualifications than their counterparts entering polytechnics. Data on the academic qualifications of entrants is not available for the first phase of the period of massification, but data for 1988/89 shows the differences between the two sectors.

Table 1.2: First-Degree Entrant Qualifications Universities and Polytechnics, 1988/89<sup>3</sup>

Qualification	University Entrants (%)	Polytechnic Entrants (%)
3+ A Levels	69.3	33.9
2+ A Levels	3.3	22.3
HNC/HND/ONC/OND <sup>4</sup>	3.9	17.5
Other	23.5	22.0
No qualifications	0	4.3
<b>Total (n)</b>	<b>75,737</b>	<b>46,608</b>

As Table 1.2 demonstrates, the traditional requirements of two or more A Levels were achieved by nearly three quarters, (72.6 per cent) of university entrants compared to just over half (56.2 per cent) of polytechnic entrants. Students who did not achieve A Level school-leaving qualification were more likely to enrol in the polytechnic sector with 4.3 per cent of students enrolling at polytechnics having no qualifications, while no university students were completely without qualifications.

However, this does not mean that the courses at polytechnics were less demanding: as Table 1.2 shows polytechnic entrants were more likely to have undertaken some higher-level or vocational study before embarking on a degree programme, with HNC/HND and ONC/OND applicants making up 17.5 per cent of entrants to the polytechnic sector compared to just 3.9 per cent of university entrants. This indicates that vocational qualifications were more acceptable as entry qualifiers for the polytechnic sector, suggesting that their founders' aspirations of less-abstracted learning were in part fulfilled.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Pratt (1997: 85); university figures from USR University Statistics and polytechnic figures from DES/DfE statistics. Number of polytechnics is 29.

<sup>4</sup> These vocational qualifications are below degree level but more advanced than school-leaving qualifications. Ordinary National Certificates and Ordinary National Diplomas are vocational qualifications and are considered equivalent to advanced BTEC qualifications, which currently provide students with learning linked to a particular profession or field of work (Jenkins et al 2007; Pearson 2011). HNC and HND qualifications in vocational subjects such as engineering are the modern-day equivalents of these and are generally taken after A Level qualifications have been completed (Directgov 2011a).

The non-university sector was also more likely to cater for women than men. According to Egerton and Halsey (1993: 191), the proportion of university entrants aged less than 30 years old who were female rose from 26.3 per cent of those born between 1936 and 1945 to 38.8 per cent of those born between 1956 and 1965. In polytechnics, female enrolment rose from 27.8 per cent to 41.3 per cent for the equivalent cohorts. This shows that, although women were beginning to increase their participation in HE, the increase was slightly faster in the less prestigious polytechnic sector than in universities.

However, despite these differences, it has been argued that polytechnics and universities were not as dissimilar in terms of either student recruitment or product offerings as anticipated by polytechnics' proponents. Although polytechnic institutions did enrol more students from lower SES and income backgrounds (Bekhradnia 2003), they still catered disproportionately for students from privileged backgrounds (Blackburn and Jarman 1993). For example, Whitburn et al (1976) found that universities, with the exception of Oxbridge, recruited similar proportions of students from manual backgrounds as polytechnics.

Additionally, polytechnics did not solely provide vocational, work-orientated programmes, but also offered more theoretical degree programmes to students. The similarities between the two types of institution are perhaps demonstrated best by the merger of New University of Ulster, a 'plate glass' institution built following the publication of the Robbins Report, and Ulster Polytechnic in 1984, showing that the two types of institution could effectively harmonise their management structures and student offerings if desired (University of Ulster Library 2008).

Thus, this period of development saw an increase in demand following legislative and population changes which precipitated the government and institutions to adapt the HE system to enable mass participation. However, although mechanisms were put in place to guarantee the quality of polytechnics degrees, there were clear differences in the perceived prestige of polytechnics in comparison to universities, and in terms of their missions. However, despite these perceived differences, there was also a degree of similarity between the two types of institution in terms of their student populations and the focus of degree programmes.

## ***2.2 Institutional Finance and Government Control***

Reform to the way in which institutions were financed was necessitated by the increasing demand and competition for higher education places. The number of advanced students increased by 36 per cent for universities and 112 per cent for polytechnics between 1979/80 and 1991/92 (adapted from Pratt 1997: 28). In particular, growth was stimulated by increasing participation from women, with there being equal participation by men and women by 1991 (Egerton and Halsey 1993).

Trow (1996) argues that this growth in enrolments, which was mirrored across Europe and in the United States, meant that universities became a competitor for welfare state funds with other benefits and services. This increased strain on the public purse from higher education expansion came at a time of pressures for welfare state retrenchment as a result of economic difficulties arising from increased welfare costs and globalization backed by a political appetite for change (Pierson 2009).

Consequently, the New Right's initial reforms of the HE sector, which began soon after the general election, were concerned mainly with finance. In December 1979, the government introduced a cap on the funds available for advanced higher education in polytechnic institutions, with the amounts to be given to LEAs determined in advance by central government (Pratt 1997). University funding was also cut, as state subsidy for international students was withdrawn (Shattock 1996). According to Pratt (1997: 249) this reduction in budget funding "precipitated crisis at a number of polytechnics" such as Sheffield Polytechnic which had to lay off 40 members of staff following a two per cent cut in funding.

However, Trow (1996) argues that the growth of the HE sector also increased the saliency of arguments relating to accountability and standards in higher education, with governments wishing to increase their control over institutions. In England, the government exhibited a particular mistrust of 'establishment' institutions such as the universities, shown by efforts to increase government control over the sector. Completing the centralisation of the polytechnic sector was the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) where polytechnic institutions and colleges with student populations which contained more than 55 per cent of full-time enrolments were completely removed from LEA control (HMSO 1988).

Funding was also removed from LEA responsibility through the creation of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), with a similar body, the Universities Funding Council (UFC), replacing the University Grants Committee which had previously allocated funds to universities. This gave the government formal control over institutional funding: both the PCFC and the UFC were comprised of appointees of the Secretary of State for Education. The Act stipulated that any institution receiving funds via the UFC or the PCFC could have its accounts inspected and audited by state officials at any time. Also, for the polytechnics specifically, a degree of control over institutional management was maintained with the institutions needing the approval of the Secretary of State for their governing structures including committee functions and their constitutions (HMSO 1988).

However, at the same time, the social control Anthony Crossland had deliberately maintained over polytechnic institutions by placing them in the power of local educational authorities (Pratt 1997) diminished significantly. The ERA increased the autonomy of polytechnic institutions compared to the powers they had experienced when under LEA control. In effect, polytechnics were given the same powers as universities in the management of their funding, with the Act specifically conferring the right to distribute funds and collect funds from other sources such as private endowments to the institutions' managers. Thus polytechnics and colleges which most closely followed the university model in tutoring full-time students were given a legal personality and funding structures. This increased the similarities between these institutions and the universities (HMSO 1988).

As the sector expanded from the early 1990s, central government sought to limit HE expenditure with the 1990 Education (Student Loans) Act. This Act froze the levels of maintenance grants available to students, in effect decreasing the size of the grant in real terms. In order to enable students to receive sufficient money to study, private contributions were expected from students' parents, with the amount of expected parental contribution falling away as parental income decreased (Hesketh 1999)<sup>5</sup>.

However, although polytechnics were given more control over day-to-day management of their institutions, the government increased the accountability of the

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hesketh (1999) the long-term impact of the resulting means-tested grant and loan system resulted in greater proportions of students working part-time to supplement their income.

HE sector by introducing a consumer market into higher education. It was codified that parental contributions were expected to help students meet the financial costs of HE participation, giving students and parents a greater stake in the quality of their education and eventual outcomes. This increased the government's potential ability to mould institutional behaviour in line with its objectives, but at the same time gave institutions a greater degree of freedom in how to manage their budgets.

Thus, although polytechnics and universities had originally been funded via different mechanisms and been under greater central control, New Right reforms brought the two sectors closer together. The foundations of an HE market were also established, with consumer choice being introduced into the sector.

### **3. Ending the Divide? Old and New Universities 1992-2008**

The harmonisation of funding and accountability arrangements preceded a formal merger of universities and polytechnics of institution in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The Act encouraged polytechnics to receive royal charters and obtain university status (HMSO 1992) prompting the merger of universities and polytechnics into a single sector.

In some respects, this legislation was unnecessary. Reforms following the Robbins Committee report already permitted HE providers to seek Royal Charters independently. According to Matterson (1981), Leicester Polytechnic and the Polytechnic of Central London had considered seeking university status by independently obtaining charters. This route to university status has since been pursued by some HE colleges, which were not given university status by the 1992 Act. For example, Edge Hill University, formerly an HE college, was awarded its charter enabling it to award its own degrees from 2006 (Edge Hill 2011).

However, the creation of the legislation paved the way for polytechnic institutions to seek university status, and the number of institutions using the university title increased from 46 to 74 (Neave 1994: 123).

#### ***3.1 Student Access and Institutional Prestige***

Although the merger of the two institutions technically gave former polytechnics (henceforth new universities) and old universities the same status, there is evidence

that some dissimilarities between the two types of institution remained. In particular, as Table 1.3 shows, the 16 Russell Group institutions received 65.4 per cent of the HEFCE block grant for research in 2008/09 while the 52 new universities received 5.6 of this fund.

Table 1.3 Final HEFCE Recurrent Grant Allocations for Universities 2008/09 (£m)<sup>6</sup>

	Russell Group (16)	Pre-1992 Universities <sup>7</sup> (42)	New Universities (52)	Total Universities (110)
%				
Teaching	24.0	25.2	50.8	4,289
Research	65.4	29.1	5.6	1,458
Other	22.5	34.2	43.2	111
Total	34.3	26.4	39.4	5,858

Although research funding is not used as an indicator for universities league tables in England it is used internationally, for example in Australia (Dill and Soo 2005). The number of citations in published research journals compared to the number of staff is also a key indicator for the QS world university rankings produced for the Times Higher Education (THE 2008). Research quality and the funding on which this is based are therefore associated with institutional reputation. The disparity of research funding allocation between different types of institution demonstrates that there are some key differences between old and new universities which may reflect or propagate a perceived variation in the reputation or status of the two types of institution.

According to Ainley (1994), the clientele of the different institutions also continued to vary according to HEIs' position in the hierarchy. As Table 1.4 shows, non-traditional HE participants were over-represented in new universities which gained their charters after 1992<sup>8</sup>. The proportion of full-time young degree entrants from low participation

<sup>6</sup> Data and list of HEIs from HEFCE (2008/40); rounded to nearest £1m; percentages to one decimal place – totals may not sum due to rounding. Institutions were classified according to their membership of the Russell Group (2008) and status in 2008 assessed from background information available from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2011). Where information from QAA was unavailable, university official sources were consulted. York St John University gained status from the Privy Council in 2006 (York St John University 2011). University for the Creative Arts gained university status in 2008 (University for the Creative Arts 2011). Members of the University of London are classified as old universities, unless they are members of the Russell Group (UL 2011).

<sup>7</sup> This includes University Campus Suffolk, where education is jointly provided by the universities of East Anglia and Essex. It is classified as an old institution like its parent providers.

<sup>8</sup> There are a significant number of university entrants for whom data are missing, particularly with reference to students' socio-economic background where data are available for only 77.9 per cent of students. These data should therefore be treated with caution.

neighbourhoods, where few individuals progress to higher education, and lower socio-economic groups in new universities was roughly double the proportion of students entering Russell Group institutions. This would suggest that former polytechnics continue to cater for students from less advantaged backgrounds to a greater extent than older institutions.

**Table 1.4 Full-Time Young Undergraduate Entrants to English Universities 2008/09<sup>9</sup>**

	Russell Group (16)	Pre-1992 Universities (36)	New Universities (52)	All universities (77)	<b>Total (n)</b>
State Schools and Colleges	73.8	86.2	95.6	88.4	<b>228,135</b>
Low SES <sup>10</sup>	20.8	29.6	40.4	33.1	<b>188,945</b>
Low Participation Neighbourhood	6.0	8.9	13.1	10.6	<b>241,230</b>

Nonetheless, although new universities catered disproportionately for non-traditional learners, these students continued to be under-represented in HE (Ross 2003). According to Connor et al (2001) in 1999, 59 per cent of the HE population comprised students from the highest social classes (professional and managerial backgrounds) despite these groups representing only 38 per cent of the total population in 2000. Thus, although polytechnics or new universities have enabled an increased proportion of less advantaged students to access higher education, their more affluent peers continue to dominate the sector.

Thus, although the binary system was officially abolished in 1992, it still continues to operate in terms of student access and reputation.

### ***3.2 Student Admissions to Universities***

One of the reasons for this difference in access to new and old universities may relate to student achievement, which is also associated with institutional reputation.

<sup>9</sup> Data for State Schools and Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) from HESA 2009a; data for SES from HESA 2009b. Excludes Buckingham University and postgraduate-only institution Cranfield University. The list of HEIs was obtained from HESA 2009a and 2009b. Percentages rounded to one decimal place. Institutions were classified in the same way as for Table 1.3.

<sup>10</sup> Age Adjusted National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification groups 4-7 based on parental occupation supplied via the UCAS form. Includes small employers and own account workers, lower supervisory and technical occupations, semi-routine occupations and routine occupations (ONS 2011). These categories are the same as used for the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 6.

According to Dill and Soo (2005) student entry score is a measure of university reputation, and is used in UK university league tables. Old universities and research-intensive institutions in particular tend to have more demanding entry requirements than newer universities (The Times 2011). This may impede the entry of students from lower socio-economic groups, who on average attain lower levels of qualification than their more affluent peers (Leathwood 2004; West and Pennell 2003).

Students' school-level academic attainment is conveyed to university selectors via the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) which was formed in 1994 to receive applications for old universities and former polytechnics (Hughes 1993). UCAS processed HE applications to all HEIs (including colleges), with applicants completing a single form allowing them to apply to several different courses at the same or different institutions. UCAS permitted candidates to apply for up to five different courses, although candidates could only make four applications to courses where numbers were regulated including medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (UCAS 2011a)<sup>11</sup>.

Each applicant's UCAS form was distributed to their chosen providers. Candidates were required to pay a fee to submit the UCAS form<sup>12</sup>. Universities could seek further information in order to make their decisions by communicating further with the candidates directly or via their schools, by requesting further documentation including extra application forms or essays, or by interviewing the applicants. Extra admissions tests were more common in certain subject areas, for example Parry et al (2006) found that of the 22 institutions offering five-year medicine courses surveyed, only two did not interview applicants. The interview is also more commonly used at particular institutions, with Oxford and Cambridge routinely interviewing applicants and requesting additional school-work to determine admissions (Oxford 20011; Cambridge 2011)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information about the UCAS form and the information it requests, see Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> In 2010/11, this fee was fixed at £21 for all applicants who applied for two or more courses and £11 for those who applied for one course only (UCAS 2011b)

<sup>13</sup> Both Oxford and Cambridge have used additional application forms, as well as UCAS forms, to access candidates but in 2008 both announced that this practice was to be discontinued in subsequent years.



The difference in the use of additional tests or information collected from applicants may relate to the variation of demand for places between courses and institutions. For example, applicants for medicine may be routinely interviewed partly because medicine is a competitive course in terms of the number of applications per place.

Table 1.5 Applications and Accepted Applicants by Subject to UK Universities 2008<sup>14</sup>

Subject	Total Applicants	Total Accepted	Difference Total and Accepted Applicants <sup>15</sup>
Medicine and Dentistry	21,152	9,258	11,894
Subjects Allied to Medicine	60,213	43,275	16,938
Biological sciences	38,109	35,598	2,511
Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences	5,598	4,948	650
Chemical and Physical Sciences	16,414	16,523	-109
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	26,500	26,472	28
Engineering	24,736	23,519	1,217
Technologies	2,074	2,968	-894
Architecture	11,617	10,333	1,284
Social Studies	42,856	35,146	7,710
Law	23,252	21,196	2,056
Business Studies	62,307	55,892	6,415
Communications	10,674	10,456	218
Linguistics	14,139	12,456	1,683
European Languages	4,938	4,651	287
Other Languages	1,215	1,558	343
Humanities	15,993	14,464	1,529
Creative Arts	63,002	49,188	13,814
Education	19,099	15,458	3,641
Combined	36,675	57,923	-21,248
General	1,735	5,345	-3,610
No Subject Preferred	86,391	n/a	n/a
<b>Total</b>	<b>588,689</b>	<b>456,627</b>	<b>132,062</b>

Although UCAS data does not give an exact indication of subject popularity due to the way applicants are classified (see footnote 15 below), Table 1.5 does give an indication of which types of course are more and less oversubscribed. In particular, medicine, subjects allied to medicine, social studies, business courses and the creative arts attract thousands more applicants than are accepted, even when interest from applicants who have applied to several different subjects is not taken into account.

<sup>14</sup> Data from UCAS 2011c. Percentages rounded to one decimal place. The number of accepted applicants is close to, but not exactly the same as, the number of applicants who eventually enrolled for these courses (UCAS 2011d).

<sup>15</sup> Applicants could apply for up to 5 courses in 2008. Where applicants applied for more than one subject area, they are classified as having no preferred subject. This is why it appears that more applicants are accepted than originally applied (UCAS 2011d).

Conversely, some subject groups which accept a large number of prospective students face much lower levels of initial interest from applicants. Table 1.5 shows that courses in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects)<sup>16</sup> and courses in languages and humanities are not highly-oversubscribed before the interest of applicants who have applied for several different types of course is taken into account. Recruitment to STEM subjects became a particular government concern, as discussed further in Chapter 10, demonstrating the difficulties universities faced in attracting applicants to these subjects.

Thus, although all universities used the same admissions form, the method of selecting students and the requirements for entry varied between different institutions and courses. Evidence suggests that this may reflect both institutional reputation and course popularity, although the exact nature of the association needs further investigation.

### ***3.3 University Funding and Student Access***

As well as the organisational changes to universities following the Further and Higher Education Act there have been considerable changes to the way in which higher education has been funded since 1992. Alongside attempts to increase private capital flows to universities so as to reduce institutions' reliance on the state, there have also been efforts to increase access to higher education for non-traditional students.

As increasing numbers of students entered HE, the government introduced mechanisms to reduce its expenditure on the sector. In 1998, means-tested maintenance grants were abolished following the publication of the report of the Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, known as the Dearing report. In addition, tuition fees which were payable up-front and fixed at just over £1,000 per annum were introduced to increase private contributions to HE (Dearing et al 1997).

To enable students to access sufficient income to pay these fees, loans grew in importance as students were expected to avail themselves of subsidised government loans in order to meet the expenses of HE entry. These effectively interest-free means-tested loans provided all HE students with a minimum amount of monetary

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<sup>16</sup> STEM subject recruitment has become of particular concern to policy makers since 2008. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 10 which looks at policy developments which followed the completion of this research.

resources which exceeded the amount payable in fees but was not sufficient to cover living expenditure for those receiving the minimum level of assistance. Private finance in the form of parental and student contributions was expected to make up the shortfall (Barr 2003).

However, although this did increase levels of private equity in the HE sector, the levels were not considered sufficient. Consequently, in 2004 the Higher Education Act was introduced which allowed HEIs to charge up to £3,000 per annum, with institutions also being permitted to charge varying levels of fees from the 2006/07 academic year onwards. Students continued to be able to finance their studies via government loans<sup>17</sup>, but students from less affluent backgrounds were also able to access non-repayable means-tested maintenance grants (HMSO 2004). In 2007, Gordon Brown's government extended eligibility for student grants with students whose parental income was less than £60,005 per annum able to access a partial grant. Students with a parental income of up to £25,000 per annum were eligible for the full grant of £2,835 each year (Aimhigher 2008).

The introduction of means-tested maintenance grants built on the temporary introduction of Opportunity Bursaries in 2001, which provided £2,000 non-repayable grants to students with little family experience of higher education and which were shown to have positive economic and psychological impacts for students (West et al 2009). Grants were also used to calm fears that increased tuition fees would result in a decline in participation for less affluent students, who were shown to be more susceptible to fears about accruing debt than their more affluent counterparts (Callender and Jackson 2005). These grants were income assessed, with students needing to submit information about their parents' income in order to successfully apply for the grants, which were tapered to give additional funds to students whose parental income was lower.

It was argued that 'top-up fees' not only increased private equity paid to the sector but were also necessary for reasons of social justice (Barr 2003). As demonstrated previously, university students tended to come from more privileged backgrounds and it was argued that increasing funding to the HE sector via general taxation distributed

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<sup>17</sup> In 2008/09 the maximum repayable government loan was £6,475 per annum, available to students living away from home and studying in London (Aimhigher 2008).

funds from the poorest individuals to the wealthiest who dominated universities (Le Grand 1987a). Asking students to partly finance their own studies thus helped minimise the extent of vertical redistribution from poor to rich.

This commitment to social justice and in particular increasing HE enrolments from less privileged groups can also be seen in the creation of the Office of Fair Access (OFFA). This organisation was charged with monitoring HEIs' recruitment behaviour. It was given the power to sanction institutions deemed to be failing to attract sufficient numbers of less-advantaged students by preventing these HEIs from charging the maximum fee level. OFFA monitored HEIs' Access Agreements, which contained details regarding HEIs' measures for facilitating the entry of students from lower income backgrounds for example through bursaries, financed from tuition fee revenue (OFFA 2011a). HEIs needed to present an acceptable package in their Access Agreements in order to charge the maximum levels of tuition fees meaning that institutions had a direct financial incentive to develop measures to encourage the entry of non-traditional HE participants.

In order to charge fees of more than £2,700 per annum, universities had to give low-income students with parental incomes of less than £25,000 a year a bursary of £310 in each year of study (Callender 2009a). However, many universities gave higher bursaries than this, with Russell Group universities offering larger bursary payments on average than new universities (Callender 2009a). It was hoped that allowing universities freedom to vary bursary levels would influence student choice and increase access to higher education for this more cost-conscious group. However, the evidence suggests that student choices about whether to enter HE and which university to apply for were not influenced by bursary levels (Corver 2010).

As well as penalising universities which did not work sufficiently hard to widen access to their institutions, the government also sought to encourage universities to widen participation via rewards. HEIs were given a financial incentive to recruit students from less advantaged backgrounds via the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Widening Participation Fund (WPF) (HEFCE 2007/20). The WPF, which can be regarded as a 'postcode premium', rewarded universities which recruited students living in areas with low levels of HE participation (Rolfe 2003).

However, as discussed in the previous section, some universities had a greater incentive to increase access for students from non-traditional HE participation backgrounds because different types of university enrolled more and fewer non-traditional students. As Table 1.6 shows, in 2008/09 there was an association between HEI prestige and whether institutions met location adjusted benchmarks for recruitment of students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN), census wards with low levels of HE access (HEFCE 2007/20)

Table 1.6: Full-Time Young Undergraduates to English Public HEIs 2008/09<sup>18</sup>

n (%)	Low Participation Neighbourhood				Total
	Exceeds Target	Misses Target	No Difference	Insufficient Data	
Russell Group	0	0	16	0	16
Pre-1992 Universities	4	1	28	3	36
New Universities	10	6	36	0	52
Universities Colleges/HEIs	1	4	15	0	20
All Institutions	15	11	95	3	124

Of the 121 HEIs in England, for which data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency were available, new universities were more likely to exceed targets than other institutions. However, the picture is complex, as new universities were also more likely than pre-1992 and Russell Group universities to miss their LPN recruitment targets. Nonetheless, there was greater scope for the old universities to increase their intake of students from low participation neighbourhoods to access additional revenue from HEFCE's WPF.

However, in practice the fund may have only a marginal effect on institutional income. The WPF included funding to aid retention and funding related to the recruitment of disabled students, as well as funding to improve HE participation for students who live in LPNs (HEFCE 2007/20). Thus, HEIs could access Widening Participation funding through different mechanisms which may not have related to the recruitment of students from LPNs. Furthermore, the sums involved were small: in

<sup>18</sup> Data for State Schools and LPN from HESA 2008a; data for SES from HESA 2008b. See Table 1.4 for HEI sample details. HEI recruitment against benchmarks is classified as being the same as the target if there is no statistically significant difference between the benchmark and the proportion of the student population from each group, for whom there is known data.

2008/09, the Widening Participation Fund for all HEIs in England amounted to £340 million, which represented 5.7% of HEFCE's total funding for HEIs (HEFCE 2008/40).

In addition, the importance of the WPF may have varied between different types of institution. As Table 1.3 above demonstrates, Russell Group and old universities attracted more research funding than other institutions, and these universities may attract further funding for particular research projects from public and private sources, as well raising income from endowments (Liefner 2003). The WPF may therefore be more important as an income source for less prestigious HEIs which have less secure income streams outside of the HEFCE grant allocation than old institutions.

Therefore, as the financial contribution of students and their families to HE increased, policies sought to encourage wider access to HE by rewarding institutions which recruited students from non-traditional backgrounds (HEFCE's WFP) and allowing sanctions to be delivered for universities deemed to be making insufficient effort to widen participation (OFFA). These developments coincided because the government needed to demonstrate a commitment to widening participation so that responsibility for HE finance could shift towards individuals, as it was feared these moves would restrict access to HE for less advantaged students.

### ***3.4 Admissions, Recruitment and Widening Participation***

Indirectly, the government also sought to widen access to university by encouraging and enabling universities to recruit more students from less affluent backgrounds. This was a key goal for the Blair government, which instituted a target for 50 per cent of all 18 to 30 year olds to participate in higher education (Labour Party 2001), a target which would not have been met successfully without increased recruitment from low-SES groups (HEFCE 2002/49)<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore, programmes designed to raise the aspiration and academic attainment of school-leavers were created to ensure potential students from non-traditional backgrounds had the capability and desire to enter HE. To raise aspiration and attainment, the government created Excellence in Cities in 1999 and Aimhigher:

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<sup>19</sup> This target was made more specific in the strategy document *Higher Ambitions* which stressed that it was hoped that 50 per cent of the relevant cohort would participate in higher education, not necessarily straight from school or undertaking degree level study (DBIS 2009; West and Barham 2010).

Excellence Challenge followed in 2001. These programmes aimed to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education and help potential students aspire to go to university, for example through the provision of a summer school aimed at school pupils under the age of 16 (Morris and Rutt 2005). In 2004, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was conjoined with Partnerships for Progression which worked with local clusters of schools and HEIs to encourage students to advance to higher levels of education (HEFCE 2002/49). The resulting 'Aimhigher' programme was funded until July 2011 (HEFCE 2010).

Aimhigher partnerships (regional branches of the umbrella organisation which organised and delivered widening participation initiatives on behalf of the government) were encouraged to target specific groups. These were: high achievers from more disadvantaged backgrounds classified as gifted and talented; students from any social background with a specific disability which could impede learning; learners in work; and, for certain institutions with low participation rates from these groups, students from minority ethnic backgrounds (HEFCE 2007/12). In 2008, the guidelines were updated to include children in care as a specific disadvantaged group, while pupils from minority ethnic groups were given a lower level of priority (HEFCE 2008/05).

These programmes aimed to increase access to university by changing the nature of those applying to enter higher education. The government also established the independent Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group to examine the principles underpinning university admissions policies and practices and how this contributed to 'fair access' (Schwartz et al 2004). This group analysed the admissions processes used by the HE sector, and developed recommendations of best practice to promote access for under-represented groups.

The resulting Schwartz report recommended that universities abide by the principles of fair admissions by having transparent selection systems, and by trying to select students according to "latent talent and potential" alongside academic results, to recognise the role that educational context could play in student attainment (Schwartz et al 2004: 5). Thus, the Schwartz report made it clear that universities were able to admit two students with different levels of academic attainment if staff members had

reason to believe that both prospective students had the *same potential* to succeed on the course<sup>20</sup>.

It was also made clear that direct government intervention was not proposed, with recommendations to enable universities to retain autonomy over the admissions process being made clear. However, institutions' progress in implementing the recommendations and promoting fair admissions was monitored (McCaig et al 2008a).

Thus, the government attempted to bring about increased participation indirectly through an admissions review and formal target which, although not impinging on individual institutions directly, signalled to HEIs their funder's desire. However, although there were attempts to widen participation, these resulted in limited change to the composition of the HE student population in terms of participation from under-represented groups, as shown by Table 1.4 above. Similarly, although the participation of ethnic minority groups improved considerably, there were concerns that non-White students were over-represented in less prestigious former polytechnic institutions, known as new universities (Shiner and Modood 2002).

Thus, the government has seen student aspiration and attainment as well as university admissions policies as a key factor for widening participation and increasing access to HE for under-represented groups. Accompanying the rewards and sanctions delivered via HEFCE and OFFA to encourage wider access, the government tried to encourage universities to adjust admissions policies in such a way as to promote fair access without the use of a financial incentive. The motivations of university staff members and their reactions to government incentives are therefore of great importance when examining the ways in which the government can influence university admissions and recruitment behaviour.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Although HE has become more cohesive following the merger of universities and polytechnics in 1992, there are still significant differences between the two types of institution in terms of perceived status and student access. Up to 2008/09, efforts were

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<sup>20</sup> This is discussed more fully in the following chapter.



made to increase access to HE for non-traditional groups to recognise that variations in entry rates between different groups of students have been made. This was particularly so while the government sought to shift the financial burden of higher education from the state to the individual.

However, although the government has increased state control over the widening participation programmes implemented by universities, in 2008/09 institutions continued to exercise considerable control over generic recruitment initiatives not aimed at non-traditional students and over admissions policies and practices.

Although recent policy developments have changed the context of higher education in England since this research was undertaken<sup>21</sup> some of the concerns in terms of finance and access are still important considerations. This research, which examines institutional admissions, recruitment policies and practices, and the role that government incentives play in these, can thus provide important insights into the way the current HE system may or may not facilitate equity of access for students to universities in England.

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<sup>21</sup> For example the Aimhigher programme was abolished in July 2011 (HEFCE 2010). Recent policy developments from 2008/09 to 2011 are discussed more fully in Chapter 10.

## Chapter 2 **Motivation, Behaviour and Equity: A Literature Review**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will explore knowledge about university admissions and recruitment policies and practices and how they are influenced by institutional reputation, course popularity and government incentives. Evidence will be drawn from research pertaining to the HE and school markets in England as there are some parallels between these two sectors (Coates and Adnett 2003).

The review will firstly examine research into universities' selection behaviour, evaluating the theoretical and empirical evidence available from countries with 'marketised' systems of higher education, including the UK, US, Australia and Israel (Brown 2011). Second, the review will explore notions of equity, as a theoretical framework for evaluating the impact of institutional selection behaviour on access. Lastly, the review will analyse theories of motivation, exploring the role that government incentives may play in determining individual and institutional behaviour.

The review of the evidence will demonstrate where there are gaps in current knowledge to determine what research and sub-research questions need to be investigated to add to the evidence base. These research questions are investigated in the following chapters.

### **2. University Behaviour: Admissions and Recruitment**

Although different HEIs occupy different places in the market, they are all technically able to influence their student populations. Universities purposefully determine which particular students may enter their institution via admissions processes. Universities can also attempt to shape the applicant pool indirectly by making their institution more or less attractive to particular students via recruitment mechanisms.

#### ***2.1 University Admissions***

Universities in England are not obliged to accept any applicant who successfully completes school-leaving qualifications. Instead, universities directly select students

from amongst the applicant pool, exercising *discretion* to choose between available applicants (West and Barham 2009).

In order to secure a place at university, students can apply for up to five different courses at the same or different institutions via the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS 2011a). Universities receive applications which contain information about candidates' academic characteristics, school background and a personal statement from the candidate and school reference.

Selectors can use information on the UCAS form to determine which candidates to accept. Discretion gives institutions the flexibility to evaluate candidates both in relation to the rest of the applicant pool and to take account of non-academic factors such as motivation demonstrated in candidates' personal statements (Brown and Bimrose 1992; 1994). Although HEIs publish 'standard offers', generally expressed in A Level grades or UCAS points, HEIs can reject applicants who better these requirements and accept applicants who are not expected to meet them (Eurydice 2011). Some courses use additional selection procedures such as interviews, further facilitating selector discretion (Parry et al 2006).

Entry requirements may vary between institutions and courses: highly over-subscribed and more prestigious HEIs generally ask for higher grade achievements than less popular 'recruiting' universities and those which gained university status after 1992 (Leathwood 2004; Rolfe 2003). The entry requirements for different courses within the same institution can also vary. For example, different departments hold dissimilar views as to the relative merits of particular post-compulsory qualifications (Germon and Gro 1993).

Furthermore, HEIs have the flexibility to vary the conditions which candidates must satisfy to qualify for admission. HEIs may give offers which are lower or higher than the standard offer to candidates if they choose according to their assessments of applicants and course recruitment goals (Fulton 1983). Conditional offers are the usual means via which HEIs signal their acceptance of applicants, who have not generally achieved post-compulsory qualifications when they submit applications. These represent the results candidates need to achieve in order to enrol at the institution, with universities obliged to accept any applicant meeting requirements set

out in their offer conditions. Thus, university selectors may raise, lower or waive conditional offer requirements in order to influence recruitment.

HEIs can also exercise discretion after school-leaving results are published in August. Selectors judge whether or not to accept candidates who fail to meet conditional offer requirements. There is empirical evidence to suggest some selectors do exercise discretion at this stage, even where the course is popular enough to avoid formally entering the clearing process (Featherstone 2010). Courses which have places to fill may also consider additional applicants who apply during the ‘clearing’ stage to courses which have spaces to fill (UCAS 2011e)<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, university selectors have considerable freedom to exercise discretion to admit preferred candidates to their institutions.

### *2.1.1 Academic Attainment: Creaming*

An examination of educational markets demonstrates that providers tend to favour high-achieving students and pupils. For example, in England schools which can set their own admissions criteria are more likely to use academic tests to determine pupil entry (West et al 2004). It is suggested that this is because educational providers have an economic incentive to recruit high-achieving applicants who will improve the quality of the course they are studying (Winston 1997). Universities recruitment of high-calibre applicants is expected to improve the quality of the educational experience, facilitating word-of-mouth recruitment and therefore access to additional income (Coates and Adnett 2003).

Research from the US, where universities have greater freedom to set tuition fee levels, supports this hypothesis. The average Standardised Assessment Test (SAT) score of applicants at colleges is correlated with tuition fee levels suggesting that colleges charging larger amounts of money, taken as an indication of quality, have higher achieving intakes (Davies and Guppy 1997). However, this evidence can be challenged because, when considering enrolment student and HEI decisions are

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<sup>22</sup> These candidates may have submitted applications previously for the same or different courses and received no offers, or have failed to meet conditional offer requirements. Candidates who did not submit an application during the main admissions round may apply for the first time at this stage. Applicants who have successfully secured a university place may also be ‘released’ so that they can apply to a different university (UCAS 2011e).

conflated. It is possible that by charging higher fees, universities are repelling those from lower-income backgrounds, who tend to achieve at lower levels than their more affluent peers (West and Pennell 2003).

It can also be hypothesised that university selectors will select candidates who are 'pleasant to teach', particularly where they educate students, because they wish to improve their experiences as teachers (Bunting 1967). Enjoyment from teaching is an important source of utility for new academics (Jensen et al 2006) with falling intake quality associated with a reduction in satisfaction (Oshagbemi 1997). Thus, for university selectors who also teach students, there are personal benefits which arise from creaming students who participate actively in their studies.

Thus, research suggests that selectors will give preference to applicants who achieve high A Level results, a factor which is correlated with social advantage (Saunders 1990).

This dynamic may be accentuated by the use of *predicted* rather than actual academic attainment in HE admissions. Because the majority of applicants apply to HEIs before sitting post-compulsory examinations, school teachers predict how candidates are likely to perform. However, it is suggested that 'predicted grades' are inaccurate as teachers tend to over-estimate pupil performance (Hayward et al 2005; Snell et al 2008). This makes predicted grades, although widely used, an unreliable measure of candidates' 'quality'. The accuracy of predicted A Level grades has improved since the introduction of the AS/A2 Level structure as predicted grades are partly based on achieved AS level results (Dhillon 2005). However, there have been suggestions using predicted grades may be unfair to applicants (Schwartz et al 2004)<sup>23</sup>.

Although the evidence is mixed, there is some suggestion that the accuracy of predicted grades varies according to pupils' educational and social background. Hayward et al (2005) suggest that teachers at independent schools are more accurate in their predictions than those at other post-compulsory institutions and that students from Black and Asian backgrounds are more likely to receive optimistic predictions than their white peers.

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<sup>23</sup> Discussions about changing the timing of the admissions process so that candidates apply to enter HE after completing their qualifications are currently underway (DBIS 2011).

### 2.1.2 Discrimination, Affirmative Action and Contextualised Attainment

This section will discuss the role that ethnicity, socio-economic status and area of residence play in the university admissions process and whether there is evidence of discrimination or affirmative action. Potential students with these characteristics have been identified as targets for widening participation activities<sup>24</sup>.

Direct discrimination is defined in the UK Equality Act 2010 as the less favourable treatment of a person or group compared to others because of a protected characteristic such as ethnicity. In an HE context this would include favouring a white candidate over a candidate from an ethnic minority group because of their ethnicity, rather than their ability to succeed on the course.

Discrimination may also be indirect if a person or group receives unfavourable treatment because of a *criterion or practice* which results in them receiving an unfavourable outcome in comparison to others because they have a protected characteristic (HMSO 2010a). Therefore, a process which systematically prevents a group from accessing higher education despite a similar ability to succeed at university level could be regarded as discriminatory.

In the US, universities have tried to overcome apparent discrimination against students from minority ethnic backgrounds using *affirmative action*. Affirmative action allows selectors to treat two candidates who are similar in terms of academic attainment and motivation, but where one has a protected characteristic, in different ways to correct for disadvantage. In the US, this has resulted in universities promoting the recruitment of students from ethnic minority backgrounds ahead of similarly-qualified white peers. Legal judgement following the *Bakke* case declared the pursuit of a heterogeneous student body a valid goal for university selectors enabling the use of affirmative action (Anderson and Corrine 1999).

Bowen and Bok (1998) describe how, in the US, elite institutions did engage in affirmative action, offering places to students from ethnic minority backgrounds who achieved lower SAT results than their white peers. Some institutions also took

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 1 for more details.

prospective students' social background into account, although evidence suggests that students' academic characteristics were more influential (Karen 1991).

The use of affirmative action in the US has been questioned with legal judgements declaring two-track admissions processes to be illegal (Anderson and Corrine 1999). Similarly, although The Equality Act 2010 permits 'positive action' to treat a person with a protected characteristic favourably in the UK, the Act implies that legal interventions may increase *aspiration* and provide *assistance* to individuals with a protected characteristic so that they can compete with those who do not have a protected characteristic (HMSO 2010a: 103). This does not appear to permit the introduction of two-track admissions processes which treat applicants differently because they have a protected characteristic.

However, in the UK, university selectors are encouraged to take account of applicants' backgrounds to *contextualise attainment*. Although applicants cannot be treated favourably because of their backgrounds, their educational and social context may form part of the evaluation process so that applicants are selected according to their potential to complete the course rather than academic attainment (Schwartz et al 2004: 7).

In the UK, research suggests that university selectors may use non-academic factors when allotting places to students in a manner consistent with discrimination. In terms of *ethnicity*, Shiner and Modood (2002) showed that many black and minority ethnic groups were less likely to gain admission to old universities than their white peers, controlling for academic attainment. Although universities are not given information about applicants' ethnicity, Shiner and Modood (2002) hypothesise that candidates' names are used to determine ethnicity. However, these findings have been challenged by Gittoes and Thompson (2007).

Ayalon (2007) found similar evidence of discrimination against ethnic minority applicants in Israel, where Arab students received fewer offers to study at more prestigious institutions in contrast to applicants from the disadvantaged Mizrahim Jewish minority who exhibited similar application behaviours. Although Israel is different to the UK in terms of relations between different ethnic and faith groups, this

evidence of discrimination practised by prestigious institutions against ethnic minority candidates concurs with Shiner and Modood's (2002) findings.

English universities have an incentive to recruit students from *low participation neighbourhoods* via HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund which attaches a "postcode premium" to these candidates (Rolfe 2003: 29). If this information is used to *contextualise attainment*, the process accords with the principles of fair admissions and the UK's legal framework (Schwartz et al 2004; HMSO 2010a). However, there is limited evidence that universities use admissions techniques to facilitate the entry of students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) (Rolfe 2003). This may relate to the small size of the fund, which is inadequate to cover the additional costs of recruiting disadvantaged students (Coates and Adnett 2003).

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that universities do use admissions policies to widen participation, and that these efforts pre-date the introduction of financial incentives to influence university behaviour. Rudd (1987a) suggests that candidates with low *socio-economic status* (SES) were more likely to be enrolled at HEIs than similarly qualified high-SES peers and Fulton and Ellwood (1989) showed that preferential offers were given to low-SES candidates to pre-1992 universities.

University selectors may therefore wish to both contextualise attainment and select high-achievers which could mean that university selectors face contradictory goals. However, Greenbank (2006) suggests that universities have reconciled the two aims by casting widening participation as recruitment and not an admissions activity. This is permitted because WP benchmarks look at enrolment, so institutions' recruitment and admissions policies are not considered separately (Pugh et al 2005).

This finding is partially supported by Pennell et al (2005) who show that only 12 per cent of institutions took the applicant's postcode, a measure of LPN, into account for admissions purposes. Overall, 43 per cent took account of whether an applicant was from a disadvantaged background without further admissions tests<sup>25</sup> whereas nearly

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<sup>25</sup> The majority of HEIs (66 per cent) took account of students' performance at interview, whilst large proportions also took students' placement in a compact agreement or recommendation from their school into account, indicating that students classified as WP candidates were placed through extra admissions procedures and these were influential in the admissions process (Pennell et al 2005: 18).



all of the institutions engaged in some form of non-admissions related widening participation activities such as summer schools (Pennell et al 2005: 18, 10).

### *2.1.3 Selection, Popularity and Reputation*

Institutional reputation in terms of university status and course popularity in terms of the number of applicants per place may also influence university admissions.

First, demand has an impact on HEI ability to directly select. HEIs and courses which are under-subscribed may not be able to exercise discretion because they face strong incentives to fill places (Francis et al 1993). HEFCE reward HEIs which enrol the maximum number of students and penalises those which under-recruit (HEFCE 2008/27). Thus, the pressure to recruit outweighs the motive to select, either according to academic or social characteristics.

Francis et al (1993) suggest that lack of demand may make admissions tutors more *risk-averse* and less willing to enrol students who are not traditional clientele. Risk-aversion arises where a small but guaranteed payoff is valued more highly than a potentially valuable but uncertain payoff (Holt and Laury 2002). Therefore, for less popular courses, an additional ‘standard’ student known from experience to be a safe bet may bring greater utility to the selector than one from a less familiar background.

Similarly, unfamiliar students may be less attractive to selectors if they do not ‘fit’ with an institution’s habitus, or the culture and preferences which have been formulated as a result of the social groups which make up the student population and their interaction with the organisation (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Thomas 2002). Thus, despite pressure to fill places, selectors may be reluctant to make lower offers to less-advantaged students who are not part of the traditional clientele of the institution.

Although, this pre-dates the introduction of the postcode premium, university selectors may still have an economic incentive to use risk-averse selection criteria. Institutions who enrol applicants who ‘drop-out’ of higher education lose both funding (HEFCE 2010/24) and prestige, with ‘completion rates’ forming part of the criteria used to rank universities in league tables (The Times 2011). As students with lower post-compulsory attainment and those with disabilities or long-standing illness

are more likely to withdraw from higher education, risk-averse selectors may avoid admitting such students (Davies and Elias 2003).

Furthermore, Brown and Bimrose (1994) found that admissions tutors for popular courses used candidates' achieved and predicted academic attainment as heuristics for quality to avoid evaluating a large volume of personal statements. The scope for considering non-academic characteristics to exercise contextualise attainment was thus reduced for more popular courses.

Second, research suggests that *institutional reputation* may have an impact on university admissions behaviour. According to Harrison (2011) old universities, tend to recruit fewer students from less advantaged backgrounds, after adjusting for institutions' academic requirements<sup>26</sup>.

This may relate to student choices rather than institutional behaviour. There is evidence that low-SES students and those from ethnic minority backgrounds feel they will not 'fit in' at prestigious HEIs (Karen 1991; Reay et al 2005; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Whitehead et al 2006). The atmosphere and facilities in university cities (Chatterton 1999) and cost considerations may also deter potential students from low-income backgrounds from applying to prestigious HEIs (Forsyth and Furlong 2003)

As new HEIs are generally more successful in recruiting students from less-advantaged backgrounds and low participation neighbourhoods, they are likely to have maximised financial assistance from HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund (WPF). In contrast, older universities could increase income from this fund by recruiting more students from LPNs. The financial incentives to recruit these students may therefore be stronger for more prestigious institutions than for new universities.

Much of the research looking at differences in admissions practice concentrates on the old university sector and predates the introduction of HEFCE's WPF (Francis et al 1993; Brown and Bimrose 1994; Fulton and Ellwood 1989). However, more recent research suggests the WPF may influence institutional behaviour in the expected

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<sup>26</sup> This analysis is supported by evidence presented in the previous chapter.

manner. Pennell et al (2004) found that old HEIs were more likely than their post-92 counterparts to take a student's background into account in admissions. Greenbank (2006) however found that old universities were less inclined than new institutions to contextualise attainment because this was associated with a reduction in student quality. However, this research focused on HEI *policies*, and acknowledged that there may be differences between the policy and practice at these institutions.

Reputation may also affect HEIs' ability to select in interaction with course demand. Coates and Adnett (2003) suggest that less over-subscribed HEIs, which were predominantly post-1992 universities, may try to avoid penalties for under-recruitment by selecting non-traditional students for whom there is less competition. Less popular new universities may therefore work to select-in students who are considering the labour market, or who will be rejected by more prestigious institutions and more popular courses. For example, Pugsley (2004) found that a less popular institution guaranteed places for lower-achieving pupils studying at local Further Education colleges to boost recruitment. Thus, less prestigious, unpopular institutions are hypothesised as behaving in a way to maximise demand by *opening doors*.

## ***2.2 A Typology of Institutional Direct Selection Behaviour***

Thus, the review above suggests that a typology can be developed hypothesising the way different HEIs might behave in terms of direct selection, which takes into account both institutional reputation and course popularity.

### ***2.2.1 Hypothesised admissions behaviour***

University selectors are hypothesised to behave in one of four ways, depending on institutional reputation and course popularity as shown in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: A Typology of Institutional Direct Selection Behaviour

	Popular Selecting Course	Less Popular Recruiting Course
More Prestigious Old University	Contextualise Attainment Hypothesis 1	Risk-Averse Selection Hypothesis 2
Less Prestigious Post-1992 University	Academic Creaming Hypothesis 3	Opening Doors Hypothesis 4

**Hypothesis 1:** Selectors for popular courses at old universities will use applicants' background information to *contextualise attainment* and facilitate the entry of candidates from less privileged backgrounds.

Selectors will use applicants' contextual information to select applicants according to their ability to succeed in HE (Schwartz et al 2004). This will result in students with lower levels of academic attainment than others receiving offers because their backgrounds have been taken into account.

**Hypothesis 2:** Selectors for less popular courses at old universities will be *risk averse* and select students who are similar to previous intakes.

These selectors will not differentiate between applicants according to background characteristics due to risk aversion (Francis et al 1993). Less popular courses at prestigious institutions are faced with a need to fill places and will recruit 'good' students. Selectors will therefore recruit academic achievers and traditional students who are less likely to drop out and will fit with the institutional habitus.

**Hypothesis 3:** Selectors for popular selecting courses at new universities will *cream* high-achieving students and give preferential offers to encourage their enrolment.

As new HEIs enrol more non-privileged students than old universities, they have less incentive to select further students from these groups (Pugh et al 2005). Selectors for popular courses at new universities may give preferential offers to high academic achievers to encourage their entry.

**Hypothesis 4:** Less popular recruiting courses at new universities will *open doors* and facilitate the entry of applicants who are unable to enter other institutions in order to fill places.

Under-subscribed HEIs which have little reputational standing are only able to exercise limited discretion over applicant selection. However, they are able to facilitate the entry of applicants who may be unable to enter other universities in order to fill places (Pugsley 2004). Selectors will therefore *open doors* to students who achieve at lower levels to obtain sufficient numbers of students.

### 2.2.2 Critique of the Typology

There are several reasons why the above typology may not adequately describe institutional admissions behaviour.

First, research suggests selector decisions may vary between academic departments (Germon and Gro 1993; Brown and Bimrose 1994; Featherstone 2010). Fulton and Ellwood (1989) ascribe these differences to differing departmental priorities. For example, English Literature tutors had a strong commitment to social justice which influenced their attitudes towards applicants presenting non-traditional qualifications.

Furthermore, differences between departments indicate that an examination of admissions should consider HEI *policy* and *practice* as these may differ. Whilst HEI policy may not recommend the use of contextual data for example, selectors may contextualise attainment independently. Alternatively, selector practice may be constrained by institutional policy. The research on which the above typology is based examines either policy or practice, meaning that it may not accurately reflect the interaction of these two factors.

In addition, it may no longer be the case that academics have the autonomy over selection which has been found in most previous research. As a result of the Schwartz review's recommendations to increase transparency and consistency in admissions, universities have increasingly centralised student selection to administrative offices and away from academic departments (Adnett et al 2011; McCaig 2008b)<sup>27</sup>. The assumption of a variation between departments and courses may now be out-dated.

### 2.3 Student Recruitment

According to Kotler and Fox (1995), HEIs can also select applicants indirectly through marketing, which is a commonly accepted practice amongst HE providers (Sauntson and Morrish 2011; Callender 2010; Blackburn 1986; Price et al 2003; Locke et al 1992; Rolfé 2003). Evidence also suggests that marketing may influence student choice of university and thus influence student recruitment (Maringe 2006; Litten 1982; Connor et al 1999a; Pugsley 2004; McDonough 1997).

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<sup>27</sup> Pilot interviews with admissions staff at several institutions indicated the existence of centralised admissions offices. Interviewee selection and interview schedules were modified to take account of this.

It could be argued that marketing may become increasingly important for universities as student mobility increases and as consumers become more adept at interpreting information relating to the HE market (Briggs 2006)<sup>28</sup>.

According to Kotler and Fox (1995: 6):

*“Marketing involves designing the institutions’ offerings to meet the target markets’ needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service these markets”.*

### 2.3.1 A Refined Marketing Mix

Universities can therefore use a variety of functions and programmes designed to influence consumer choice. This section investigates how universities can alter their attributes to encourage the recruitment of consumer groups and thus indirectly influence student selection.

Marketing is seen as a function of four attributes described collectively as the *marketing mix* (Davies and Scribbins 1985). The marketing mix consists of *price* factors including bursaries and fees, *programme attributes* including what students are taught, the method of delivery or *place* of the programme such as whether the material is delivered at distance or on campus and the way the institution portrays itself in *promotional material* (Davies and Scribbins 1985). An institution’s offering in terms of these attributes can influence the relative attractiveness of degree programmes.

Other research suggests that the above definition excludes key components of the university product. Facilities such as libraries form part of an institution’s offering to the extent that facilities can be argued to compensate for poor institutional reputation (Price et al 2003). HEI atmosphere influenced by peer groups, architectural design and the more elusive ‘ethos’, have also been shown to be important components of a university's brand and to influence how comfortable students feel at their place of study (Ali-Choudhury et al 2009; Reay et al 2005; Sauntson and Morrish 2011; James

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<sup>28</sup> Chapter 10 discussed how government proposals may further encourage consumer choice (DBIS 2011).

2000; Winston 1997; Coates and Adnett 2003; Rudd 1987b; Rouncefield and Scott 2002).

Therefore, in order to encompass these important aspects, *programme attributes* include facilities, while atmosphere is taken to be part of *place*.

Thus, the marketing mix consists of several HEIs' attributes which can be manipulated to attract consumers. However, there are some constraints on what institutions can achieve. Universities need to ensure they can deliver the expected product to consumers because current or former student experiences have an influence on future word-of-mouth recruitment (Kotler and Armstrong 1991; Coates 1998). Thus, any assumed market position needs to be believable not only in the short-term to convince consumers to apply and enrol, but must be sustainable in the longer term.

A university's position in the HE hierarchy or *reputation* may in particular be difficult to alter in the short-term (Price et al 2003). Institutional reputation stems from the historical development of the HE sector and layers of perception built up from numerous different sources such as family, school staff and employers. Although it is difficult to change the perceptions of consumers, it has been suggested that a gradual alteration in market position is feasible (Croot and Chalkley 1999; Maringe 1999).

### 2.3.2 Segmentation: Targeting Particular Students

Furthermore, as different types of marketing mix will appeal to some consumer groups while not attracting others, the marketing mix can be used to attract *different types* of consumer as desired by providers (Kotler and Fox 1995). Potential consumers, divided into 'segments' according to attributes such as socio-demographic characteristics, can be directly targeted by the HEI if they are deemed desirable (Ivanauskas and Pajuodis 2005).

In the HE market, this is possible because different elements of the marketing mix are more important to particular groups of students (Connor et al 1999a, Price et al 2003, Whitehead et al 2006; Callender and Jackson 2008). For example, students from higher *socio-economic backgrounds* have been shown to be more aware of the importance of institutional reputation and league table position (Ball et al 2002; Brooks 2005) and are more likely to emphasise the social facilities offered by

institutions (Connor et al 1999a). Therefore, improving an institution's position in the league tables by raising entry requirements for example and investing in social facilities may encourage applications from more privileged students.

In terms of attracting *high-achievers*, Reay et al (2005) demonstrate that academically-orientated applicants prefer institutions which emphasise the challenging nature of academic study and reject institutions which promote the social aspects of university life. Thus, institutions seeking to attract highly-motivated applicants could emphasise the challenging nature of degree programmes. As university entry standard and students' degree classifications form part of institution rankings (Bowden 2000) this would suggest that reputation can be used to attract particular students according to academic as well as social characteristics. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between the entry standard of institutions and league table position (Eccles 2002).

According to Callender (2002), students from some *ethnic minority backgrounds* are less likely to take out student loans. Thus, an institution wishing to attract students from low-income backgrounds and ethnic minority groups could offer more generous bursaries or lower tuition fees than competitors. Similarly, Metcalf (2003) shows that students without *parental experience of HE* are more likely to take on paid employment whilst studying, meaning that universities seeking to attract less privileged students could introduce flexible contact hours and evening courses.

Institutions can also use promotional aspects of the marketing mix to appeal to particular consumer segments. Summer schools have been shown to be particularly appropriate for less-confident students with this being seen as a key tool for widening participation (Pennell et al 2004; Lewis 2002; Lasselle et al 2009). Litten (1982) has shown that, in a US context, 'race' is an important factor influencing students' interpretation of promotional material, with greater proportions of Black students taking account of direct mail-outs from HEIs than their white and Asian peers.

Research also suggests that students seek other sources of information when choosing HEIs and courses. The role of friends (Brooks 2005), latent knowledge from social networks (Reay et al 2005), the family (Pugsley 2004), teachers and previous graduates (James 2000) have been shown to play a significant role in student choices.



Nonetheless, research suggests that most students also seek information directly from institutions for example by reading prospectuses (Connor et al 1999a).

In terms of the place of delivery, research suggests that cost-conscious students may de-prioritise moving away from the parental home in order to study (Pugsley 2004; McDonough 1997; Callender 2002). Independent school leavers are less likely to live at home while studying, controlling for attitudes to debt and university cost (Callender and Jackson 2008). Universities may therefore be more attractive to particular consumers who wish to live at home whilst studying depending on location and transport links. Institutions have little control over these aspects of their marketing mix (although acquiring multiple sites is a possibility). However, localism does provide universities with a potential ‘captive market’ which may be targeted or ignored by recruitment strategies according to institutional priorities (Rolfe 2003).

Technically, all HEIs are equally able to use marketing mixes to indirectly select. There are no policy restrictions on how HEIs promote themselves. Although there are some constraints regarding programme attributes and mode of delivery, for example the Qualifications and Assessment Authority (QAA) audits HEIs to ensure that degree programmes meet benchmarks for standards and contain specific content, there are no a priori reasons to suspect these will affect some HEIs more than others (QAA 2008).

Constraints on pricing however do technically vary between HEIs. Office for Fair Access (OFFA) requirements suggest institutions which have been less successful in recruiting non-traditional students are expected to be “more ambitious” than their competitors in terms of increasing access, for example using more generous bursaries (OFFA 2011b: 23)<sup>29</sup>. There is little evidence of variation in terms of tuition fee levels, but bursary schemes do vary between institutions (Callender 2009a; Callender 2010). Therefore, price factors are partially determined by third parties. However, even within this area HEIs can use pricing independently in accordance with recruitment goals to attract particular applicants. Bursaries and scholarships which do not form part of Access Agreements can be applied at universities’ discretion.

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<sup>29</sup> Further details about the role of OFFA in determining fee levels are given in Chapter 1.

### 2.3.3 Reputation, Popularity and Student Recruitment

However, research suggests that reputation and popularity may influence the extent to which universities can use their marketing mixes to appeal to specific consumer segments and which students are targeted.

A strategy which selectively appeals to desirable consumer segments may be more important for institutions which, due to lack of demand, cannot directly select their chosen intake. According to Smith (1956), providers which are operating in an imperfectly competitive market where the supply and demand side are heterogeneous, like the HE market, have two strategies which they can utilise to maintain consumer interest. Universities can use *product differentiation* or *market segmentation*; which strategy is most appropriate depends on the providers' ability to select via admissions. These marketing strategies, which traditionally rely on promotional materials, are used to increase demand from sub-groups of consumers rather than individuals (Bass et al 1968).

For providers who supply under-subscribed courses, Smith's (1956) theory suggests that *market segmentation* is the more appropriate strategy. Market segmentation aims to increase demand from specific consumer groups by assuming that different groups have different needs, identified in terms of their demographic characteristics for example (Kotler and Armstrong 2006). A desired group is identified and the marketing mix adjusted to secure custom from this group. Thus, market segmentation can be used to attract a vertical slice of the consumer market, necessary when university selectors are not in a strong position to reject undesirable customers because of the need to fill places. Thus, the HEI needs to increase demand from desirable consumer groups so that more students from this segment can be admitted.

For over-subscribed providers who are more able to exercise discretion over admissions, Smith (1956) suggests that *product differentiation* is more appropriate. Product differentiation aims to induce demand for a product to exceed supply, resulting in higher prices than would be expected in perfect competition. Universities using this strategy would try to maximise the number of applications they receive across the market by differentiating their product from their competitors along any dimension which consumers use to formulate a buying decision. By attempting to increase demand horizontally across the market, this strategy does not target a specific

consumer group, an unnecessary goal for providers who are able to control their intake using direct selection.

Although Smith's ideas are still commonly cited (Evans 2004) his theory has been challenged. For example Dickson and Ginter (1987) contend that some authors view product differentiation and market segmentation as different strategies while others maintain that they are complementary strategies. Other researchers have argued that providers cannot attempt to appeal to all potential consumers successfully and that product differentiation which aims to entice an *entire* mass market is unfeasible (Gibbs and Knapp 2002).

However, using a definitional framework provided by Kotler and Fox (1995), Smith's (1956) ideas can be adapted to form a more workable hypothesis. When defining market segmentation, Kotler and Fox (1995) make a distinction between *strong segmentation* where a narrow slice of the market is targeted and *multiple-segmentation* where targeting takes place, but the consumers of interest cover a broader section of the population.

Thus HEIs have two distinct strategies which mirror those identified by Smith (1956). Institutions can position themselves in relation to their competitors by providing differentiated offerings to appeal to many different segments, or they can engage in a more narrow marketing strategy and satisfy a few desirable segments. Thus, providers with the ability to exercise discretion over admissions outcomes will wish to appeal to a variety of segments whereas providers which do not have discretion may focus their offering on a narrower selection of desirable segments.

However, authors suggest that some variation between courses of similar popularity is expected in relation to the reputational strength of institutions. According to Nicholls et al (1995), marketing may be of a greater necessity for institutions without a strong reputation because, in the absence of detailed programme information, consumers use brands as heuristics. Consequently, HEIs with strong reputations are readily chosen while those which lack strong reputations have to work hard to attract consumers. HEIs with strong reputations are thus expected to adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to marketing in contrast to other institutions which need to market themselves more proactively (Ali-Choudhury et al 2009; Briggs and Wilson 2007; Ivy 2001).

This view is supported by Pruitt and Isaac (1985) who suggest that HEI departments use narrow segmentation as a default setting. They contend that universities establish recruitment paths which operate so as to screen applicants before they apply so that selectors can be confident those they select will have certain characteristics. If these recruitment channels yield sufficient applications from desirable consumers, there is no incentive for universities to attract other consumer segments. This is because new markets do not yield as many applications per resource spend as established areas of demand (Pruitt and Isaac 1985).

Conversely, Coates (1998) argues that institutions with weak reputations and who are under-subscribed may have to work hard to *create demand* to recruit sufficient numbers of students to avoid penalties for under-recruiting (HEFCE 2010/24). As untapped demand principally consists of qualified but under-privileged students for whom HE participation is not an automatic consideration (Pugsley 2004) these institutions have to invest more in the marketing mix to convince potential students about the benefits of HE participation as well as their products (Coates 1998). These institutions are thus competing with the labour market rather than other HEIs.

This effect may be sharpened by universities' natural inclination to promote their areas of strength, as universities recruiting well against WP benchmarks are likely to publicise this achievement (Pugh et al 2005). Using WP indicators such as recruitment of students from lower socio-economic groups as part of the marketing mix may further increase the attractiveness of these institutions to these students, who may be under-confident about their ability to 'fit in' (Reay et al 2005).

There is some evidence to support this hypothesis, with Ali-Choudhury et al (2009) demonstrating that less-prestigious HEIs demonstrated their widening participation credentials to maintain sufficient levels of demand. According to Pennell et al (2005: 12), students undertaking vocational qualifications and work-based learning were targeted more frequently in WP activities such as outreach initiatives by post-1992 universities. Similarly, Rolfe (2003) demonstrates that, for new universities, widening participation activities and work with local schools were a core part of institutional strategy, in contrast to old universities, where outreach activities were not intended to increase demand for the institution except from high-achievers (Rolfe 2003).

## 2.4 A Typology of Institutional Indirect Selection Behaviour

The above review suggests that a typology can be developed to predict the ways in which different institutions will behave in terms of student recruitment according to university reputation and course popularity.

### 2.4.1 Hypothesised Behaviour

University recruiters are expected to behave in one of four ways as shown in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2: A Typology of Institutional Indirect Selection Behaviour

	Popular Selecting Course	Less Popular Recruiting Course
More Prestigious Old University	Laissez Faire Hypothesis 5	Strong Segmentation Hypothesis 6
Less Prestigious Post-1992 University	Multiple Segmentation Hypothesis 7	Demand Creation Hypothesis 8

**Hypothesis 5:** Old universities supplying popular courses will take a *laissez faire* approach to student recruitment, relying on their strong brand to attract consumer interest.

Popular, brand-assured old universities feel secure about their market position and adopt a *laissez faire* attitude to student recruitment. As a result, their courses do not tailor their product to attract either more students overall or particular types of student (Nicholls et al 1995).

**Hypothesis 6:** Old universities supplying less popular courses will try and increase demand from desirable consumer groups using *strong segmentation*.

Old universities supplying undersubscribed courses are less able to screen out undesirable applicants during the admissions process. They are therefore expected to try and increase demand from particular consumer groups by using the marketing mix to attract desirable students using strong segmentation (Kotler and Fox 1995).

**Hypothesis 7:** New universities supplying more popular courses will use *multiple segmentation* to increase overall demand, and allow course selectors to cherry-pick applicants.

Recruiters for courses at new universities which are popular, facilitating discretion in admissions, will try and increase demand throughout the consumer population using *multiple segmentation* (Kotler and Fox 1995). Reputation is not sufficiently strong to allow these institutions to rest on their laurels, but course popularity enables cherry-picking of desirable applicants during the admissions process, meaning that recruiters can target a broad selection of students.

**Hypothesis 8:** Universities supplying less popular courses will work to *create demand* among consumer groups which do not traditionally participate in HE in order to fill places.

Institutions which do not have established reputations and which supply under-subscribed courses have the option of filling places by creating demand from sections of the population which could enter HE but do not do so automatically (Coates 1998). This may also facilitate the creation of a brand as an access university, further raising recruitment (Ali-Choudhury et al 2009).

#### 2.4.2 Critique of the Typology

The above typology may not capture all aspects of institutional behaviour in terms of student recruitment. According to Rolfe (2003), institutions also vary their recruitment strategies in terms of the geographic areas they target. This may be associated with institutional reputation in particular, with selective institutions (in terms of the entry requirements of applicants) having a wider geographic reach than less selective institutions and new universities (Rolfe 2003).

Second the hypotheses presented do not account for recent HE policies which promote widening participation initiatives at more prestigious universities in particular. Although evidence suggests that the 'postcode premium' may not be effective because the additional costs of education non-traditional students outweigh the benefits (Coates and Adnett 2003), the premium has increased in value over time (Pugh et al 2005). Thus, the government's instructions to prestigious universities to widen participation may have increased recruitment efforts for this particular market segment, reducing their laissez faire approach (OFFA 2011b; McCaig and Adnett 2009; Ali-Choudhury 2009).

Furthermore, the typology above permits recruitment strategies to differ *within* institutions, with departments facing dissimilar market pressures responding with different strategies. There is no empirical evidence of this. As the review suggests, research into university recruitment tends to focus on central institutional policy rather than departmental activities or the practices of recruitment officers.

However, evidence suggests that departments within an institution may face different pressures (Ivy 2001). In a US context, Lee (2007) demonstrates that departmental culture is influenced not only by institutions, but also by academic discipline. Similarly, Henkel (1997) describes how changes to higher education in the UK have led to the development of maximum devolution to departments with leadership from a strong central authority, termed ‘centralised-decentralisation’. Therefore, there is reason to build hypotheses which allow recruitment practices to vary between institutions and departments, so that this assumption can be put to the test.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

It is expected that institutional admissions and recruitment policies and practices will be influenced by university reputation and course popularity. However, the hypotheses which predict how this process will function and expressed in Hypotheses 1 to 8 have not been tested in the current policy context or are dependent on theoretical research which has not been empirically tested. Furthermore, there are reasons to suspect the hypotheses may not accurately describe university behaviour, which means empirical testing is warranted.

## **3. University Selection and Equity**

This section will examine different interpretations of equity and how it differs with the related concepts of fairness, equality and equality of opportunity. *Equity of access* defined as access according to current potential, will underpin the investigation of the above hypotheses.

### **3.1 Different Views of Equity**

Equity can be seen as the distribution of resources so that outcomes match inputs, with individuals contributing more to resource production *fairly* qualifying for a greater proportion of the good (Leventhal 1976). Thus, where equity is associated with the distribution of a good, the *merit* of individual parties should dictate how

much of the good they receive (Aristotle 2002; Bostock 2000). This is a similar concept to distribution according to *desert*, where it is just or equitable for individuals who deserve more to receive more in consequence (Le Grand 1991).

Thus, equity and fairness are associated with justice of distribution. However, this does not account for conceptualisations of desert which vary between contexts and depend on what ‘good’ is being distributed (Walzer 1983; Bostock 2000; Sen 1995). For example, views may alter depending on whether the good in question is scarce, such as income, or potentially limitless such as freedom (Sen 1995; Nozick 1974). Nor does it recognise that a just distribution may take account of the *need* of the different individuals. One person may deserve a good but not need it while another has more need of the good due to social disadvantage (Walzer 1983; Bostock 2000; Rawls 1971; Lethenthal 1976).

Thus, an equitable distribution of a good according to merit may be justly *unequal* as different parties receive different amount yet may not be *fair*. Alternatively, an inequitable and unequal distribution which benefits the worst off may be considered fair (Rawls 1972). Fairness and equity therefore have some features in common, but fairness can encompass a different aspect of justice which relates to desert in terms of need rather than merit.

The concept of fairness also relates to human relationships and the way individuals interact with one another. For example, fair interactions can be seen as ones which promote the happiness and comfort of others without reference to self-interest, or where individuals reciprocate treatment from another individual, working to benefit or undermine a person depending on behaviour in previous interactions (Fehr and Schmidt 2000). This has some elements of justice, with reciprocity reflecting that past behaviour affects what treatment individuals are perceived to deserve during future interactions. However, the desire to treat others in a fair, unselfish manner stands aside from equity or justice, and is more akin to altruism (Andreoni and Miller 2002) which is discussed in the following section.

The principle of fairness has also been applied to *equality of opportunity* if this is necessary for outcomes according to desert to be realised. For example, investment in schooling to aid individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds could facilitate an



equitable distribution of offices following a competitive examination as all potential candidates have an equal opportunity to prepare for the test (Walzer 1983). Equality of opportunity is thus associated with *life chances* where individuals of equal capability and merit receive different outcomes in life because of their social and educational backgrounds which may need to be corrected via state intervention (Walzer 1983; Fabian Commission 2006).

The concept of equity has also been compared with that of *equality*, particularly in relation to social interaction. Two individuals are treated equally if they are treated in the same way in accordance with the principle of *procedural fairness* where the same rules and standards are applied universally (Sunstein 2006). However, Sunstein (2006) has argued that an alternative definition of procedural fairness would permit individuals to be treated differently to recognise varying needs and characteristics.

In terms of access to higher education, equity of access may encompass both procedures and outcomes. The good being distributed - university places - is a scarce commodity and there is therefore a need to identify what an equitable distribution of those places or access could resemble.

### *3.1.1 Equity and Higher Education*

In the allocation of university places, it could be argued that *desert* relates to students' potential to succeed on their chosen course, an admissions goal which HEIs have been encouraged to consider (Schwartz et al 2004). An inequitable distribution of places would therefore entail one where a student who could potentially succeed on the course was passed over in the selection process in favour of another student who did not share this potential. Alternatively, an inequitable distribution of admissions outcomes would result in one candidate being rejected from their chosen course while another student with equal potential to succeed was accepted to the same degree programme.

Although this principle holds for access to higher education, it also applies when considering students' access to *specific* institutions because the graduate earnings which can be realised are not consistent across the HE sector. According to Chevalier and Conlon (2003), students graduating from more prestigious Russell Group universities can expect to earn more upon graduation than if they had attended a less

prestigious HEI. Therefore, if an applicant who could succeed at a Russell Group university is rejected while a similar peer is accepted, this can be considered inequitable even if the applicant later secures a place at a new university.

There are also different earnings premia for different courses (Naylor et al 2002), although the pattern is not consistent<sup>30</sup>. It may be difficult to demonstrate that a graduate's earnings will be negatively affected if they are rejected from a mathematics course but accepted for an engineering degree at the same institution. However, if a similar applicant in terms of potential to succeed on the course is accepted in their place, this can nonetheless be considered inequitable even without the difference in earnings which may result.

In HE admissions, *unequal* outcomes could thus result from a 'fair' system, where individuals with higher academic ability and motivation justly gain access to better outcomes than their peers. This view of equity envisages a fair HE admissions system functioning as a meritocracy, accurately allocating students to institutions of differing reputation according to *ability and effort*. Saunders (1990) argues that such a functionalist system has benefits in terms of societal efficiency, with individuals being channelled into the appropriate educational paths and thence to appropriate careers. This view of higher education admissions would predict that there would be no differences in terms of admissions net of ability and effort, for which A Level examinations could be thought a good proxy measure (Saunders 1990).

This is the view taken by Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in formulating benchmarks for recruitment of disadvantaged students. Institutions' benchmarks are adjusted according to entry qualifications profile; the underlying assumption is that, for HEIs' recruitment to be compared fairly, the academic qualifications of intakes should be controlled (HESA 2007). Thus, institutions which recruit from less-qualified sections of the student population, which is correlated with disadvantage (Bekhradnia 2003), have higher benchmarks than institutions which recruit more-qualified applicants to fit with the vision of equity as meritocracy.

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<sup>30</sup> Students studying humanities subjects and agriculture achieve lower levels of graduate earnings on average than students who studied for social science degrees. Graduates who studied most STEM subjects (excluding biology), creative arts, education, law and politics and business achieved higher earnings than social science graduates on average, controlling for degree classification.

According to Leventhal (1976) such a conception of equity may need modifying to acknowledge the *process* of resource allocation. Thus, in the HE context, for the admissions process to be equitable two school-leavers of equal academic ability and equally motivated should have the same probability of being accepted at each institution. It could be argued that this implies applicants should be treated equally in a process which is procedurally fair and does not differentiate between applicants (Sunstein 2005).

However, this has been criticised for not taking account of structural factors which prevent those of equal capabilities from achieving equal educational outcomes. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that students from different social backgrounds are pushed into different educational routes for reasons other than ability and effort (Goldthorpe 1996; Hatcher 1998). Educational attainment measured via intelligence tests is also influenced by background factors such as poor school attendance (Neisser et al 1996). Thus, horizontal equity, where each group member within an academic band is treated equally (Le Grand 1987b), actually results an inequitable distribution because of the influence background characteristics have net of ability and effort have in determining HE admissions outcomes.

### *3.1.2 The Role of Choice*

Such differences influenced by background characteristics have been described as manifesting themselves in the form of consumer preferences (Reay et al 2005) but also may relate to institutional behaviour if this behaviour reinforces structural impediments to equality of access. Treating all students similarly could result in vertical inequity if students of similar capabilities are prevented from achieving similar outcomes not only through structural factors but through provider selection behaviour (Le Grand 1987b).

Different definitions of equity treat outcomes which are influenced by brute luck such as background factors dissimilarly to those which result from individual choice. 'Luck egalitarianism' holds that equity is satisfied if differences between outcomes for two people result from their choices rather than factors which are beyond their control (Voight 2007; Scheffler 2003). Using this definition, those who make 'bad' decisions are seen as justly receiving poorer outcomes than similar individuals who make better choices. Following this, Dworkin (2003) argues that outcomes resulting from brute

luck are justifiable, so long as individuals can *choose* to protect themselves against the effects of bad luck, for example by opting into insurance schemes. In other words, outcomes are inequitable if they relate to structural factors, but not if they result from individual agency (Alcock 2006).

However, luck egalitarianism has been criticised from two different perspectives which argue that it results in inequitable outcomes. First, Nozick argues (2006) that brute luck, for example an abundance of intellect which can be seen as a ‘gift’, should play a role in determining outcomes, whether or not insurance has been provided. Although this appears to justify an approach which promotes procedural fairness, this argument does agree with the ideal of distribution according to *desert* (Le Grand 1991).

Adapting this for higher education, it could be argued that someone of higher intellect, which may result from effort or luck, *deserves* superior educational outcomes, because this ability will help them to succeed in higher education (Schwartz et al 2004). However, where two people have equal academic ability but arrive at different educational outcomes for reasons beyond their control, for example because of illness or their background characteristics, this violates the principle of equity.

A second criticism of luck egalitarianism is that, by stating that unequal outcomes resulting from choices are in fact equal, it does not take account of the impact which brute luck can have in the formation of preferences (Voight 2007; Le Grand 1991). For example, Pugsley (2004) shows that it is more important for students from higher social groups to maintain their position in the occupational hierarchy than it is for students from lower social groups to ascend the hierarchy. Although apparently making different choices about what social class they wish to achieve, students are in fact making the *same* choice – not to fall in the class hierarchy – which manifests itself as a ‘different’ choice owing to brute luck.

This means that unequal outcomes which follow from choices may be inequitable if the payoff structure is different for different social groups, forcing different choices to be made. According to Le Grand (1991) it could be argued that where choices are constrained by structural conditions, for example where tuition fees deter a less

affluent student from participating in higher education, there is a justification for action to correct the choice constraint.

Therefore, in order for equitable access to be achieved, institutions may need to adjust both admissions and recruitment policies to recognise the impact which background factors can have on students' choices and academic attainment.

### *3.2 Equitable Admissions*

The implications of this for higher education are that, in order for places in higher education to be allocated in accordance with desert, it may be necessary to treat applicants differently in the admissions process.

First, although very good A Level attainment is correlated with university attainment (Boyle et al 2002) there is empirical evidence to suggest that post-compulsory performance is not an accurate measure of student potential. For example, students who attended state schools are more likely to achieve a first class degree than students from independent schools who have similar levels of school-leaving attainment (Hoare and Johnson 2011). Thus, if university places are to be allocated according to merit or desert, then taking account of students' contextual information (in terms of type of school attended) as well as their academic performance is justified.

Second, application quality may be influenced by social and educational background. Pupils attending independent schools are more likely to spend three or more hours completing their UCAS form than students from state schools (Rouncefield and Scott 1998) and candidates from less affluent backgrounds may have less opportunity to differentiate themselves from other applicants via expensive experience-enriching gap years (Heath 2007).

This evidence suggests that academic attainment and application quality may not reflect student potential. Therefore the use of contextual information when evaluating applicants for admission is consistent with equity of access. It may also be procedurally fair if this is taken to mean that applicants are treated as individuals, which may mean flexibility of process (Sunstein 2006). The 'justness' of this approach may explain why there is evidence that university selectors, at least in the context of a highly selective institution, do take contextual information into account

(Featherstone 2010) and why the use of contextual information is advocated in government policy (Schwartz et al 2004; Milburn et al 2009).

### ***3.3. Equitable Recruitment***

As the review above suggests, students from different social and educational backgrounds may face different HE choice constraints due to cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Students with similar potential to succeed on a course may therefore make different application choices because of the influence of their backgrounds (Reay et al 2005; Brooks 2005).

In addition, evidence suggests that educational context may influence which institutions and courses school students are able to apply to because of their previous choices. For example, mature students are less likely to take 'academic' A Levels and are more likely to take vocational qualifications such as BTEC National Diplomas, which may be held as less prestigious by university selectors (Connor et al 2006; Germon and Gro 1993). Thus, previous choices about study at school level may prevent potential HE students from exercising a free choice over which universities and degree programmes to apply to, and this may result in inequitable outcomes.

Where these differences result from 'constrained' rather than free choices on the part of applicants, it is justified for recruitment policies and practices to try and correct for this. This could be accomplished by differentially targeting the marketing mix to encourage applications from non-traditional students through school liaison and outreach activities. Similarly, the provision of an 'insurance policy' for students who have made ill-informed choices would facilitate equity of access. Universities could for example supply programmes below degree level to assist the progression from school to university for students who have initially achieved at lower levels, or who have not taken the necessary subjects at school level to qualify for their chosen degree programme.

Furthermore, because the evidence suggests that more prestigious institutions in particular may deter potential students from non-traditional backgrounds, it would be consistent with equity of access for these universities to focus on targeting students non-traditional students via their marketing mixes to a greater extent than other institutions. This may explain why OFFA requires more prestigious institutions to

make additional efforts to encourage access and widen participation than other universities (OFFA 2011b).

### ***3.4 Conclusion: Equity as Current Potential***

It could be argued that some students who might have had the potential to succeed in higher education may have been prevented from doing so as a result of their backgrounds. For example, Niesser et al (1996) show that malnutrition in childhood is associated with scores on intelligence tests. Blanden and Machin (2010) suggest that parental income is important for children's educational progress from a very young age. This is due to a lack of equality of opportunity for all individuals to develop their capabilities.

However, when evaluating students' potential, university selectors and recruiters cannot evaluate students according to how prepared they *would have been* for academic study had there been equality of opportunity. If universities are asked to make adjustments for inequality of opportunity, this is likely to result in inequitable outcomes, as students who should have been able to complete the course but cannot do so may be admitted ahead of those who can succeed on the degree programme.

Thus, in order for equity to be realised, university staff members should take account of contextual information where it enables a better prediction about *current potential* to be made. This understanding can be used to investigate whether institutions' admissions and recruitment policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access.

## **4. Government and Universities: Influencing Behaviour**

As has been discussed here and in the previous chapter, the government introduced financial incentives into the English HE market to encourage universities to admit students from widening participation backgrounds. These take the form of HEFCE's 'postcode premium' to *reward* universities who admit students from low participation neighbourhoods and the possible *sanction* of reduced tuition fees levels if OFFA decides that an institution is not making sufficient efforts to widen participation.

This need to control institutional behaviour demonstrates that the connection between government and universities can be characterised as a principal-agent relationship,

which has been applied to a number of institutional settings (Eisenhardt 1989). The underlying assumptions are that a principal purchases services which are delivered by the agent, with a contract identifying necessary actions for both parties (Waterman 1998). If there is a dissimilarity of goals between the two parties and asymmetric information so that the principal experiences difficulties in establishing how well an agent is performing their duties, incentives may be necessary to ensure that the agent behaves in the manner desired by the principal<sup>31</sup> (Kivistö 2005). These incentives need to be well-designed to ensure that the agent cannot access rewards and avoid sanctions by ‘gaming’ where contracts have technically been fulfilled without the agent manifesting the behaviour the principal expected (Bevan and Hood 2006).

However, human beings and the structures they work within are not only motivated by economic stimuli. Other factors including self-interest unrelated to monetary rewards and altruism are also important (Le Grand 2006; Rowley 1996). Furthermore, individual and organisational behaviour can be influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic incentives (Deci and Ryan 1985; Frey and Oberholzer-Gee 1997), and this may affect the degree to which behaviour can be controlled by government policy. Thus, government can try and influence individuals and organisations using methods other than financial incentives, including the provision of information and altering the environment to encourage attitude and behaviour change (Dolan et al 2010).

This section analyses the potential motivations which may underpin the actions of university staff members and the organisations they work in to develop theories for how government incentives may influence university selection behaviour.

#### ***4.1 Incentives and Self-Interest***

This section analyses how financial and non-financial incentives may encourage institutions to change their behaviour.

##### ***4.1.1 Rational Behaviour***

Rational choice theorists characterise individuals as operating primarily in response to economic stimuli, arguing that individuals make self-interested decisions so as to maximise the benefits received while minimising costs.

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<sup>31</sup> The government contracts HEIs to fulfil several functions including teaching and research shown by the allocation of funding in the previous chapter. In the UK, allocation of government funding is partly performance-based for example in terms of research quality (Liefner 2003).



In an educational context, rational choice or rational action theory has been applied to explain differences in educational attainment (Goldthorpe 1996) and persistence to higher levels of study (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Erikson and Jonsson 1996). It could be argued that rational choice theory has also been used in higher education policy making, for example in the links between research performance and funding allocation which give universities an incentive to improve research quality to access additional resources (Liefner 2003).

In applying this theory to university behaviour, it would be expected that individuals working in institutions would seek to obtain as much funding as possible from the state, students and other funders while minimising expenditure on staff and students. Thus, economic self-interest for institutions involves maximising resources.

Developments to rational choice theory have seen an incorporation of 'affective factors' into the cost-benefit calculations individuals make (Etzioni 1998). Payoffs which do not affect income but affect personal utility are thus included in the assessment of different options. Using this interpretation, factors which promote university self-interest in non-monetary ways, such as a desire to recruit students who are easy or fun to teach, can play a role in a rational decision-making process. Affective factors relate to individual and institutional subjective wellbeing or 'happiness', a key goal of social and public policy (Dean 2006; Layard 2006; Dolan and White 2007)<sup>32</sup>. These affective factors are also 'intrinsic' motivators: they are internal to individuals and consequently the institutions in which the individuals are located, rather than being applied externally as with institutional income (Deci and Ryan 1985).

There are several conditions to rationality<sup>33</sup>. First, it is assumed that decision-makers will have perfect information, i.e. that they will be able to accurately project the overall utility which they will receive from each possible alternative decision in order to arrive at a self-interested outcome (Swait and Adamowicz 2001). Second,

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<sup>32</sup> There are several different interpretations of wellbeing including 'how well people are' (Dean 2006), actual and perceived physical or mental health (Courtenay 2000), happiness (Dolan and White 2007) and, more broadly, a cluster of factors including positive and negative emotions and how individuals feel which is akin to happiness (Hicks 2011) This review refers to a 'happiness' which encompasses positive and negative emotional responses when discussing subjective wellbeing.

<sup>33</sup> These assumptions are usually applied to economic or 'price' rationality but can be equally applied to a definition of rationality which includes affective factors in cost-benefit calculations.

rationality is conditional on transitive preferences, so that each possible decision can be ranked in a strict order of hierarchy (Tversky and Kahneman 1986). As preferences are ordinal, it follows that the chooser will always select the highest-ranked preference (Tversky and Kahneman 1986). Given complete information therefore, individuals (including university staff and management) will be able to rank preferences in a strict order to make optimum decisions.

#### *4.1.2 Constraints on Rationality*

Although influential, the theory of the rational chooser has been challenged using a social constructionist framework developed from Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Although Bourdieu supports the role of agency in his conception of decision making (Hatcher 1998), his work suggests that choices are influenced by cultural capital, which affects knowledge of markets and the ability individuals have to operate within them. Bourdieu thus suggests that choosers are able to call upon different levels of knowledge and information resources when identifying choice bundles and this consequently affects preferences.

Cultural capital is usually applied to consumer choice-making (for example Reay et al 2005; McDonough 1997; Brooks 2005) and there is no reason to suspect that institutions will also be unequally placed within markets. However, it could be argued that Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is a more important criticism of rational choice theory for institutional behaviour.

Bourdieu argues that habitus, a structure of an individual's clusters of preferences or *taste*, is cultivated according to one's place in society as class norms, expectations and culture are important influencers in the way these develop (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Hatcher 1998). A preference based on habitus can be considered a component of utility and thus form a part of a rational decision-making process, but may also be seen as prompting irrational choices if 'taste' is prompted by factors such as fear or misunderstanding. There is evidence that habitus influences student choice of university, with students rejecting institutions where they feel 'out of place' (Reay et al 2005). The same may be true of universities: institutions' place in the HE hierarchy may result in a difference of taste according to their position, and this may influence the students they *believe* they prefer.

However, it could also be argued that formulating selection priorities according to institutional taste is consistent with rational action. Recruiting students who ‘fit’ with the university and whom lecturers are happy to teach may improve student satisfaction survey results and facilitate word-of-mouth recruitment. Thus, depending on what considerations underpin it, university motivation influenced by habitus could be argued to represent institutional self-interest.

#### ***4.2 Altruism: The Wellbeing of Others***

As well as acting from self-interest, it is suggested that individuals are motivated by a desire to benefit others (Titmuss 1970). This section examines how altruism may influence university selection behaviour.

##### *4.2.1 Public Service Ethos*

There is evidence that individuals are motivated by the desire to aid or benefit others rather than purely acting to further self-interest (Titmuss 1970) and it has been suggested that this cluster of motivations may influence university staff members in particular. Public servants and those working for non-profit organisations are characterised as desiring to help promote the utility of welfare consumers and wider society (Le Grand 2007). The conception of the ‘public service ethos’ where public servants, including university staff, are seen to be motivated by the altruistic desire to serve, is still evident in policy rhetoric despite a reduction in the reliance on knightly behaviour to deliver services (Needham 2006; Le Grand 2007).

According to Titmuss (1970) there is evidence that individuals do desire to aid others and society in general, even at the risk of inconvenience to themselves. Furthermore, public servants may place greater value on the societal aspects of their roles than private sector counterparts (John and Johnson 2008). However, it is unclear whether more altruistic individuals choose to work for public services, or whether public sector workers become socialised into acting altruistically.

The link between institutional and individual motivation is therefore unclear. University ethos may develop as a result of the cluster of preferences of its staff members, or alternatively individual staff members may internalise the motivation of other staff members so that an institution develops an ethos which has been produced and reproduced by social norms (Deci et al 1994).

However, if university staff members and institutions are influenced by altruism, this may indicate a lack of need for financial incentives to encourage institutions to fulfil certain objectives. Among these may be included the provision of high-quality educational experiences which meet the needs of students as research suggests this is an important motivation for university teachers (Rowley 1996). Initiatives to widen participation and admissions policies to facilitate access to disadvantaged groups may also be provided if broadening access to HE is seen to be a moral imperative to allow more individuals to share the benefits of education and improve society (Thomas 2001; Fulton and Ellwood 1989). Thus, government rewards and sanctions to widen participation may be unnecessary and inefficient.

#### *4.2.2 The Limits of Altruism*

However, the evidence suggests that university staff may face difficulties behaving in altruistic ways due to the competing pressures they face. Academics in particular have several roles including those of researcher, educator and administrator and as time becomes a scarce resource, this may result in a reduction in altruistic tendencies. Harman (1988) demonstrates in Australia, where the pressures on academics' time are similar to the UK, that staff members working in medical departments discouraged junior colleagues from contributing to university life in order to ensure sufficient resources were dedicated to research. University staff in England, who face pressures to bolster institutional recruitment, may encounter similar pressures which could result in altruistic motivations playing a less important role in selection behaviour than might have been predicted.

Furthermore, although altruism can be described as an intrinsic motivator, it can be eroded by external incentives. Introducing policy mechanisms to appeal to individuals' self-interest can 'crowd out' altruism (Le Grand 2006; Frey 1997). This has implications for universities in England. Like other public services, higher education has become increasingly marketised and competitive since the 1980s (Fossett 2011; Hoggett 1996) and the association between institutional income and student enrolment may have eroded the influence of altruism over selection behaviour.

In addition, research suggests that the introduction of incentives such as the Widening Participation Fund to encourage widening participation may erode altruistic

motivations for broadening access. According to Frey and Oberholzer-Gee (1997) there is evidence that offering payment can erode civic duty. Thus, activities which may have been offered voluntarily by institutions to widen access may not be continued if a financial incentive is introduced to encourage these actions is subsequently withdrawn (Le Grand 2006).

Finally, an examination of the survey data collected by Titmuss (1970) suggests that many 'altruistic' reasons for doing good (in this case donating blood) could be classified as self-interested. Donors gained individual utility from apparently selfless deeds. This 'warm-glow' effect, with altruistic acts prompted by the self-interested desire to maximise personal wellbeing, can result from intrinsic or extrinsic motivations, where people act in an altruistic way either to benefit themselves or as a result of social pressure (Andreoni 1990). Apparent altruism may therefore be imperfect, and have some of the characteristics of self-interest.

#### ***4.3 Conclusion***

Therefore, there is reason to suspect that both self-interest and altruism may influence institutional behaviour and that this may impact how government incentives designed to change institutional behaviour work in practice. Financial rewards and sanctions may be important but other means of altering university behaviour for example through the provision of information may also be effective. However, research examining how university selection staff members respond to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators is needed to clarify which processes are important, and whether these incentives work differently according to institutional reputation and course popularity.

### **5. Conclusion: Research Questions**

A review of the literature suggests that institutional reputation and course popularity may influence university selection behaviour in terms of admissions and recruitment policies and practices and this may have implications for equity of access. Furthermore, although government incentives have been used to try and widen access to HE, the ways in which university staff members are motivated may influence the degree to which these rewards and sanctions can alter university admissions and recruitment.

Although hypotheses have been developed to anticipate the way admissions and recruitment may be influenced by institutional reputation and course popularity, these are for the most part developed using empirical findings which relate to a previous system or rely on theoretical understandings which require empirical testing. Therefore, these hypotheses need to be tested in order to verify them. Additionally, although there is a theoretical understanding about what may motivate university staff members, this understanding is primarily not based on empirical evidence relating to the current HE context.

The following research questions have been generated in order to fill these gaps in the evidence base:

1. To what extent are university admissions policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?

This question and the sub-research questions below are addressed in **Chapters 4 to 6.**

- a. To what extent do admissions policies and practices vary between universities as a result of differences in institutional reputation and course popularity?
  - b. How are university reputation and course popularity associated with admissions outcomes?
  - c. To what extent do university admissions policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?
2. To what extent are university recruitment policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?

This question and the sub-research questions below are addressed in **Chapters 7 and 8.**

- a. To what extent and why do recruitment strategies differ between universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity?

- b. How far do widening participation goals and activities vary between universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity and why?
  - c. To what extent do university recruitment policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?
3. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies shaped by government policies and why?

This question and the sub-research questions below are investigated in **Chapters 8 and 9**.

- a. How far are university widening participation programmes influenced by government priorities?
  - b. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies and practices affected by government rewards and sanctions which are designed to change selection behaviour and do these incentives appeal to university self-interest or altruism?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to fill the gaps in the evidence presented above to discover to what extent university reputation and course popularity influence student selection to English universities and to determine how this affects equity of access. How university selection behaviour is influenced by government policy and why, particularly where these initiatives are reinforced with rewards and sanctions, will also be examined.

## Chapter 3 Methodology: Investigating University Selection Behaviour

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methods used to answer the research and sub-research questions developed in the previous chapter and state why these were appropriate.

1. To what extent are university admissions policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?

This question was addressed via semi-structured interviews with university admissions staff members based at four case study universities in England. The institutions were selected according to status and overall levels of popularity to investigate the hypotheses. Where possible, findings were tested via a multivariate analysis of UCAS admissions data.

2. To what extent are university recruitment policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?

This question was addressed via semi-structured interviews with university recruitment staff members based at the four case study universities. To ensure all elements of the marketing mix were included, at least one person with responsibility for widening participation and one person with responsibility for tuition fees and bursaries were interviewed alongside recruitment officers and managers.

3. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies shaped by government policies and why?

This question is addressed via an analysis of the semi-structured interviews carried out with university staff at each case study university.



## **2. Examining University Selection Behaviour**

In order to investigate university staff members' behaviour and the motivations underpinning their actions, the primary method of investigation chosen was comparative qualitative case studies. Where possible, an examination of quantitative administrative data was used to test the findings developed from the qualitative research.

This section will discuss why these methods were chosen, addressing the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches.

### ***2.1 Qualitative Comparative Case Studies***

This project used a comparative case study approach to examine the research questions:

1. To what extent are university admissions policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?
2. To what extent are university recruitment policies and practices affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how does this facilitate equity of access?
3. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies shaped by government policies and why?

#### ***2.1.1 Reputation and Popularity: Testing Hypotheses***

Case studies are used to study phenomena in the contexts in which they are operating to allow processes to be observed, and can incorporate a variety of different data collection methods to ensure that the research question of interest can be addressed (Yin 2003; McClintock et al 1979). This research method is thus a useful mechanism for studying organisations where a 'central' policy exists but there is the possibility that behaviour will vary between different units due to the role of provider discretion (Lipsky 2010). This applies to higher education, where some central policies to regulate university behaviour exist, as described in Chapter 1, but universities may

have considerable autonomy and are able to exercise discretion, particularly regarding student admissions and recruitment as discussed in Chapter 2.

A case study approach is thus an appropriate means for addressing the above research questions. The goal of this research is not only to examine institutional behaviour, but to test the hypotheses developed in the previous chapter.

In terms of *admissions*:

**Hypothesis 1:** Selectors for popular courses at old universities will use applicants' background information to *contextualise attainment* and facilitate the entry of candidates from less privileged backgrounds.

**Hypothesis 2:** Selectors for less popular courses at old universities will be *risk averse* and select students who are similar to previous intakes.

**Hypothesis 3:** Selectors for popular selecting courses at new universities will *cream* high-achieving students and give preferential offers to encourage their enrolment.

**Hypothesis 4:** Less popular recruiting courses at new universities will *open doors* and facilitate the entry of applicants who are unable to enter other institutions in order to fill places.

In terms of *recruitment*:

**Hypothesis 5:** Old universities supplying popular courses will take a *laissez faire* approach to student recruitment, relying on their strong brand to attract consumer interest.

**Hypothesis 6:** Old universities supplying less popular courses will try and increase demand from desirable consumer groups using *strong segmentation*.

**Hypothesis 7:** New universities supplying more popular courses will use *multiple segmentation* to increase overall demand and allow course selectors to cherry-pick applicants.

**Hypothesis 8:** Universities supplying less popular courses will work to *create demand* among consumer groups which do not traditionally participate in HE in order to fill places.

These suggest that university reputation and course popularity may affect selection priorities. Therefore, a multiple or comparative case study approach is indicated, so that the different market conditions facing institutions can be examined.

### *2.1.2 Disadvantages of the Case Study Approach*

Although comparative case studies are frequently used in educational research to investigate university behaviour (for example Greenbank 2006; Metcalf 2003; Rolfe 2003), this approach is not without criticism. One of the difficulties with hypothesis testing using a case study approach is that the selected cases may be ‘unique’, and very different to the rest of the population, meaning that the results cannot be considered generalisable (Yin 2003).

Although some researchers have attempted to overcome this problem by investigating a random sample of institutions (for example Townsend 1962) this is not a feasible option for this research. In 2008/09 when fieldwork for this research was carried out, there were 110 institutions with university status received HEFCE funding (HEFCE 2008/40). Investigation of a large enough random sample to allow results to be generalised to the population would have been feasible, but resource and time constraints would have prevented an in-depth examination of processes at each sampled university. In order to eliminate other possible explanations and increase internal validity of the findings, it was deemed advisable to undertake an in-depth examination of a smaller heterogeneous sample of case universities (Yin 2003).

One of the means via which the difficulties associated with case study research can be avoided is to use case studies to generate findings which can be tested further to assess generalisability. This ‘analytical generalisability’ where case study research aims to develop a theory or hypothesis which can be subjected to further analysis (Yin 2003), is the aim of this research. Where possible, hypotheses are tested via an analysis of UCAS data, as discussed below.

### 2.1.3 Case Selection Criteria

The four universities were selected so as to capture the diversity in the university market as far as possible along a number of dimensions. Only ‘multi-faculty’ universities, which offered degree subjects in at least seven ‘subject categories’ as classified by UCAS were included to ensure that a variety of different courses could be included in the research<sup>34</sup>. This recognises that there may be commonalities between similar departments across institutions (Germon and Gro 1993; Francis et al 1993; Featherstone 2010).

Case study selection needs to maximise sample variation along as many dimensions as possible in order to reduce the possibility that findings will be biased by sample selection (Geddes 2003). Therefore a number of different characteristics which could be described as control, independent and dependent variables informed sample selection:

Geographical location – the four case institutions were located in different regions of England according to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification. This ensured that cases were not clustered according to region, as has been the practice in most previous studies which examine the current context (Greenbank 2006; Reay et al 2005). Results can therefore be transferred beyond the context of local HE markets, which may vary significantly from areas in England.

Hierarchical position – two of the case universities were pre-1992 institutions, of which one was a Russell Group HEI and the other a non-Russell Group University. Two were new institutions, one of which became a university following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 while the other was granted its charter more recently.

Popularity – within each of the two groups of old and new HEIs, one of the institutions was heavily oversubscribed, accepting fewer than 15 per cent of applicants, and one was less oversubscribed, accepting more than 20 per cent of applicants in the 2007/08 academic year (UCAS 2008).

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<sup>34</sup> A Table of UCAS subject groups can be found in Chapter 1. They include categories such as ‘Medicine and Dentistry’ and ‘Humanities’.

HESA benchmarks – within each of the two groups of old and new HEIs, one of the institutions performed well in relation to HESA's location adjusted benchmark for enrolling students from lower social groups, exceeding this measure by more than 4 percentage points. The other institution in each group either just met (i.e. did not exceed) or failed to achieve this target in both the 2005/06 and 2006/07 academic years (HESA 2006; HESA 2007).

By selecting along these four dimensions, the cases aimed to represent the diversity of the English HE market along the variables of interest while ensuring that the institutions did not solely represent a localised market. This selection procedure was used in order to ensure that the cases were not selected according to either the dependent (widening participation measures) nor independent (market position) variables in isolation as this could lead to selection bias by failing to include cases which may have contradicted the hypothesis (Geddes 2003).

Four cases were deemed an appropriate number in order to try and maximise the amount of variation in the population represented by the sample whilst keeping the number of cases as small as possible to allow each case to be investigated fully.

#### *2.1.4 Ethical Considerations*

The cases were recruited via a letter giving information about the research project and inviting participation sent in the first instance to the Vice-Chancellor or equivalent of selected institutions, although in many cases these invitations were later forwarded to other members of staff. The initial request was followed up with phone calls and emails to the members of staff considering the request, where necessary. LSE ethical guidance was followed and consent for the research obtained from LSE's Ethics Review Committee.

Institutions were promised anonymity in the initial request and subsequent conversations, both for themselves as institutions and for individual staff members. Interviewees were also promised anonymity and confidentiality before the start of each interview. The decision to give institutions anonymity recognised that the information being sought could be commercially sensitive as institutions' admissions and recruitment policies could be used to inform the strategies of competitor universities targeting the same student groups. However, from the outset, institutions

were made aware that, although everything possible would be done to protect the anonymity of the case HEIs, some individuals with an intimate knowledge of the sector might be able to identify them.

In order to compensate institutions for the resources given to the project in the form of staff time and information, the researcher offered to write two reports, one giving an overall comparative picture of the four cases and one tailored to each HEI, and which was circulated exclusively to its employees.

## ***2.2 The Cases: Four Different Universities***

The four selected case studies were very different from one another, not only along the dimensions listed above but also in terms of their character and student populations.

Southern Rural University: This new university was based in a primarily rural setting. However, it was connected by good transport links to a nearby affluent and physically attractive city, making it easier for students' parents to visit the campus. The institution's campus was physically attractive, small and noticeably friendly, with staff members and students greeting each other. Most of the students were white.

Eastern New University: This multi-site new university had two campuses, a 'main campus' based in the centre of a multicultural town, and a 'second campus' based in a different area close to a town centre. The main campus had modern buildings and a noticeably diverse student population. The second campus was based in a slightly more affluent part of the region, with the campus itself having more green spaces.

Northern Town University: This was a multi-site old university, although the research concentrated on the main university campus based in the centre of the city. The campus was large, and some of the buildings used for administrative purposes were based at a distance to the 'heart' of the campus where most of the academic and social services were located. The student population was noticeably diverse.

Central Research University: This campus university was a member of the Russell Group. The campus was based at distance to the nearest city but there were transport links available. The campus was large, modern in terms of architecture with some

green spaces. Student accommodation was set slightly apart from academic and administrative buildings. The student population was noticeably diverse.

### ***2.3 Data Collection and Analysis***

This gives an overview of the tools used to collect and analyse data from admissions and recruitment staff at the case study universities.

#### ***2.3.1 Sample of Staff Members***

Data collection principally involved semi-structured interviews with university staff with strategic and day-to-day responsibility for admissions and recruitment at each case institution. For recruitment, individuals with responsibility for the development and delivery of the four elements of the marketing mix: product, price, place and promotion (Davies and Scribbins 1985) were interviewed.

The way interviewees were selected varied at each institution. A summary of this information is given in Table 3.1<sup>35</sup>. In each case, the goal was to select individuals with responsibility for admissions and recruitment for a sample of courses which were more and less popular within the context of the institution. In other words, both ‘selecting’ and ‘recruiting’ courses (McCaig 2011) were included in the study of each case. Individuals with leadership and strategic responsibilities for both institutional admissions and recruitment were also selected. In addition, both administrative admissions officers and academic admissions tutors based in departments were included in the sample at each university.

As Table 3.1 demonstrates, in some universities’ participants were chosen by the institution whereas in others the researcher selected respondents. This was sometimes on the recommendation of previous interviewees. In all cases, the requirements of the research to maximise variation determined the sample composition. The number of interviews at each institution was not determined in advance of the project and, in almost all cases, requests for additional interviews to maximise sample variation were met with a positive response<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> A fuller version of the table is available in Appendix 1.

<sup>36</sup> The only exception was at Eastern New University, where a request to interview additional central admissions officers was declined by the potential respondents rather than the institution. However, officers from central admissions departments at both campuses at this institution did take part in the research.

Thus, the sample of interviewees was also selected so as to maximise heterogeneity and represent the institutions in which they were located as fully as possible (Bryman 2008). A random sample of interviewees would not have facilitated the investigation of the research question as it would not have ensured the selection of staff members with different areas of responsibility working for different courses in terms of popularity and subject, necessary for the research.

Table 3.1: Methods for Recruiting Participants

Institution	Admissions	Recruitment
Southern Rural University	University staff selected interviewees in consultation with the researcher.	Interviewees were selected by the researcher using snowball sampling.
Eastern New University	Interviewees were selected by the researcher using the staff directory and snowball sampling.	Interviewees were selected by the researcher using the staff directory and snowball sampling.
Northern Town University	University staff selected interviewees in consultation with the researcher.	University staff selected interviewees in consultation with the researcher.
Central Research University	University staff selected interviewees in consultation with the researcher.	University staff selected interviewees in consultation with the researcher.

The resulting sample of admissions and recruitment staff met the research objectives in terms of maximising variation according to course popularity and the type of role played by the respondent (whether they had responsibility for strategic management or day-to-day activities). Table 3.2 lists interviewees at each case institution.

The sample size at each institution varied according to the need to maximise variation. For example, it was necessary to interview a larger number of admissions staff at Central Research University and Northern Town University as their admissions procedure was not as centralised (and therefore more diverse in terms of the number of staff making selection decisions) than at Eastern New University and Southern Rural University. Conversely, it was necessary to interview more individuals with responsibility for recruitment at Eastern New University, owing to the institution having two campuses.



Table 3.2: Interviewees at Each Case Institution<sup>37</sup>

Institution	Admissions	Recruitment
Southern Rural University <b>Total 13</b>	4 Admissions Officers (creative arts/education, variety of courses) 2 Admissions Managers Head of Department (creative arts)	Marketing Manager 2 Recruitment Officers Marketing Officer Widening Participation Manager Fees and Bursaries Manager
Eastern New University <b>Total 14</b>	2 Administrative Selectors (variety of courses, main and secondary campus) 3 Admissions Tutors (medical related course, social science course, education course)	2 Associate Deans (business; creative arts) Administrative Selector (secondary campus, interview also recruitment) 2 Marketing Managers (main campus) 2 Recruitment Directors (main campus) Fees and Bursaries Manager Widening Participation Manger
Northern Town University <b>Total 19</b>	2 Admissions Managers 2 Admissions Officers (medical-related course, social science courses) 2 Admissions Tutors (medical-related course, social science course) Recruitment Manager (computing/ communications courses) Head of Department (computing/ communications courses)	3 Marketing Managers 2 Marketing Officers 2 Associate Deans (communications/computing/ medical-related and sciences) Recruitment Manager (social sciences) Fees and Bursaries Officer Senior Manager Widening Participation Manger
Central Research University <b>Total 16</b>	2 Admissions Officers (variety of courses) Head of Department (social science) 6 Admissions Tutors (variety of courses)	3 Recruitment Managers Recruitment Officer Fees and Bursaries Manager Widening Participation Manger

<sup>37</sup> Job titles were changed to reflect seniority and area of responsibility to ensure respondent anonymity.

Overall, 62 staff members were interviewed at the four universities, 30 of which had responsibility for admissions and 32 had responsibility for recruitment. Total sample sizes at each institution are shown in Table 3.2. Some interviewees had responsibility for both, for example some admissions tutors engaged in school liaison activities. Interviewees with dual responsibilities were classified according to their primary role, but data relating to both admissions and recruitment were included in the analyses.

### *2.3.2 Data Collection*

Data were elicited from the sample at each university using semi-structured interviews. These interview schedules were developed after a review of the literature, some of which is presented in the previous chapter, and following pilot interviews with four staff members working in admissions and recruitment based at three different institutions, which did not subsequently take part in this research.

Separate interview schedules were developed for academic admissions tutors, administrative admissions officers, recruitment staff, staff with responsibility for fees and bursaries and staff with responsibility for widening participation<sup>38</sup>. Interview schedules for both admissions and recruitment were taken to all interviews, so that additional questions could be asked if, during the course of the interview, it emerged that the respondent had responsibilities for both direct and indirect selection. These schedules allowed similar questions to be asked for respondents across departments and institutions so that data from different individuals could be analysed together, but also allowed interviewees to shape the direction of the interview, with open questions and probes which followed up respondents' information (Bryman 2008). Digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription company and each transcript was checked against the digital recording for accuracy.

One of the disadvantages to interviewing is that respondents may alter their accounts so as to meet social expectations, or aid the researcher (Cornwall 1984). In order to overcome this problem as far as possible, the hypotheses of the research were not conveyed to respondents<sup>39</sup>. Official university documents including university prospectuses, which include course entry requirements and details about institutional

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<sup>38</sup> Interview schedules are presented in Appendix 1.

<sup>39</sup> Respondents were told that the research intended to investigate whether admissions and recruitment practices varied between universities placed differently in the HE market. If interviewees had additional questions about the research, they were discussed after the completion of the interview.

fees, bursaries and scholarships as well as other features of the university which comprise the marketing mix were used to triangulate data elicited during interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Course popularity was validated where possible during interviews, with an indication of popularity derived, as far as possible, from publically available UCAS data. Data relating to widening participation initiatives and targeting were triangulated with institutions Access Agreements<sup>40</sup>.

### *2.3.2 Data Analysis*

Interview data were analysed manually using the ‘framework’ method, which is widely used for social research (Ritchie and Spencer 2002). Although there is specialist ‘Framework’ software which can assist this method, MS Excel can be used as a suitable alternative. The framework method is similar to coding, but provides a systematic means for organising data so that it can be analysed in a robust manner<sup>41</sup>.

Thematic codes were developed following a thorough review of the data (Ritchie and Spencer 2002). The transcript of each interview was ‘charted’ into an Excel spreadsheet. Each column contained a thematic code, for example ‘what student attributes are desired’. The data from each respondent which corresponded with this code was summarised into this column. Each row in the spreadsheet contained data from one respondent.

Every part of the transcript was summarised into the framework. Where data fitted into two or more codes, this was noted on the framework. According to Ritchie and Spencer (2002), the categories for the columns into which the data are categorised may originally be highly descriptive. They are subsequently altered and refined as transcripts are analysed in an iterative process. This ensures the categories fit the data, in a manner similar to iterative coding.

## ***2.4 Quantitative Analysis of UCAS Data***

One of the disadvantages of qualitative research is that findings cannot be generalised to the population (Bryman 2008). One of the means of mitigating this is to test findings with an analysis of quantitative data.

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<sup>40</sup> Institutions’ Access Agreements for each available year are analysed in Chapter 8. These are publically available from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2011c).

<sup>41</sup> Training in the use of this method was provided by the National Centre for Social Research.

Although quantitative data were not readily available regarding university recruitment (as opposed to student enrolment), UCAS collect administrative data which were used to test some findings in relation to student admissions. Specifically, because UCAS collect information about what *conditional offers* candidates receive from their chosen courses and institutions, it can be identified whether universities use discretion at this stage to help or hinder the enrolment of particular students. Therefore, a quantitative analysis of UCAS data can be used to investigate how university reputation and course popularity are associated with admissions outcomes (question 1b).

#### *2.4.1 The Sample: Access and Characteristics*

Data for a sample of applicants seeking to enter higher education in the 2006/07 academic year were obtained from UCAS<sup>42</sup>. As this project aimed to pay particular attention to the association of applicants' social class with conditional offer levels, and owing to the small numbers of applicants from the lowest social groups, a stratified sample of 16,000 applicants with 2,000 applicants from each of the seven social groups and those of unknown social class was obtained. The dataset included applications submitted by each of these applicants both in the main admissions round and clearing, giving a total of 91,294 applications to UK institutions.

The data related to applicants who applied to enter higher education in 2006, the first year that the Higher Education Act came into force. Although more recent years' data were available, the 2006/07 entry cohort was selected because, in August 2008 when access to data was granted, a UCAS project to input the predicted grades for the 2006/07 cohort of applicants was underway. Information about predicted grades was therefore available for this cohort. It was considered important to include applicants' predicted grades in analyses as HEIs use these predictions of academic success to determine offer decisions, but these do not always accurately reflect academic performance (Dhillon 2005).

At the time access to the data was granted, predicted grade information was available for a randomly selected sample of applicants. The sample of applicants selected for

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<sup>42</sup> The sampling method and included variables were negotiated with UCAS. Some variables were unavailable, owing to UCAS not recording this information, such as students' parental income. Some information is available to UCAS but is not recorded, and so is unavailable to researchers (such as candidates' GCSE subjects and grades). Some requested information was withheld in order to preserve institutional anonymity (including data relating to institutional location at a more detailed level than Nonclementure of Territorial Units for Status level 1).

this project was drawn from the group of candidates, rather than from the population as a whole. However, as the candidates who had this information available had been selected at random from the population, this was not deemed to be problematic, especially given the benefits to the analysis from the increased validity of being able to use predicted examination success in the analyses.

As this project focuses on home student admissions and recruitment, the sample included home-domiciled applicants only. As mature students and those presenting non-traditional qualifications are thought to face very different challenges in HE entry to ‘traditional’ students (Connor et al 2006) the sample only include applicants aged 20 and under on 30 September 2006. Candidates presenting A Level qualifications only were included to facilitate comparability amongst those applicants included in the sample. Summary information about the sample is contained in Appendix 2.

#### *2.4.2 The Data: Administrative Information*

The UCAS data were collected from every applicant who submitted an application through the central admissions body, including all undergraduate applicants, both home and international, applying through the main admissions rounds in the earlier months of the academic year prior to entry. Data for those who applied to enter HE during ‘clearing’ were also available<sup>43</sup>. This covers the majority of undergraduate applicants. Even candidates who apply directly to the university are subsequently asked to submit a UCAS application.

UCAS collects information relating to applicants’ course choices which are passed on to their chosen universities. This includes candidates’ names, ages, addresses, schools attended and predicted and achieved qualifications as well as the school reference and personal statement. In order to undertake its own analyses and to aid research into university admissions, UCAS also collects data relating to applicants which are not made available to HEIs. These include applicants’ parental occupation and ethnicity and the other course choices they have made, as HEIs are not told which other universities and courses their applicants have applied to. UCAS stores additional information, including the number of applications and accepted applicants for each course and institution and the A Level points score of these applicants and accepted

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<sup>43</sup> The clearing process is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

applicants, giving information about the popularity or competitiveness of each course and the academic selectivity.

Therefore, analyses of UCAS data can control for a number of different variables which contain information which is both available and unavailable to the universities and applicants<sup>44</sup>.

UCAS data has several advantages over other sources of data relating to HE admissions, such as those available through HESA. Crucially, because UCAS collects data from both applicants and their chosen institutions, it facilitates the separation of applicant and HEI decision-making processes so that student and university choices can be analysed separately, which are conflated if enrolment outcomes are analysed (Shiner and Modood 2002).

The administrative nature of the data also means that there are some advantages to UCAS data. Because students are penalised if they submit false information to HEIs, there is a strong incentive for them to ensure that the information contained on their forms is accurate, increasing the reliability of the data. It is also in applicants' interest to make sure that they have filled in their forms correctly in terms of their course choices, as a mistake may mean that they do not apply to the institutions and courses which they intended to. Therefore, there is some optimism about the reliability of UCAS data, which has been verified through research (Rudd 1987a).

However, Rudd (1987a) does highlight a problem with UCAS data: because applicants know that the bulk of their form will be passed on to their chosen HEIs, they may omit information which they fear will compromise their application. Rudd (1987a) argued that a larger than expected proportion of applicants from lower social groups do not give data on their parents' occupations because they fear it will jeopardise their applications, even though this information is not made available to HEIs. This concern may also be of relevance to applicants' ethnicity. However, as UCAS label applicants who do not provide information about ethnicity and social class as 'unclassified', allowing these candidates to be analysed as a separate group.

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<sup>44</sup> Information about the variables used for this research is available in Chapter 6, where the results of the analysis are presented. More detail about the method of analysis, given the clustered nature of the data, is also given in this chapter.

A further difficulty with the UCAS data was the conditional offer summary which contained information about offer conditions. These were usually expressed in terms of A Level grades or UCAS point scores, but occasionally included non-academic conditions such as work experience or health requirements. This summary was extracted from a string variable which contained the unaltered text of the conditions as typed by the admissions staff member. Therefore, there is no standardised way of inputting offer conditions, which means that attempts to extract academic requirements from this variable are not always successful.

To overcome this difficulty, UCAS provided both a summary of the text and the full text of the offer conditions, so that the two could be compared. Thus, although there are some difficulties with this variable, measures have been taken to improve its reliability and thus increase confidence in the analyses.

There are also some problems with using UCAS data owing to its administrative nature. As the data were not collected for the purposes of this research project, there are a number of variables which previous research indicates may be of interest about which we have no information; these include income (Connor et al 2001) and parental education levels (Callender and Jackson 2005). However, as parental occupation or social class can be used to classify individuals with similar life chances (Bulmer 1980) it may be an appropriate proxy to use for income. However, several factors such as 'cultural capital' which may influence student decision-making cannot be included (Reay et al 2005; Pugsley 2004).

### **3. Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods**

Therefore, this project used both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the research questions. However, it has been argued that quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be combined due to the different epistemological and ontological assumptions with which they are associated (Morgan and Smircich 1980). This argument suggests that, because quantitative methods assume that an objective reality can be identified through research and qualitative methods contend that knowledge does not exist externally to the interpreter, they cannot be successfully combined (Bryman 2008).

However, it has also been argued that combining qualitative and quantitative methods can allow research to take advantage of the strengths of both methods. Quantitative analyses of large datasets using random probability sampling allow researchers to identify associations between variables, establish the magnitude of these associations and say how far these can be generalised to the population. However, they cannot explain processes and identify causal links. Qualitative methods on the other hand are rooted in individuals' interpretation and they are therefore very useful for understanding processes and therefore explaining why phenomena are observed, but these cannot be generalised to the population. Therefore, it can be seen as best practice to draw upon both quantitative and qualitative methods, although these do not need to be undertaken in the same study (Bryman 2008).

One useful way of combining approaches is to use qualitative research to generate hypotheses which can be tested using quantitative research (Bryman 2008; Yin 1996). This research took this approach, testing findings identified from semi-structured interviews with admissions and recruitment staff members at four case study universities with multivariate analyses of data from UCAS where possible.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This research will use a multiple comparative case study approach to investigate the research questions developed following a review of the literature to identify gaps in the evidence base and hypotheses which could be tested empirically. Although there are some disadvantages to the methods chosen, overall they provide a robust mechanism for analysing institutional selection behaviour. The case study approach will allow a deep examination of institutional behaviour which considers processes as well as outputs (Bryman 2008). The sample, both in terms of the four institutions which were selected and the respondents recruited from within each university, has been selected so as to maximise variation, to increase the validity of the findings (Geddes 2003; Yin 1994).

Furthermore, where possible the external validity of findings from the qualitative research will be tested via quantitative analyses of UCAS data to overcome the difficulties associated with both types of approach. Thus, overall, the methods chosen to address the research question should increase the validity and reliability of the data and the conclusions drawn from the following analyses.



## Chapter 4 **Strong and Weak Selection: Discretion and the UCAS Form**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will examine the admissions process at the four case study universities to address the sub-research questions:

- 1a. To what extent do admissions policies and practices vary between universities as a result of differences in institutional reputation and course popularity?
- 1c. To what extent do university admissions policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?

This Chapter will analyse the way the UCAS form is assessed. An overview of the use of the UCAS form for admissions processes will be presented. This is followed by an analysis of the admissions process and the implications for equity of access at different universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity. First, popular (selecting) courses at pre-1992 institutions will be examined, followed by less popular (recruiting) courses at these universities. This will be followed by an examination of courses at post-1992 universities, selecting courses then recruiting courses.

Finally, the conclusion will address whether the evidence presented supports the hypotheses regarding university behaviour presented in Chapter 2 and whether the admissions behaviour at the four case study universities is likely to facilitate or impede equity of access<sup>45</sup>.

### **2. The UCAS Form and Admissions Process**

This section discusses how applicants progress through the admissions process, where selector discretion can be exercised and how the UCAS form can be used.

#### ***2.1 Admissions Stages***

Selectors can exercise discretion during four stages of the admissions process:

- 1) Candidates' UCAS forms are assessed to determine whether the selector wishes to make an offer to the applicant, or invite them to a further selection stage. For most

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<sup>45</sup> The hypotheses are restated in the chapter conclusions.

applicants, UCAS forms are submitted in the academic year before they desire to enter HE, unless the candidate intends to take a ‘gap year’ (Heath 2007).

- 2) For the optional stage two, candidates are invited to participate in further tests. These can include interviews, an examination of candidates’ portfolios or essays, auditions or numeracy and literacy tests.
- 3) Following a successful application, the selector determines what offer to give to the applicant. Selectors can give unconditional or conditional offers, where the candidate needs to meet specified requirements before qualifying for admission.
- 4) The final stage takes place after candidates’ post-compulsory attainment is known. Applicants who fail to achieve offer conditions may or may not be admitted to the institution at the selector’s discretion. If necessary, the course may enter ‘clearing’, where unplaced applicants compete for spaces.

This chapter considers the first selection stage where admissions officers, based either in a central office or particular departments, and academic admissions tutors make decisions on the basis of the UCAS form which candidates should be issued offers of acceptance or taken forward to further selection stages. Later selection stages will be considered in the following chapter.

## ***2.2 Using the UCAS Form***

A number of different elements of the UCAS form were evaluated to determine admissions outcomes by administrative officers and academic tutors at each university. This chapter focuses on three important elements: academic attainment; personal information and contextual data.

### *2.2.1 Academic Attainment*

Academic attainment includes candidates’ *achieved* qualifications at secondary and post-compulsory level (qualification type, subject and grade attained) and *current study* (what qualifications and subjects they are hoping to achieve). Candidates completing these sections can include information about qualifications on and off the UCAS tariff.

The UCAS tariff allocates points to different qualifications depending on the level of attainment to allow different qualifications to be compared. For example, an A grade at A Level is worth 120 points, the same score that is allocated to three pass grades for

a BTEC National Diploma (UCAS 2011g). Qualifications on the UCAS tariff include AS and A Levels, BTEC National Diplomas and Associated Board of Music examination grades. Qualifications not included on the UCAS tariff include NVQs.

For the majority of applicants who have not yet taken their post-compulsory qualifications, information about *predicted attainment* is provided in the school reference. This is written by a member of staff at the applicant's school or college. Referees may voluntarily include further academic information, for example what scores the applicant received for individual AS Level modules, the individual papers that make up an AS Level examination.

Applicants may also give details about academic attainment in their personal statement. For example, applicants can discuss achievement in maths and science Olympiads, which are national competitions which test contestants' ability in particular subjects.

### 2.2.2 *Personal Information*

The principal section via which candidates give personal information to selectors is their personal statement, which is assumed to be written by the applicant. Candidates can include information about their motivation for taking their chosen degree, demonstrate knowledge, and discuss extra-curricular activities and work experience.

School and college staff can also impart personal information about candidates in the school reference, where the candidate's suitability for higher education is assessed. Referees may also discuss mitigating circumstances which might affect a candidate's application, such as the death of a parent or persistent illness. Candidates may also choose to discuss this in their personal statement.

Personal information is also collected via closed questions completed by the applicant. These cover candidates' age, ethnicity, parental occupation, self-declared disabilities and criminal convictions. Most of these details are made available to university selectors but information about ethnicity and parental occupation is retained by UCAS for monitoring purposes.

### *2.2.3 Contextual Data*

Although traditional definitions of context include student background and events such as illness (McCaig et al 2008b), here ‘context’ is defined differently from ‘mitigating circumstances’. Mitigating circumstances like parental bereavement or long-term illness can affect candidates from all backgrounds. Context relates to groups of students rather than individuals, specifically in terms of social and educational background. In terms of widening participation, contextual information could be argued to be the more valuable measure as it relates to the systematic impact that background factors can have on apparent student quality rather than potentially devastating events which are independent of background.

The name of the candidate’s school or college is contained on the UCAS form, which can be used to identify the type of institution attended by the applicant, whether it is a fee-charging, independent school or an FE college. Additional information about school GCSE and A Level performance can be retrieved from a government database.

The school reference can give further details about candidates’ educational context where closed questions ask for details about the school, such as what proportion of students enters higher education. However, it is not compulsory for referees to answer these questions and these data are not always available.

The referee may also give information about what the school ‘expects’ of its pupils. For example, a referee can communicate whether it is school policy for all pupils to take four subjects during their first year of sixth form, or for pupils to take three subjects only.

Finally, university selectors can use the information about applicants’ addresses to identify whether or not they live in a low participation neighbourhood. This also enables them to identify whether or not the applicant is based in the locality of the university.

## **3. Market Position and Discretion**

Each case institution used a mixture of administrative and academic staff to arrive at selection decisions. However, the role these actors played varied between institutions and between departments and courses within each university. This section examines

how HEI reputation and course popularity influence selector discretion and, where there are differences, why there are these dissimilarities<sup>46</sup>.

Course reputation is determined on the basis of whether the university is a pre or post-1992 institution. Although evidence suggests that reputation may vary between courses at the same institution, a categorisation based upon university status is used to ensure that the classification is systematic and objective. Whether or not a course is popular is based on interviewed selectors' perspectives given during the interview of whether their course was 'selecting', secure in applicant numbers, or 'recruiting', lacking security in the number of applications received<sup>47</sup>. This is a preferable measure to numbers of applications per place because, for some courses, recruitment was insecure despite apparent popularity as many applicants declined their offers, leaving the course short of candidates.

This inevitably means that popularity is considered within the context of the institutions' other courses: a recruiting course at the highly oversubscribed Central Research University might be regarded as a selecting course at Eastern New University, which received significantly fewer applications per place. The data suggest that it is valid to consider course status in this way as it is this relativity which influences selectors' evaluation of their course and their selection behaviour.

The analysis below considers courses where admissions were undertaken by the interviewees who participated in this research. For universities with highly centralised admissions systems (Southern Rural University and Eastern New University) this amounted to nearly all courses. For Northern Town University and Central Research University, admissions officers and tutors for a selection of courses were chosen to participate in the research. The breakdown of courses included in this analysis is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 shows the courses included in the analysis according to levels of popularity and institutional reputation. For the two old universities, levels of popularity differed

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<sup>46</sup> A detailed account of the admissions systems used at each case institution is given in Appendix 3.

<sup>47</sup> The labels 'recruiting' and 'selecting' were used during interviews by university staff. The interview schedules (see Appendix 1) used the terms 'more' or 'less' oversubscribed to refer to course popularity. Many university staff members challenged these terms in response to questions, and used their preferred terminology of recruiting versus selecting courses.

according to course subject: at Central Research University, courses which received comparatively few applications per place were science subjects. At Northern Town University, a recruiting institution, more popular courses were medical related subjects, which had links to professional careers.

Table 4.1: Participating Courses by Institutional Reputation and Course Popularity

	Selecting Course	Recruiting Course
Pre-1992 HEI	<p><b>Northern Town University:</b> 2 Medical-Related courses (one accredited and one linked to another institution)</p> <p><b>Central Research University:</b> Courses in Social Studies, Education, Languages, Maths, Business Studies and Creative Arts</p>	<p><b>Northern Town University:</b> Courses in Maths, Computing, Communications and Social Studies</p> <p><b>Central Research University:</b> Courses in Biological Sciences and Engineering and Technologies</p>
Post-1992 HEI	<p><b>Southern Rural University:</b> Courses in Languages, Creative Arts and Social Studies</p> <p><b>Eastern New University:</b> Three accredited courses: Social Studies, Education, Medical-Related</p>	<p><b>Southern Rural University:</b> All other courses offered by the university</p> <p><b>Eastern New University:</b> All other courses offered by the university</p>

Selecting courses at Eastern New University had accreditation from professional organisations, suggesting that course association with careers increased applicant interest at this university. Conversely, at Southern Rural University, degree programme popularity reflected student choices nationally. Subjects with a high level of applications per place across the country were also popular at this institution.

Although Southern Rural University was, overall, an apparently oversubscribed institution, there was insecurity about the number of applicants who eventually selected the institution as their firm choice. Thus, staff viewed several courses as recruiting owing to a fear about low conversion rates.

Discretion at this initial selection stage was based on selectors' evaluation of applicants' qualifications (levels of attainment, qualification types and subjects taken), applicants' personal statements and contextual information<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Mitigating circumstances are not discussed. All selectors included in this research described taking mitigating circumstances into account in similar ways, whereas there was variation between courses

### ***3.1 Pre-1992 and Selecting***

These courses included most of those provided by Central Research University, with the exception of science-based courses, and courses at Northern Town University which had links to medical professions. Admissions were overseen by academic and administrative staff at both universities, with the locus of responsibility varying between departments.

#### *3.1.1 Academic Attainment*

All selectors assessed applicants' achieved and predicted grades or UCAS points to inform admissions decisions. The level of required attainment was set by academic departments in conjunction with the central admissions office and signalled to applicants via the course 'standard offer'. Standard offer difficulty varied between courses but requirements were high at Central Research University and lower on average at Northern Town University.

There was a relationship between popularity and standard offer difficulty at these pre-1992 institutions with the most oversubscribed courses. For example a business studies course at Central Research University had the stiffest requirements. However, popularity only partly explains these differences. In particular, the two medical related courses at Northern Town University had identical academic criteria in terms of required UCAS points, but the accredited course had spaces left to fill at clearing, while the unaccredited course did not.

In particular, selectors discussed pressures to raise entry requirements to increase perceived course quality among potential consumers. This may reflect the relationship between entry requirements and institutional league tables (Times 2011) However, offers could not be raised without reference to the attainment of current consumers. In other words, requirements were influenced by what the market would bear.

“the standard offer is based on... where the course sits in the market... the qualifications of the previous applicant pool... it's not just about the market, it's about who's applying to us” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

However, actual and desired consumer bases were not the only considerations of university selectors when setting standard offers. The selecting courses at Northern Town University had low standard offers to facilitate the entry of students from less advantaged backgrounds. The aim was to identify students with *potential* which was not signalled by academic attainment. Nonetheless, selectors were keen not to pitch the standard offer too low which could deter potential students, or facilitate the recruitment of students who could not successfully complete the course.

“we keep our standards relatively low so that we can get students who are keen but aren’t classically doing well in their A levels. But if we bring our levels too low... [highly-qualified] students will.. say this course must be too low a standard for us” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical-Related Course, Northern Town University*

“we asked for at least two full A levels [with one grade C]... they’re the students that are really struggling... so now we’ve increased that” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Non-accredited Medical Related Course, Northern Town University*

Preventing student failure was not discussed by selectors from Central Research University. This may reflect the difference in selection models used by the two universities. Northern Town University selectors did not differentiate between applicants presenting qualifications which exceeded the standard offer: all students meeting minimum requirements were offered places. The standard offer therefore needed to be high enough to *screen out* students who could not complete the course. Conversely, selectors at Central Research University ranked applicants, *creaming* those with high levels of GCSE and A Level attainment and good personal statements over those who just met minimum requirements.

Northern Town University selectors were thus engaging in ‘weak selection’, rejecting applicants who did not meet the minimum requirements while selectors at Central Research University were using ‘strong selection’ to cream applicants predicted to perform at high levels.



This difference in approach partly reflects levels of popularity. Courses at Central Research University needed to differentiate between applicants to a higher degree than those at Northern Town University in order to manage numbers and prevent over-recruitment.

“if you applied simple academic criteria... you’d be overwhelmed with students.”

*Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

There were some exceptions to this: one selecting course at Central Research University used weak selection at this stage. However, in contrast to courses at Northern Town University, the standard offer was raised in the hope that very difficult entry requirements would manage the number of successful applicants. Therefore, this course postponed selection decisions until after A Level results were published.

Selecting courses at pre-1992 institutions examined the applications of candidates presenting a range of different types of qualifications such as BTECs and Access courses using the UCAS tariff to determine the equivalency of qualifications. However, some selectors made it clear that, as well as considering overall attainment, particular types of qualification were more highly prized than others.

“the ideal candidate [has] perfect scores at GCSE and A level” *Admissions Tutor,*

*Languages and Related Disciplines, Central Research University*

“the International Baccalaureate programme... [is] a fantastic system” *Admissions*

*Tutor, Business Studies and Administration, Central Research University*

Stating particular qualifications as desired and prioritising certain qualifications in discourse demonstrates that particular credentials were more highly prized than others. A preference for A Levels and the International Baccalaureate (IB) was found among some selectors at Central Research University<sup>49</sup> and not at Northern Town University. This type of discretion may therefore be concentrated in the most prestigious institutions rather than across the old university sector.

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<sup>49</sup> One course in education, which recruited a larger proportion of mature students than other Central Research University courses, did discuss the acceptance of CACHE Diplomas and Access Courses. This suggests that course clientele has an influence on selection criteria.

Selectors for pre-1992, selecting courses also used post-compulsory qualification subject to exercise discretion. Where this occurred, ‘harder’ traditional subjects were favoured:

“there are some subjects that we are desperately un-keen on. Media Studies, PE”  
*Admissions Tutor, Business Studies and Administration, Central Research University*

“some people... have taken very hard A levels... say physics, but will do very well in [this subject]” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical-Related, Northern Town University*

For some courses, candidates who had studied a wide variety of subjects were seen as being of higher calibre, and were favoured in the selection process.

“If you can do sciences and arts and humanities it shows that you’re... very capable.” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

Difficulty of subject could thus be used in two ways. It could contextualise or ‘excuse’ an applicant’s poor performance or eliminate applicants who had taken easier course options. Northern Town University selectors used subject to excuse candidates whilst selectors at Central Research University showed distaste for ‘easy’ subjects.

### 3.1.2 Personal Statement

The level of discretion used in evaluating candidates’ personal statements was high for some courses in this group, with applicants’ personal statements scored according to criteria designed by the selector to determine suitability (strong selection). For some courses, discretion was low with personal statements merely checked to see that there were ‘okay’ (weak selection).

Potential students were expected to use the personal statement to demonstrate commitment to their chosen course for both strong and weak selection courses. However, strong selection courses had nuanced criteria which revolved around applicants’ intellectual engagement with the subject, commitment to the university,

and the level of care taken over the personal statement. One selector for these courses described the best statements as a “mini-essay”. In contrast, weak selection courses used what one selector described as a “simplified response” to the statement; if the candidate briefly mentioned the course, this was sufficient to communicate interest.

In addition, for strong selection courses, the calibre of applicants’ personal statements was scored, allowing this information to be combined with scores for academic attainment so that candidates could be ranked. For weak selection courses, applicants were not ranked; any applicant who mentioned the course qualified for admission. Thus, weak selection courses screened out applicants who did not mention the course while strong selection courses creamed the highest-scorers.

Strong selection courses also evaluated candidates’ extra-curricular activities. At Northern Town University, applicants were expected to discuss relevant work experience while selectors at Central Research University looked for engagement with extra-curricular activities which were unrelated to candidates’ academic interests. These were taken to indicate how candidates would contribute intellectually to the course and to the university environment.

“[We want them to] demonstrate they’ve got the experiences and qualities necessary for a future health professional” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Non-accredited Medical-Related, Northern Town University*

“you might have more to contribute to a discussion because you can relate things to what you’ve done outside of your studies.” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

“we want [this department] to be in the drama, in the art, in the sport.” *Admissions Tutor, Business and Administrative Studies, Central Research University*

There was a difference in the use of extra-curricular activities between the two universities, with Central Research University placing an emphasis on candidates’ contribution to campus life to a much greater extent than Northern Town University.

This relates to institutional ‘brand’, with campus atmosphere seen as an important part of Central Research University’s marketing mix<sup>50</sup>.

Weak selection was used for one selecting course sampled from each pre-1992 university. This was because the personal statement was seen to lack validity. Prospective students’ upbringing was seen to influence extra-curricular activities and the personal statement was questioned due to the prevalence of plagiarism.

“we rapidly dropped [scoring the personal statement] because there was a concern that it was... a function of the school or sixth form people attended” *Department Head, Social Studies, Central Research University*

“we quite often get plagiarised areas... they’re so worried about producing a good personal statement, they steal it” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*

However, similar fears about the personal statement were expressed by a number of selectors in this category, including those exercising strong selection. Therefore, it could be argued that popularity as well as concerns about personal statement validity can explain the different approaches.

Although the course at Northern Town University was popular, it was not heavily oversubscribed and had sufficient numbers of empty places to justify participation in clearing. Selectors for the weak selection course at Central Research University had difficulties getting applicants to name the course as their ‘firm choice’ meaning the applicant base was not secure. This was attributed to delays in telling candidates that their applications had been successful, which concurs with research from Briggs and Wilson (2007) who show that candidates give a slight preference to institutions which are the first to offer them a place. Academic staff attributed this delay to the central admissions officer, who could not assess candidates’ personal statements quickly. The selection process was thus simplified, in the hope that this would speed up the admissions process and increase the department’s conversion rate.

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<sup>50</sup> The marketing mix is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Thus, strong and weak selection can be seen as a response to popularity: selectors for more popular courses scrutinised applications to cream the best candidates while less popular courses were better served with a quick, less nuanced process.

### *3.1.3 Contextual Data*

Contextual information was taken into account by some selecting courses at both pre-1992 universities. However, the process was formalised at Central Research University, where candidates could choose to submit an additional form alongside their UCAS application. This form, which asked for a statement relating to academic and personal circumstances, was used by departmental and central staff. Admissions tutors at Central Research University also developed their own contextual measures which varied between different departments.

At this stage, selector discretion could enable a disadvantaged candidate to receive an offer they might otherwise not have been awarded. Thus, discretion could influence the university student population directly by promoting the entry of students from less advantaged backgrounds over similarly qualified but more privileged students.

“[if] their predicted grades are comparable to someone else’s but they’ve got these particular circumstances... it’s taken into the overall score [used to rank applicants]” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

Contextual information was used to encourage participation from non-traditional students (widening participation). This was desirable to help achieve a balanced student intake, to select the best candidates and to promote ‘fairness’ with candidates from different backgrounds seen as equivalent despite the apparent academic difference. Fairness here means ‘outcome fairness’ with differential treatment enabling equitable selection outcomes.

“[if] it’s quite a poor school, then an A and two Bs... is a real feat compared to three As at a top flying public school”<sup>51</sup> *Admissions Tutor, Languages and Related, Central Research University*

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<sup>51</sup> The Admissions Tutor for this course used this information to make standard (not lower) offers to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who otherwise may not have received an offer.

Contextual information was used by selectors for the non-accredited medical related course at Northern Town University. Applicants were interviewed in waves according to the distance they lived from the university, with local applicants prioritised. This strategy was intended to increase access to medicine for local students. A creative arts course at Central Research University also used contextual information to invite a heterogeneous group of applicants according to region, educational background and gender to each interview.

However, although contextual information could influence the timing of interviews, it did not affect selection decisions:

“if... we were completely flooded with applications... then we would have screened [local] applications first. I can’t honestly see that ever being the case”  
*Departmental Admissions Officer, Non-Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*

“when I do get [rare] applicants from the north I... think “Oh please be good so that I can invite you””  
*Admissions Tutor, Creative Arts, Central Research University*

One of the reasons selectors gave for not using contextual data was that they did not feel information relating to school background was of sufficient quality to accurately contextualise students’ academic attainment.

“if we had reliable statistical data on schools’ exam results... one might be tempted”  
*Department Head, Social Studies, Central Research University*

Thus, contextual factors were taken into account at both pre-1992 institutions. However, Central Research University was the only case institution which gathered additional information via a bespoke form and the only institution where some admissions tutors described changing selection decisions to take account of context. This may at least partly relate to Central Research University’s student population, which was much more privileged than that of Northern Town University and had a greater need to widen access to non-traditional students.

### *3.1.4 Equity of Access*

It could be argued that the admissions processes for selecting courses at the pre-1992 universities were consistent with equity of access. At Central Research University, admissions criteria creamed the best applicants but a number of selectors discussed the using contextual information to inform their decisions at this stage. At Northern Town University, although applicants' backgrounds did not influence selection decisions, academic criteria were used to screen out students who could not be successful. Therefore, according to staff members' accounts, selection according to potential took place as a matter of course at Northern Town University and at Central Research University, contextual information was used to try and ensure students with equal potential were selected.

However, as the previous section demonstrated, not all courses which creamed applicants did take contextual data into account. This demonstrates that selector preferences could play a role in determining admissions policies and practices in a manner which might impede equity of access. Furthermore, it suggests that an applicant's chance of being accepted to their university of choice may differ depending on what course they have applied to because of selector preferences rather than their academic potential.

In addition, the evidence suggests that course entry requirements increased with course popularity. Thus, the scope for using weak selection practices to admit all students who could successfully complete a course diminished as the number of applications per place increased. This was partly to convey a sense of quality to applicants, demonstrating that admissions criteria could be used as a marketing tool, as suggested by previous research (Brown and Bimrose 1994). However, research suggests that high entry requirements may deter candidates who could potentially succeed on the course but do not view themselves as academic high-flyers from applying (Connor et al 1999; Brook 2005). Therefore, raising entry criteria because of the market could impede equity of access as a result of student self-selection, even if the selector subsequently contextualises the attainment of those who apply.

The preference shown by some selectors for particular post-compulsory qualifications and the distaste for particular subjects at Central Research University may also impede equity of access. Students who have taken different qualifications and subjects

to those traditionally presented may be less prepared for the course, or may have the same potential to succeed as other applicants who have a more conventional academic profile. Where selection criteria exclude individuals who are less prepared for the course, this may not affect equity of access as students who feel their entry qualifications do not match their chosen HE course are more likely to drop out than those who have qualifications which are a good match (Yorke and Longden 2008). However, where candidates who are rejected because of their post-compulsory subjects and qualifications have the same potential to succeed as applicants who are admitted, this is not consistent with equity of access.

Although some qualifications may not prepare students as well for university as A Levels, there is some evidence students with ‘Access’ qualifications<sup>52</sup> achieve comparable degree results to A Level students (Hatt and Baxter 2003). Therefore the degree to which selectors’ preferences for certain subjects and qualifications influenced equity of access will depend on the course content and design. This will vary between different contexts.

Finally, there was some suggestion that some courses did not use the personal statement to inform selection decisions in a significant way. It could be argued that this is consistent with equity of access as the quality of a personal statement may depend on educational background (Rouncefield and Scott 1998). However, the evidence presented above suggested that reducing the role of the personal statement increased the importance of applicants’ academic attainment for selection decisions, which may not fully capture the characteristics needed to succeed in HE, including motivation and engagement (Yorke and Longden 2008).

### ***3.2 Pre-1992 and Recruiting***

This group includes non-medical courses at Northern Town University and science-based courses at Central Research University. Admissions for these courses at were overseen by administrative officers based centrally (Central Research University) or within departments (Northern Town University). The two exceptions were a social studies course at Northern Town University and an engineering and technologies course at Central Research University which were overseen by academic staff.

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<sup>52</sup> Access courses are designed to give students who do not have traditional school-leaving qualifications the skills they need for higher study (Access to HE 2011).



### 3.2.1 Academic Attainment

As for selecting courses at these institutions, some selectors for recruiting courses prioritised A Levels and the IB in discourse. However other selectors in this group, all at Northern Town University, discussed using the UCAS tariff to assess applicants with different qualifications, which were given equal weighting according to UCAS tariff scores.

However, there was some apparent tension about the perceived status of academic qualifications deemed equivalent by UCAS. For example, academic staff members within a maths/computing department at Northern Town University were unwilling to accept Key Skills Maths in place of a C grade at GCSE, although Key Skills qualifications are included on the UCAS tariff (UCAS 2011g)<sup>53</sup>. Thus, the UCAS tariff did not eliminate discretion, with academic staff subjectively assessing the usefulness of different types of qualification when setting selection criteria.

Preference was also given to particular subjects taken at A Level or equivalent, with those subjects related to the degree programme given priority in the selection process.

“as long as someone is doing... a classic or a social science, then I’m quite happy”  
*Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

For some recruiting courses at Central Research University there was some evidence of selectors dismissing undesirable subjects, indicating that an aversion to ‘easy’ subjects spread beyond selecting courses at this institution. Candidates taking easier options were seen as being less well-prepared for their chosen course:

“applicants who’ve done biology... PE and say, Chinese and this is a Chinese student... [is this] relevant to the degree?”  
*Admissions Tutor, Biological Sciences, Central Research University*

At Northern Town University in contrast, some courses had no specific subject requirements. This approach resulted from a diverse applicant pool in terms of

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<sup>53</sup> Key Skills at Level 1 are regarded as equivalent to a full GCSE by the Department for Education, with Key Skills at Level 2 regarded as equivalent to an AS Level (DfE 2011). An E grade at AS Level is worth 20 points with a Key Skills qualification at Level 2 worth 10 points (UCAS 2011g).

academic background, which meant specific selection criteria could not be applied without the loss of many candidates.

This suggests that both current applicant base and institutional reputation influence the level of selector discretion. More research-orientated institutions have more demanding, less open selection criteria than their counterparts at old, but not research intensive, institutions.

All selectors in this group used weak selection to screen out applicants who did not meet minimum requirements in terms of predicted attainment expressed via A Level grades and UCAS points. In most cases, the minimum requirements were set below the advertised standard offer in order give applicants the chance to improve their scores.

“candidates who know they need to achieve a slightly higher grade... to get into a university that they really want will... work harder” *Admissions Tutor, Biological Sciences, Central Research University*

However, where predicted grades were seen as an accurate measure of A Level attainment, for example because they were based on AS level results, there was a reluctance to discourage students with unattainable offers. Selectors’ perceptions of academic measures can therefore influence the way discretion is exercised.

“If you make it completely out of their reach... that can de-motivate people” *Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

Minimum entry requirements varied between these recruiting courses. Academic factors could play a role in setting the standard offer. For example, admissions tutors could raise requirements to select-out candidates who could not complete the course successfully. However, for some courses, evidence indicated that market-related factors played a strong role in setting the standard offer, with higher student numbers leading to more difficult requirements. This process was tempered by university reputation, competing providers and student perception of course quality as indicated by the offer level.

“there are academic imperatives which really I should be talking about... but from a marketing perspective... we wouldn't want to set it too low initially to make it appear as though it... wasn't a challenging course” *Department Head, Media and Communications, Northern Town University*

Thus, a strong reputation and a larger number of students allowed courses at Central Research University to have higher standard offers than recruiting courses at Northern Town University. A difference in popularity may also explain the lack of strong selection along academic attributes amongst recruiting courses in comparison to the selecting courses at the same institutions.

### 3.2.2 Personal Statement

The level of discretion used over the personal statement was weaker for all pre-1992 recruiting courses compared to selecting courses at these institutions. However, there was variation in the way the personal statement was used within this group.

For most courses, the personal statement was not used at all at this stage, although it could be explored in future interviews with applicants. However, personal statements were used for the more popular recruiting courses at Northern Town University, either to determine which candidates should receive offers or which should be invited to interview.

In these cases, statements were screened for interest in the course, relevant experience or activities and literacy. These attributes were assessed to decide whether the applicant was able to engage with the degree successfully. This strong selection was needed for these courses to manage numbers and screen out potentially unsuccessful students.

“some understanding of what it is that you're going to be studying... will help you through [to completion]” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

At Central Research University, personal statements were also used for strong selection where the applicant's academic profile did not match course criteria, but applicants were not ranked according to personal statement calibre. In other words,

the personal statement was used where academic information was insufficient to show candidates' suitability for the course. Selectors evaluated interest, extra-curricular activities and, where appropriate, candidates' explanation as to why they had not taken subjects which would better prepare them for their chosen degree.

“it's much harder for students without [maths and physics] to complete the course successfully... therefore we need to take a more careful judgement as to whether we think they can cope” *Admissions Tutor, Engineering and Technologies, Central Research University*

At Northern Town University, interest in the course was a criterion for recruiting courses but an apparent mismatch between student interest and course content did not prevent an offer from being made as for selecting courses. Instead, identification of mismatch could result in further information being sought from the applicant to check that they wished to apply for the course, or not affect the selection decision.

“If we couldn't spot anything [indicating interest] then we would be phoning [the applicant]... if they haven't made a mistake then we would... make the offer” *Departmental Admissions Manager, Media/Communications and Maths/Computing, Northern Town University*

It could be argued that discretion via phone calls to applicants used to select-in 'poorer' candidates was due to a desire to make as many offers as possible as this behaviour is also observed for recruiting courses at post-1992 institutions<sup>54</sup>. However, it could also be attributed to the role of the staff member making selection decisions. Applicants were contacted where selection decisions were made by admissions officers rather than academic members of staff, who have other roles as researchers and educators and therefore may have less time to contact applicants.

### 3.2.3 Contextual Data

None of the selectors in this group used contextual data at this stage to determine admissions outcomes. In common with some selectors for oversubscribed courses at pre-1992 institutions, using contextual information was hindered by a perceived lack

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<sup>54</sup> This is discussed more fully in sections 3.3.2 and 3.4.2.

of suitable information, where respondents felt it more ethical to treat everybody in the same way and a reluctance to recruit potentially unsuccessful applicants.

“no matter how much we want to widen participation... the main objective is... to ensure that the applicant can cope with the course” *Admissions Tutor, Engineering and Technologies, Central Research University*

Some respondents at Northern Town University equated the use of contextual information with discrimination:

“I wouldn’t like... somebody [to] treat me any differently to the person that lives next door... just because they’ve got more money” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Variety of Social Studies Courses, Northern Town University*

This contrasts with the views of selectors for more popular courses at Northern Town University who did not see contextualising attainment as discrimination. This partly reflects the difference in the applicant pool for recruiting courses, which had more diverse student bodies than their more popular counterparts. It was therefore unnecessary to contextualise attainment because students from less advantaged backgrounds were being recruited.

#### 3.2.4 Equity of Access

For recruiting courses at old universities, contextual data were not used to the same degree as for selecting courses. Combined with the increased importance of academic attainment as the personal statement played a lesser role in selection decisions, it could be argued the admissions processes for these courses was inconsistent with equity of access. This is because evidence suggests that post-compulsory academic attainment, which was a key admissions criterion for these courses, may not reflect student potential to succeed in HE (Hoare and Johnston 2011). Thus, although using the personal statement may impede equity of access<sup>55</sup>, overall it could be argued that weak selection practices used for these courses, when combined with the lack of use of contextual data, did not allow students to be selected according to potential.

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<sup>55</sup> See section 3.1.4.

However, it could also be argued that there was less need to use contextual data for these recruiting courses in comparison to selecting courses at the same institutions. As entry criteria were less demanding due to lower levels of popularity, the academic standards applied by selectors were closer to the minimum levels needed to succeed on a course which explains why some selectors chose not to take contextual data into account as they felt this would permit the selection of students who could not complete the course successfully. Therefore, as there was less need for the use of contextual data to ensure students who could potentially succeed were selected, the admissions processes for these courses may not impede equity of access because of the lower entry requirements.

Additional features of the admissions practices for these courses may facilitate equity of access. Although some courses prioritised particular post-compulsory subjects, some of these recruiting courses had more flexible entry criteria allowing students with different school-leaving qualifications to enrol on the course. Similarly, selectors described using the UCAS tariff to evaluate qualifications in terms of their equivalency. It could be argued that this is consistent with equity of access because it recognises that student potential may not be tied to particular subjects of study, allowing students to enter degree programmes even where they have made ill-informed choices when selecting their post-compulsory qualifications and subjects.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that even though this is consistent with equity of access, it may result in an unfair distribution of places. This is because fairness and justice not only relate to the allocation of resources but also to how individuals interact, as discussed in Chapter 2. If selecting students with a diverse range of qualifications and who do not necessarily show engagement with the course in their personal statements increases course recruitment, this is beneficial for course selectors. However, it may be detrimental to the wellbeing of students who enrol on the course if they dislike the programme or struggle academically (Yorke and Longden 2008; Davies and Elias 2003). Thus, although the distribution of places may be equitable because two students with equal potential to succeed are equally likely to be selected, it may be unfair because it benefits the course selector rather than the student. However, the degree to which this applies will vary between courses and the extent to which certain qualifications and levels of engagement are necessary to enjoy the course of study.

### *3.3 Post-1992 and Selecting*

This group includes the more popular accredited, professional courses at Eastern New University and ‘prime courses<sup>56</sup>’ at Southern Rural University in nationally popular subjects such as English Literature. At both institutions, selection decisions were made by central administrative officers. Academic tutors exercised judgement for ‘borderline’ applicants where there was uncertainty about suitability.

#### *3.3.1 Academic Attributes*

Compared to the old institutions, selectors exercised less discretion to aid selectivity or creaming. Selectors accepted a wide range of qualifications, with vocational qualifications seen as desirable by some selectors in this group, in contrast to most staff members at Central Research University.

However, there was some evidence of unease about certain qualifications among this group of selectors. This focused on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which are not contained on the UCAS tariff, rather than ‘approved’ qualifications.

“the person whose got the NVQ... would have quite a bit of catch up to do”  
*Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

In addition, there was some evidence that popularity influenced course subject requirements. At Southern Rural University, ‘prime courses’ required applicants to present post-compulsory qualifications in subjects which related to their chosen degree, with this requirement absent from other courses. This partially reflected the difficulty of these courses, with a relevant post-compulsory qualification being vital for student success. However, the additional requirement was also used to manage the high numbers of applicants.

“[For] prime courses... it’s essential for an applicant to have a high grade in the subject... we receive huge numbers of applications, so it’s a way of selecting”  
*Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

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<sup>56</sup> Staff at Southern Rural University throughout the institution used a term similar to ‘prime courses’ to discuss these degree programmes. The label has been changed to project institutional anonymity.

Popularity did not have the same impact at Eastern New University, where subject requirements were set by external accrediting bodies.

Thus, there was evidence that selecting courses could have more demanding entry requirements than recruiting courses. Although this was not always the motive for raising academic requirements, selectors could use course popularity to cream higher achievers. This was seen particularly at Southern Rural University, overall the more popular of the two post-1992 institutions.

This interpretation is supported by an examination of how popularity affected the level of the standard offer and the ‘rigidity’ with which it was pursued. Selecting courses at both new universities used weak selection for their admissions procedures, but the minimum requirements were higher for selecting courses than for recruiting courses. This was justified in terms of the need to control student numbers, as well promoting the recruitment of better quality students.

“we’ve had a lot of students... we’re trying to aim at [a] stronger calibre of student” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

Selecting higher-achievers was a goal for a number of respondents working at Southern Rural University suggesting that, rather than being necessary to control student numbers, raising requirements was *permitted* by the rise in student numbers. This suggests that this more popular institution had a desire to re-position itself as a selective institution. However, efforts were tempered by current student demand:

“we have gradually upped our range... we don’t want students to think that we’re too easy to get into, because that doesn’t fit with our positioning... we’ve got to be realistic about the points that students... actually achieve” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, although raising requirements could prevent courses being “bombed” with applicants as one manager put it, there was also evidence of desire to maintain low selection levels where possible in order to promote the widening participation ethos of the university. It was also felt that weak selection facilitated ‘fit’ between



student and institution: students who wanted to go to the university could freely choose to do so, and would not drop out as a result.

“the aim is... [to] match the university with people who want to study here... in maintaining a recruiting policy I think we’ve got a better chance of doing that”,  
*Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

For Eastern New University courses, standard offers were set by central management. With some exceptions, owing to accredited body requirements, the standard offer was supposed to be the same for most courses. However, for more popular courses, the standard offer was rigidly applied in contrast to recruiting courses where there was more flexibility.

“With the [recruiting non-accredited education courses] we... [judge whether] they’re likely to get enough points. But with [a selective accredited education course] we need to know that they are definitely [going] to get them”  
*Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

Therefore, more popular courses had more demanding entry requirements than less popular courses to manage numbers and meet the expectations of external regulators. Courses used weak selection, raising requirements or applying criteria more rigidly rather than ranking students to determine success.

### 3.3.2 *Personal Statement*

The selectors at Eastern New University exercised more discretion in their assessment of the personal statement than their counterparts at Southern Rural University and recruiting courses at their own institution. In common with courses at the old universities, applicants needed to demonstrate they had the skills and commitment needed to succeed on the course.

As accredited courses, candidates’ potential suitability for the linked profession was also important. Applicants who did not present statements of sufficient quality were not rejected outright, but were contacted and asked to provide an additional statement.

“where we... want [the personal statement] to be something a little bit more... we would contact them and ask them to send in a proper personal statement”

*Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

This difference persisted even where the same selectors made decisions for both selecting and recruiting courses, demonstrating that it was course characteristics rather than individual idiosyncrasies which influenced selection practices.

In contrast, the personal statement played a minor role in the admissions process at Southern Rural University. Selectors looked for candidates to demonstrate an interest in the degree by mentioning the course rather than ranking candidates. Although desirable, it was not necessary for personal statements be well-written, in contrast to courses at the old universities.

“I look out for the spelling and punctuation... It doesn't affect [the decision]”

*Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

The reason for this lack of discretion can be attributed to the centralised selection procedure. As decisions were made by administrative officers, academic judgements could not inform selection. However, exercising discretion was also felt to be unnecessary, even for prime courses, because they were not highly oversubscribed.

“none of the courses are that competitive that I need to go through the personal statements with a fine toothcomb” *Central Admissions Officer, Creative Arts and Education, Southern Rural University*

At both universities, the personal statement could play a role in helping to secure admission for borderline candidates to selective courses. This is similar to the use of the personal statement for recruiting courses at the old institutions.

“If they're a borderline character... strong extracurricular activity will pull their application back up to be considered” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

Thus, selection using the personal statement was used where academic characteristics were insufficient to determine suitability for entry. At Eastern New University, selecting courses needed to assess candidates' suitability for linked professions rather than just consider whether candidates could successfully complete the course, so it was used routinely. At Southern Rural University, prime courses were not linked to professions which may explain the lower levels of discretion.

### 3.3.3 Contextual Data

There was no evidence that contextual data was used at this stage for either institution. Admissions staff and management were united in their reluctance to use such information as it was not necessary to widen participation. Institutional reputation, the level of the standard offer and the widening participation recruitment effort were sufficient to diversify the student body.

“we’re not like some red brick universities. We don’t care whether they come from an independent or a state school” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

“we work a lot with schools and communities in the background before the admission process kicks in” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

When discussing contextual data, some selectors interpreted the question as implying that more privileged applicants should be given admissions priority, demonstrating that contextual data was not viewed as a mechanism for widening participation.

“if we [looked at school details] we’d never fill any places... a large proportion [of applicants]... come through widening participation” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

This may relate to the two universities' 'brands' as widening participation institutions. The use of contextual data for balance would thus mean facilitating the entry of a different group of applicants to their 'usual' local and non-traditional applicants.

### *3.3.4 Equity of Access*

Some features of the admissions processes for selecting courses at new universities were consistent with equity of access. In particular, although the personal statement only played a weak role in selection decisions, where it was deemed insufficient candidates were not rejected outright but were contacted for additional information.

As previously discussed, personal statement quality may be partly a function of applicants' educational and social background (Rouncefield and Scott 1998). Therefore, contacting applicants for additional information facilitated equity of access because it gave candidates the opportunity to correct errors in their application which could assist the entry of students according to potential to succeed. This is because contacting applicants provided an insurance policy for those candidates who had spent less time on their personal statement or did not receive good advice about how to complete the form, allowing students a second chance to provide sufficient information to demonstrate their potential. As Rouncefield and Scott (1998) demonstrate, this was likely to benefit those from less-advantaged educational backgrounds in particular.

The selecting courses at new universities evaluated candidates' post-compulsory qualifications using the UCAS tariff, and discussed the suitability of a wide range of credentials. This contrasts with selectors based at Central Research University in particular who favoured A Levels and the IB. It could be argued that this reflects the lower entry requirements at the new universities, and that this demonstrates that courses at old and new institutions were not equally challenging. However, this does not accord with regulation which works to ensure that students who successfully complete degree programmes in the same subject across universities have achieved similar milestones in terms of knowledge and skill (QAA 2011). Therefore, the fact that vocational qualifications such as BTECs may be treated more favourably for popular courses at new universities compared to selecting courses at old universities is an indication that there is inequity of access. Students with similar potential to succeed may be diverted to old and new universities as a result of the qualifications they have taken rather than their capabilities.

Finally, in common with courses at the old universities, there was evidence that course popularity led to pressures to raise entry requirements partly to increase the

attractiveness of the course in the eyes of potential consumers. As previously discussed, this may influence student self-selection, resulting in different applicants of similar potential making different choices about whether to apply to the course<sup>57</sup>.

It could be argued that the impact of this may be lessened for these courses in comparison to those at Central Research University and Northern Town University due to these new universities' missions as access institutions<sup>58</sup>. However although candidates from non-traditional backgrounds may not be deterred from applying as a result of these institutions widening participation activities, these applicants may match their course choices with their perceived academic ability (Brooks 2005). Thus, candidates with lower levels of predicted attainment may eschew prime courses and those which have accreditation in favour of other courses at these universities which have lower entry requirements. Therefore, although raising entry requirements may not influence equity of access for those in the applicant pool, it may influence which students apply in a manner which impedes equity of access.

### ***3.4 Post-1992 and Recruiting***

This group includes the non-prime courses in Southern Rural University and non-accredited courses at Eastern England University. Central admissions officers made all 'non-borderline' selection decisions at this stage.

#### *3.4.1 Academic Attributes*

For recruiting courses at the new universities, weak selection was exercised in assessing students' academic attributes. Applicants falling below minimum requirements were screened out rather than ranked.

In common with selecting courses at these universities, a wide array of qualifications was accepted. However, there were instances where discretion was used by selectors in this group to 'cream' desirable applicants according to creative skill. Creative arts courses at Southern Rural University, favoured qualifications which were seen as being particularly suitable for developing relevant skills for the course.

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<sup>57</sup> This is discussed more fully in section 3.1.4.

<sup>58</sup> The widening participation activities of these universities are discussed in Chapter 8.

“our courses want students to experiment... that’s a skill that they learn really on the foundation courses and the BTEC National Diplomas and not on the A level courses” *Central Admissions Officer, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

In addition to creaming, discretion could be used to ‘open doors’ to applicants and engorge the applicant pool by accepting less prestigious qualifications, including qualifications not on the UCAS tariff such as NVQs.

“we do take a lot of students with NVQ level 3s and GNVQs... although you can’t convert them to a tariff point, you can convert their equivalency” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Thus, discretion was used to select-in particularly suitable applicants according to *non-academic* criteria or to grow the suitable applicant pool. This contrasts with the behaviour of the pre-1992 universities, where discretion was used to cream candidates presenting more prestigious qualifications.

Where particular subjects were required for admission, these were put in place to ensure selected students could succeed on the course. The motive was thus to screen out unacceptable applicants, rather than control the size of the applicant pool.

“one of [their] A levels has to be maths [for them] to cope” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

In common with recruiting courses at the old universities, offers were made to students whose predicted grades fell below minimum requirements. At Southern Rural University, selectors made applicants offers if they presented qualifications which fell slightly below the standard offer<sup>59</sup> as this was kinder to applicants and would prompt them to work hard during their final school year. At Eastern New University all applicants, whether just short of the minimum requirements or further away from them, were offered a place.

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<sup>59</sup> Standard offers for Southern Rural University were advertised as a range of points for example from 220-260 points. A standard offer within this range was fixed each at the start of each academic year.

“once they’ve got that offer they work really hard to pull [their grades] up because... they’ve fallen in love with the place” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

“most of our students are guaranteed a conditional offer... we do reject a few students, but very few” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

This can be attributed to the difference in popularity between these universities, Eastern New University, which relied on clearing to a much greater extent than Southern Rural University, needed to maximise recruitment at this selection stage.

The standard offer for recruiting courses at Southern Rural University did vary, with some asking for higher UCAS points than others. This was partially due to academic factors, with the university’s foundation degrees asking for lower grades than more demanding degree courses. However, there was also evidence of pressure to raise requirements where possible in order to attract higher attaining applicants.

“tariff points are going to increase... we need to target more accurately the kind of students that we want to attract here” *Department Head, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

Thus, although there was pressure to try and maintain low levels of selectivity where possible at Southern Rural University<sup>60</sup>, there was nonetheless evidence that popularity, reputation and an established applicant pool did influence where the standard offer was set. In contrast, almost all recruiting courses at Eastern New University used the same standard offer<sup>61</sup>. This may indicate that there were similar levels of popularity between the recruiting courses but may also reflect a reluctance to strongly select applicants due to the institution’s desire to widen access.

“it goes back to... trying to get students into higher education, to try and give them that experience to broaden their options” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

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<sup>60</sup> This evidence is discussed in section 3.3.3 of this chapter.

<sup>61</sup> As previously discussed, some recruiting courses at Eastern New University had additional subject requirements which were deemed necessary for student success on the course.

However, although both main and secondary campuses of Eastern New University had the same admissions policies, in reality selectors at the secondary campus exercised higher levels of discretion. Where selectors felt that applicants who qualified for admission were not suitable, they tried to persuade applicants to change their preference for a lower status qualification such as a foundation degree. This contrasted with the ‘open doors’ approach of the main campus.

“we will suggest alternatives to people who... the [main campus] office would traditionally accept” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University Secondary Campus*

The differences between the main and secondary campus can be attributed to the historical backgrounds of these different sites. These campuses had recently formed parts of two different institutions with staff working under different managements and with different admissions criteria.

However, there was also a difference in popularity between the two parts of the university. The secondary campus was situated in more affluent town and did not offer less popular degrees, such as science courses. Staff at the secondary campus therefore felt that the open door strategy was not as appropriate for their more popular site as for the main campus. Admissions staff at the secondary campus felt that adopting the policies of the main campus jeopardised their own recruitment as they appeared to be a lower quality institution.

“if [students] think it’s a weak university because it’s got low points then they won’t care what the facilities are” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

Thus, selectors for recruiting courses at the new universities exercised less discretion over applicants than more selecting courses at these institutions. This was partially due to differences in popularity but other factors, such as a desire to widen participation, influenced whether discretion was exercised.



### 3.4.2 Personal Statement

In common with selectors for some more popular courses at these new universities, admissions officers for recruiting courses were looking for personal statements that made well-written, convincing cases for why the applicant wanted to study the course along with details about relevant extra-curricular activities. However, the absence of this would not prevent applicants from receiving an offer.

“if they’ve got a poor personal statement... [it] drives us mad... [but main campus management] say it doesn’t really matter just recruit anyway” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University Secondary Campus*

For some accredited recruiting courses based at Southern Rural University, applicants had to mention relevant work experience in their personal statement to successfully gain a conditional offer. If this information was lacking the admissions officer contacted them for an additional statement. This is similar to behaviour of selectors for accredited selecting courses at Eastern New University, suggesting that the approach may relate to the nature of the degree rather than course popularity.

However, there was some evidence that popularity could influence selection behaviour for accredited courses. As courses grew in popularity, selectors were less willing to contact applicants for additional statements:

“we've got too many applications for the number of places, so I'm going to be now be less inclined to start chasing them” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

Thus, a rise in popularity could increase selectivity by reducing discretion. Selectors applied admissions criteria more rigidly, refusing to allow applicants a second chance to demonstrate their suitability.

### 3.4.3 Contextual Data

Selectors did not take account of applicants’ educational and social background. Due to the centralised nature of the admissions process, applications were scrutinised by the same individuals for both selecting and recruiting courses at the new universities.

Contextual data were therefore not used for the same reasons: there was no need to use contextual data to widen participation<sup>62</sup>.

In addition, selectors for recruiting courses at Southern Rural University believed that using contextual data would be at odds with the university's ethos as it would introduce selectivity and competition, which was seen as contrary to the university's approach to teaching and assessment. This supports evidence in relation to the use of weak selection at this institution for more popular courses and suggests that institutional ethos can play a role in the admissions process:

“the atmosphere of the university is... very relaxed and quite chilled... we want [not to] pick and choose” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

Although contextual data were not used officially, there was some evidence that academic staff could ask administrative officers to review applications on the basis of contextual information provided by applicants, which could potentially influence selection decisions.

“my personal inclination is to... make sure that students aren't disadvantaged by... complications of the process” *Department Head, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

This information related to individual applicants' knowledge of the admissions process rather than their background. However, if students at particular types of institution were less well-advised than their counterparts from more advantaged schools, this intervention would have the potential to correct this disadvantage.

Thus, differences between new university courses in the use of contextual data cannot be attributed to differing levels of popularity. The possibility of using contextual data is diluted because of the nature of the centralised admissions process. However, particular staff members' could influence selection decisions on the basis of contextual information in an informal way, depending on personal preferences.

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<sup>62</sup> This is discussed in section 3.3.3.

#### *3.4.4 Equity of Access*

Recruiting courses at the new universities overall had admissions processes which were consistent with equity of access. Although contextual data were not taken into account consistently, it could be argued that this was unnecessary because the majority of applicants received offers of places. Where selection criteria were applied, this was to select-out students who could not successfully complete the course. Thus, attempts were made to ensure all students who could succeed on the course could enter these institutions, for example through the flexible evaluation of post-compulsory qualifications.

However, the evidence suggested that contextual data were used in a manner which would increase equity of access, this process depended on the admissions tutor contacting the central admissions office on behalf of particular applicants. Thus contextual data were not used systematically. This may have enabled some students to enter the institution ahead of others with similar levels of potential to succeed.

Furthermore, the 'open doors' approach was partly dependent on overall levels of popularity. More popular courses had more stringent entry criteria partly because of a desire to appeal to different types of consumer and increase selectivity. This is inconsistent with equity of access because entry criteria at these institutions were influenced by market factors as well as academic attainment, increasing the possibility that student potential was not the only factor determining admission<sup>63</sup>. Thus, although access among recruiting courses may have been equitable, the allocation of places within an institution may be less equitable.

Some selectors at the secondary campus at Eastern New University expressed concern that the open doors policy may not be fair to applicants, because it benefitted the institution rather than the students. Among these selectors, there was evidence of a use of informal discretion which can be explained with reference to bureaucratic drift. Where admissions officers could not change selection criteria which they felt were inappropriately low, they informally encouraged applicants to apply for sub-degree courses. Thus, although the published selection criteria were the same between the main and secondary campuses of Eastern New University, there was in fact increased

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<sup>63</sup> This is discussed more fully in section 3.3.4.

selectivity at the secondary campus, where candidates who met the entry criteria but were judged to be incapable of completing the course were asked to change their preference and apply to a sub-degree programme. The unmonitored agent was able to exercise discretion so as to meet their own preferences which diverged with those of the principal (Eisenhardt 1989; Epstein and O'Halloran 1994).

The evidence showed that these selectors were at least partly motivated by a desire to treat students fairly and promote student wellbeing, which would indicate a wish to promote justice for students in relation to the institution. However, this behaviour could be seen as inconsistent with equity of access because students with similar levels of potential were being accepted to degree courses provided by the main campus. Thus, even where admissions *policies* were consistent with equity of access, admissions *practices* could undermine this.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There is some evidence that selection priorities and practises are influenced by institutional reputation and course popularity, but market factors do not completely explain institutional selection behaviour.

**Hypothesis 1:** Selectors for popular courses at old universities will use applicants' background information to *contextualise attainment* and facilitate the entry of candidates from less privileged backgrounds.

The evidence presented here supports this hypothesis. Contextualising attainment formed a systematic part of the admissions process for Central Research University via the use of an additional form and for Northern Town University via a process which prioritised local applicants. Some admissions tutors at Central Research University also used contextual data systematically at this stage.

That the elite institution exhibited the strongest evidence of contextualising attainment is consistent with equity of access: this university is the one where increasing diversity of student might be expected to have the highest return. Due to the link between university status and graduate salary (Chevalier and Conlon 2003) contextualising attainment at this university is also a useful means for promoting social mobility. However, as the recent trend at this university had been to centralise

admissions<sup>64</sup>, and the use of contextual data was seen to a greater extent amongst academic selectors than central admissions officers, the use of contextual data is likely to decrease.

Furthermore, although contextual data were used, the primary strategy of these courses was to cream academically able candidates, particularly at Central Research University where applicant calibre was discussed to a greater extent than student potential. Thus, where contextual data were not used this was likely to impede equity of access for these courses to a greater extent than for other courses at new universities and with lower levels of popularity.

**Hypothesis 2:** Selectors for less popular courses at old universities will be *risk averse* and select students who are similar to previous intakes.

Evidence presented here partially supports this hypothesis: selectors expressed concern that admitting applicants with lower levels of attainment, even where background factors may explain this, would be unable to complete the course. However, there was no evidence that risk-aversion led less popular courses to pick ‘familiar’ applicants. Indeed, for recruiting courses at Northern Town University, there was evidence of a willingness to widen the applicant pool by eliminating specific subject requirements. Behaviour of the least popular courses at Northern Town University was in fact more consistent with opening doors, with few applicants rejected and entry requirements lowered. Thus, university reputation may not always protect courses against market pressures.

There was however, unexpected evidence of risk aversion at Southern Rural University. Alongside evidence of creaming, there was some suggestion that the university resisted attempts to raise entry requirements where possible in order to facilitate a ‘fit’ between students and institution. This was linked to student retention, demonstrating the insecurity that this apparently popular institution felt in terms of student recruitment.

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<sup>64</sup> The admissions processes of all universities are discussed more fully in Appendix 3.

That contextualising attainment was seen as unnecessary by selectors at Northern Town University, which recruited well against HESA WP benchmarks, may suggest that current student recruitment provides a better explanation for the difference in the use of contextual data. That current student recruitment patterns influence selection practices is further demonstrated by the willingness to accept Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education (CACHE) Diplomas and Access Courses by a selector at Central Research University for a popular course which recruited a large number of mature students, in contrast to other selectors at this university.

Thus, the fact that contextual data were not used may not impede equity of access to the same degree as for more popular courses at these institutions. Furthermore, the use of more flexible entry criteria for some courses in this category may facilitate equity of access by ensuring student potential is assessed independently of academic credentials. However, it is possible that the weak use of the personal statement counters this, as it places a greater degree of importance in candidate's academic data rather than their motivation and engagement with the course.

**Hypothesis 3:** Selectors for popular selecting courses at new universities will *cream* high-achieving students and give preferential offers to encourage their enrolment.

There is evidence to support this hypothesis. Selecting courses at Southern Rural University and Eastern New University used more demanding and rigid entry requirements than their recruiting counterparts.

However, creaming meant different things to these two institutions. Creaming was along academic dimensions for Southern Rural University, with a desire to raise entry requirements seen for popular courses. In contrast, creaming for the selective courses at Eastern New University did not, in all instances, result in higher academic requirements. Rather increased discretion was used to cream the best applicants who, despite lower grades, would be better for linked professions. This can be attributed to the accredited nature of these courses, and to Eastern New University's commitment to widening participation.

Furthermore, there was some evidence at Southern Rural University of a desire to maintain selection levels at lower levels rather than raise requirements. This view was

not shared by all those with admissions responsibilities, with pressure to raise requirements as the institution becoming more popular also in evidence. This could impede equity of access by changing student application patterns and directing those with lower levels of academic attainment rather than potential away from more popular courses at these universities.

However, for some staff, selectivity was seen as detrimental to widening participation and facilitating a 'fit' between students and institution. Using strong rather than weak selection, for example in the use of contextual data, was also seen as being at odds with the university's non-competitive ethos. This suggests that this new but increasingly popular university faced conflicting pressures which would eventually result in the university having to make a decision. It could either use popularity to become more selective or retain a relaxed admissions policy, in harmony with its present ethos and mission.

**Hypothesis 4:** Less popular recruiting courses at new universities will *open doors* and facilitate the entry of applicants who are unable to enter other institutions in order to fill places.

There was some evidence to support this, particularly at Eastern New University, where discretion was used to recruit applicants who would otherwise not be able to enter higher education. At Southern Rural University, requirements were less consistent with opening doors, with higher levels of selectivity in evidence.

This can partially be attributed to differences in popularity, with recruiting courses at Southern Rural University not entering clearing to the same extent as their counterparts at Eastern New University. However, it could be argued that the difference also relates to institutional ethos. This is demonstrated by the variation between different parts of Eastern New University, where open doors were accepted to a greater degree by main campus staff than by secondary campus selectors.

Administrative selectors working to reduce the extent of the open doors policy at the secondary campus of Eastern New University were at least partly motivated by an intention to be fairer to candidates, whose admission was seen to benefit the university rather than the prospective student. However, although these actions may

have been just, the result was likely to have impeded equity of access as students with similar levels of potential would be selected to degree programmes at the main campus but directed towards sub-degree programmes at the secondary campus.

Thus, the theoretical hypotheses have some power in explaining institutional behaviour, but the processes governing university selection behaviour are more complex than previously theorised. In addition to reputation and popularity, institutional ethos and individual staff preferences are important factors influencing how discretion over admissions is used. University admissions behaviour partly facilitates equity of access, as contextual data are used, where strong selection practices and difficult entry criteria exclude many students who have the potential to complete the course rather than admitting most students. However, contextual data are not used consistently across programmes. Weak selection practices may also reduce the possibility of using information to contextualise candidates' academic attainment.



## Chapter 5 **Discretion for Successful Applicants: Further Selection Stages**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will examine the admissions process for applicants who have successfully passed the initial selection stage<sup>65</sup> at the four case study universities to address the sub-research questions:

- 1a. To what extent do admissions policies and practices vary between universities as a result of differences in institutional reputation and course popularity?
- 1c. To what extent do university admissions policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?

To do so, this chapter will look at additional selection stages: interviews; how conditional offer levels are allocated; and what happens after A Level results are published.

Analyses of the further selection stages and their implications for equity of access at selecting then recruiting courses at the pre-1992 universities will be presented. These will be followed by an examination of selection processes at the post-1992 institutions for selecting and recruiting courses.

Finally, this chapter will consider if there is evidence which supports or contradicts the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2 regarding institutional selection behaviour<sup>66</sup>. The conclusion will also address whether admissions behaviour at the four institutions is likely to facilitate or impede equity of access.

### **2. Further Selection Stages**

In common with initial selection process, admissions officers and academic staff made decisions later in the admissions cycle. However, for these later selection stages, departmental members of staff played a more significant role in decision making, even at institutions which had very centralised admissions processes<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> The initial selection stage is discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>66</sup> These are restated in the chapter conclusions.

<sup>67</sup> Further details about the selection process at each case university can be found in Appendix 3.

### ***2.1 Where Discretion Can Be Exercised***

Selectors can exercise discretion at three later selection stages:

- The optional assessment processes at stage two take place after an initial sift of UCAS forms. There is usually an interview between prospective students and at least one academic member of staff. In some cases, particularly for creative arts courses, candidates are asked to present examples of their work, perform in an audition, take additional tests, or participate in a group exercise. A number of different selectors can be involved at this stage: academic staff; and, where courses are linked to a profession, current practitioners and service clients.
- At stage three, university selectors decide what requirements should be attached to candidates' offers. Candidates receiving conditional offers have to meet certain requirements to qualify for admission. These may specify that candidates achieve particular A Level subjects and grades, or meet non-academic requirements such as pass a criminal records bureau check. Selectors can theoretically raise or lower the difficulty of requirements to help or hinder the entrance of particular candidates. They may also choose to give applicants unconditional offers.
- Stage four takes place after applicants' examination results are published, which for most presenting A Levels is in August prior to academic year of entry<sup>68</sup>. Applicants who achieve offer conditions are guaranteed places, but university selectors can exercise discretion over whether or not to admit applicants who have failed to achieve offer conditions. New applicants may also be considered at this stage, to allow institutions to fill remaining places.

## **3. Market Position and Discretion**

This section will examine the impact of institutional reputation and course popularity on admissions at these later admissions stages. This chapter develops the analysis presented in the previous chapter with courses examined according to institutional reputation (whether the institution gained university status before or after 1992) and course popularity determined on the basis of the perceptions of university selectors at these institutions.

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<sup>68</sup> The results for other qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate and BTEC National Diplomas are published earlier in the year.

The interpretation of selectors as to course popularity did not alter between different stages of the admissions process. The courses included, given in Table 5.1 below, therefore have the same classification as they did for the previous chapter.

Table 5.1: Participating Courses by HEI Reputation and Course Popularity

	Selecting Course	Recruiting Course
Pre-1992 HEI	<p><b>Northern Town University:</b> 2 Medical-Related courses* (one accredited and one linked to another institution)</p> <p><b>Central Research University:</b> Courses in Creative Arts*, Social Studies, Education, Languages, Maths, and Business Studies</p>	<p><b>Northern Town University:</b> Courses in Maths, Computing, Communications* and Social Studies</p> <p><b>Central Research University:</b> Courses in Engineering and Technologies* and Biological Sciences</p>
Post-1992 HEI	<p><b>Southern Rural University:</b> Courses in Languages, Creative Arts* and Social Studies</p> <p><b>Eastern New University:</b> Three accredited courses*: Social Studies, Education, Medical-Related</p>	<p><b>Southern Rural University:</b> Creative arts courses* All other courses offered by the university</p> <p><b>Eastern New University:</b> Creative arts courses* All other courses offered by the university</p>

\* Applicants participate in a second selection stage.

### 3.1 Pre-1992 and Selecting

This group includes the majority of courses at Central Research University, except for science-related degrees, and medical related courses supplied by Northern Town University.

#### 3.1.1 Interviews

The medical-related courses at Northern Town University and a creative arts course at Central Research University interviewed a selection of applicants. Interviews were used differently among this group of courses. Selectors engaged in strong selection for the Central Research University creative arts course and the non-accredited medical related course at Northern Town University, where applicants were ranked according to interview performance. Both of these courses were more over-subscribed. In contrast, weak selection was exercised for the comparatively less popular accredited course at Northern Town University, where interview performance enabled selectors to screen out a small number of unsuitable candidates.

Interviewers for the two courses which used strong selection assessed candidates against a number of complex criteria. At Central Research University, candidates were tested to see how they behaved in a seminar environment, designed to mimic the department's teaching methods. At Northern Town University, two academics asked each interviewee the same set of questions to assess suitability for the medical profession. The aims of the interview were thus to select students who would be able to function best on the course and as professionals.

“you can get a sense of whether somebody is going to be overly domineering or reticent... we are trying to create a kind of mini-seminar” *Admissions Tutor, Creative Arts, Central Research University*

For the accredited medical related course at Northern Town University, which used weak selection, students were only rejected after interview if they displayed worrying personal behaviour. A lack of knowledge did not prevent students receiving an offer:

“there will be people... who we don't believe will actually get the A levels predicted for them... [we] assume that they won't actually be coming” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*

The difference in selection strength between these courses can be attributed to levels of popularity. Because the accredited medical related course at Northern Town had fewer applicants, only small numbers had to be eliminated to manage successful candidate numbers.

The interviews for both Northern Town University courses were used to enable selectors to assess potential, as opposed to attainment. The aim could be explicitly to widen participation, or could be discussed in terms of recruiting better students, who would achieve at university rather than school level.

“interviewing [means] that I can then recruit students who aren't necessarily 3A, 4A students... some people just don't do well with A levels” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*

Selectors for all interviewing courses also felt that the additional admissions stage could aid recruitment by conveying course quality and promote successful students' engagement with the course. As suggested by McManus et al (1999), the interview was thought to have a positive effect on recruitment by giving applicants an impression of higher course quality and exclusivity:

“[this course is] one of the best in the country... they need to jump through some hoops to get here... when they come there is a sense of commitment and energy and dedication” *Admissions Tutor, Creative Arts, Central Research University*

For the accredited course at Northern Town University the interview was explicitly used for recruitment purposes. Selectors used direct contact with applicants to sell the course, for example telling prospective applicants about career options associated with the course. This was intended to increase the number of applicants who selected the course and prevent students dropping out once enrolled.

“we don't want a high attrition rate and if we tell people about the course... they won't leave us two weeks into the course” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*

Thus, the interview was used to determine admissions outcomes, but was also an important means for increasing student recruitment and engagement. Where recruitment was a more pressing concern, promotional possibilities were given increased emphasis.

### *3.1.2 Conditional Offers*

Conditional offer levels could be lowered or raised for particular applicants, to help or hinder their entry. Such discretion, which was only observed at Central Research University, was undertaken for one of three reasons. First, selectors expressed a desire to make applicants 'equivalent' offers in terms of difficulty so that all applicants had to pass similar milestones. Second, selectors could ask applicants to compensate for less suitable qualifications in terms of subject by achieving higher grades. Finally, selectors could alter offers to recognise the impact that educational background could have on exam attainment.

Academic equivalency of candidates was determined in a number of ways. For some Central Research University courses, the standard offer required applicants to present three A Levels and an additional AS in a different subject. Where this AS Level was not presented, or where a poor result had been achieved, this could affect conditional requirements:

“if a candidate has really bombed on their fourth AS... we may actually up the offer... to forget about the fourth AS subject” *Admissions Tutor, Creative Arts, Central Research University*

Where candidates were expected to present a broad subject mix, selectors raised offer conditions for applicants presenting a narrow mix of subjects to ‘compensate’ for the poor quality of their A Level choices:

“an applicant is coming in with... a very narrow subject mix... they might find they got higher offer” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

Offers were also adjusted to take applicants’ educational background into account, recognising that candidates from different backgrounds of the same ability achieved different levels of qualifications.

“we might... [offer] lower grades on the basis that the school finds it difficult to necessarily achieve the grades of some other institutions” *Admissions Tutor, Business and Administrative Studies, Central Research University*

School policy could also be taken into account if information was given to selectors through the reference. For example, one selector dropped the AS requirement from conditional offers for applicants whose schools who did not require pupils to take an additional AS level, but increased the difficulty of the A Level part of the requirement for applicants whose schools did expect pupils to take a fourth AS. Thus, selectors could take both school characteristics and policies into account when determining applicant offer levels.

The motive for exercising discretion at this stage was similar for all selectors who varied conditional offers. The intention was to treat applicants fairly in terms of outcome. This ensured that all accepted applicants were of the same standard, even if qualifications and results were different.

However, not all selectors for popular courses at these universities adjusted conditional offers. Where no discretion was used, all successful applicants received the same conditions, equivalent to the course standard offer. Both selecting courses at Northern Town University and some at Central Research University gave candidates the same conditional offer.

This lack of discretion resulted from a variety of factors. The ability of the selector to use discretion could be hampered by a perceived lack of suitable data. Some selectors also felt that varying offer levels was unfair, with accepting candidates at lower levels than the standard offer seen as being a prelude to student failure once on the course. Here, fairness is not related to admissions process or outcome but to *compassion*, with a desire to do the right thing in terms of promoting student welfare a greater consideration than equity of treatment or access.

“it’s no good us getting applicants... [who are] not able to handle the intensity of the courses if we’re just setting them up to fail... that’s not a nice place to be”

*Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

This group of non-discretion courses includes less popular and highly oversubscribed courses. Furthermore, the fear of ‘setting applicants up to fail’ was found at both Central Research University and Northern Town University, where entry requirements were lower. Thus the level of discretion used at this stage does not vary perfectly according to reputation or to oversubscription levels.

One explanation for the difference in the use of discretion could be attributed to who is making selection decisions. All selectors who chose to vary offer levels were academics; with there being no evidence of discretion amongst administrative admissions officers at this stage. Thus, selector role and motivation may be the primary difference between discretion and non-discretion courses, with this cutting across institutional reputation and course popularity. However, it could be argued that

the lack of evidence for discretion at Northern Town University results from this institution's more diverse student body, which meant there was less need to use admissions procedures to widen access.

### 3.1.3 Clearing

None of the selecting courses at Central Research University entered clearing. For some courses selectors filled remaining places with applicants who had not achieved offer conditions. These applicants were ranked according to the distance between the offer conditions and achieved results. Clearing itself was avoided because there was a loyalty to 'known' applicants and a desire to avoid the stigma of entering a process associated more closely with newer, less popular institutions.

“there's a sort of attachment... they're yours and you want to know that everything is sorted with them” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

“if the university has aspirations to be counted in the top four or five in the country... you should be getting a very strong field of candidates” *Department Head, Social Studies, Central Research University*

The admissions tutor for the accredited medical related course at Northern Town University accepted some applicants through clearing. Although some 'missed' students who had performed well at interview were accepted, there was a preference to have some clearing spaces.

Clearing was considered desirable because it provided a source of high-attaining students. Due to its links to medicine, the course attracted high-achieving clearing applicants who had been unsuccessful in gaining entry to medical schools. Medicine degrees are competitive and have extremely demanding entry requirements; applicants with strong post-compulsory attainment may thus be forced to pursue ambitions to enter the medical profession via less-competitive related courses.

“there will be students that won't have looked at [us] ... but they've still got very good grades so we can then potentially pick up very good students” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related, Northern Town University*



Therefore, in contrast to the views expressed at Central Research University, clearing was seen as a way of ‘picking up’ better students. This partially relates to the nature of Northern Town University as a non-research intensive institution but also demonstrates that rejected students applying for medical related courses were not viewed as stereotypical clearing applicants.

#### *3.1.4 Equity of Access*

At both universities, interviews were used to prevent student attrition post-enrolment and to sell their courses and institutions. There is some evidence to suggest that this may be an effective strategy (McManus et al 1999). However, it may also impede equity of access as students from non-traditional HE participating backgrounds may avoid applying to universities which have ‘difficult’ admissions processes including interviews (Whitehead et al 2006). Therefore, interviews may influence which students apply to the course in the first instance, excluding non-traditional students from courses due to self-selection.

The use of contextual data to determine conditional offer levels at Central Research University is likely to promote equity of access. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is because evidence suggests that students with similar levels of academic attainment from different school backgrounds achieve differently at university (Hoare and Johnston 2011). Therefore, lowering offers for students according to school policy and performance is likely to encourage selection according to potential rather than attainment.

However, contextual data were not used consistently across different courses and institutions. Courses at Northern Town University did not contextualise attainment; school policy was used by some selectors at Central Research University while others used school performance. This variation may impede equity of access because the measure of student potential differed between different courses<sup>69</sup>.

It could be argued that the need to adjust conditional offers according to contextual data was lessened at Northern Town University because interviews assessed students according to potential rather than attainment. This approach facilitated the recruitment of students who might perform well at university level regardless of their academic

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<sup>69</sup> See section 3.1.4 in Chapter 4 for further discussion.

attainment in a manner consistent with equity of access. However, not following up this approach with adjusted conditional offers undermines selectors' acknowledgement that academic attainment does not reflect student potential.

The approach to clearing differed between different courses and the impact on equity of access consequently varied across degree programmes. For the accredited medical-related course at Northern Town University, spaces at clearing were filled with new applicants who could succeed on the course to a similar or better degree than accepted applicants. This is consistent with equity of access as it effectively re-opens the competition, providing an insurance policy to students who have made poor choices about HE participation to correct their mistakes.

However, the prioritisation of 'known' applicants who missed conditional offer requirements by selectors for the majority of courses in this group may not be consistent with equity of access. This is because it may prevent a student with greater potential to succeed on the course being rejected in favour of a candidate who has less potential because of the timing of their applications. Where a 'late' application does not signal candidate motivation but reflects that the decision to enter HE may be more difficult for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Pugsley 2004) this may hinder equity of access.

This approach was justified with reference to 'fairness' where it was seen to be more just to prioritise students who had applied to the university early and had committed to the institution. This demonstrates that equity of access and fairness and not synonymous concepts.

### ***3.2 Pre-1992 and Recruiting***

This group of courses includes all non-medical related courses at the less-oversubscribed Northern Town University and the science-based courses at Central Research University.

#### ***3.2.1 Interviews***

Media and communications courses at Northern Town University and engineering and technology courses at Central Research University interviewed applicants. For these courses, which had a technical or creative element, candidates were asked a 'stock set'

of questions and were invited to discuss portfolios or projects undertaken at school with an academic interviewer.

For Northern Town University courses, the majority of applicants were interviewed while at Central Research University a sample of candidates was interviewed. This reflects differences in numbers of applicants per place. The engineering and technology courses at Central Research University were more oversubscribed than the interviewing courses at Northern Town University, which needed to enter clearing to a much greater degree.

Interviews for these recruiting courses did not use strong selection. Initial screening for Central Research University courses and a lack of applicants for Northern Town University courses meant that numbers were sufficiently manageable for almost all applicants to receive offers. Therefore, only a small number of unacceptable candidates were screened out.

However, selection strength differed between the two institutions. Applicants at Northern Town University were given offers despite interview performance. In contrast, those who were unable to communicate effectively could be rejected from Central Research University, as it was felt their presence would damage student attainment:

“if you are unable at all to make to make yourself understood ... not only are you not going to succeed you are potentially going to make it difficult for others”  
*Admissions Tutor, Engineering and Technologies, Central Research University*

Thus, selection was not the primary aim of interviews for recruiting courses at Northern Town University. It could be argued that this stemmed from the low numbers of applicants. However, selectors also showed uncertainty about the efficacy of the interview for assessing students and were concerned that strong selection would prevent the admission of an heterogeneous, balanced group of students:

“we don’t want to just produce people in one sort of mould” *Department Head, Media and Communications, Northern Town University*

The concept of ‘fit’ between student and course was an important factor explored by interviewers for recruiting courses. The interview was an opportunity to ensure that candidates were ‘on the right course’, with applicants directed to alternative degree programmes within the department if selectors judged there to be a mismatch<sup>70</sup>. The interview could thus aid recruitment for less popular courses. Seeking fit was important to reduce tension between students and departmental staff and to ensure students were more engaged with the course once enrolled.

“if students... understand more about the structure of our course then if they become as students they are more motivated and they are happier” *Admissions Tutor, Engineering and Technologies, Central Research University*

Although the interview was seen to aid recruitment by some selectors, this impression was not universally held. In one case, an admissions tutor felt interviews hindered student recruitment by slowing down the rate at which offers could be made and had stopped interviewing candidates. Removing the interview was easy because it had not informed admissions decisions, meaning its sole function was to promote recruitment.

“the ... interview was slightly farcical because if people didn’t come ... we made them an offer anyway” *Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

Thus, in comparison to some more popular courses at the pre-1992 universities, the interview was more a recruitment than a selection tool. It was used to encourage applicants to become happy, motivated and enrolled students. It could therefore be argued that the difference in emphasis both within this group and in comparison to the more popular courses resulted from a difference in course popularity.

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<sup>70</sup> The media and communications courses had both artistic and technical ‘streams’ while the engineering and technology department offered both bachelors programmes and degrees which led to a postgraduate qualification.

### 3.2.2 Conditional Offers

There was evidence of discretion being used to vary offer levels, with some selectors raising or lowering conditional offers for particular applicants. This was intended to equalise offers and compensate for lower or higher levels of achievement<sup>71</sup>.

However, for some courses at Northern Town University, offers were lowered for reasons of academic potential in a way which did not necessarily relate to students' contextual information. This judgement was arrived at by an admissions tutor, either as the principal selector or following referral of the application from an administrative officer. Academic potential was identified via the candidate's personal statement and a discussion of their abilities in the school reference.

“[if the] referee says... ‘this is a very good student, they’ve shown great aptitude in their sociology class’... I might offer them... a conditional offer [which matches their predicted points]” *Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

Some Northern Town University selectors also expressed a desire to change selection policies to allow offers to be lowered to recognise candidates' extra-curricular activities or hobbies. Where these activities were relevant to the course, selectors argued that they could be viewed as equivalent to a certain number of UCAS points. Lowering offers in these circumstances was justified with reference to outcome fairness, with candidates' extra-curricular work seen as equivalent to post-compulsory qualifications.

“in an ideal world... we could reduce [the conditional offer] if they showed particular aptitude in an area that didn't map out onto UCAS points [on the tariff]” *Department Head, Media and Communications, Northern Town University*

There was also evidence of offers being raised for students presenting 'odd' subject combinations at Central Research University. However, rather than compensate for poor subjects, a higher offer was seen as necessary to screen out applicants who might change to a more popular course once they had enrolled.

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<sup>71</sup> These reasons were given for the use of contextual data for selecting courses as discussed in section 3.1.2.

“For those candidates with... an unusual mixture of A levels... we might... ask for [higher grades]... It’s of no use to us if they accept us... and then after three weeks they go off and do English” *Admissions Tutor, Biological Sciences, Central Research University*

Evidence of offers being lowered for students to take account of contextual data was found at Central Research University. In common with popular courses at this institution, this acknowledged that students achieving similar qualifications were not necessarily of equal calibre if they came from different social and educational backgrounds.

In contrast, contextual data were not used to determine offer levels at Northern Town University. As well as demonstrating reluctance to use contextual data, in common with more selecting courses, this lack of discretion was justified with reference to course popularity. With significant numbers of students being selected both before and after the A Level results were published, the need for contextualising attainment was lessened:

“we haven’t been... able to reject lots of students anyway, so I don’t think positive discrimination... has ever really been... an option” *Department Head, Media and Communications, Northern Town University*

Thus, there were differences between courses in the way discretion was used that this stage which relate to institutional reputation and course popularity. However, selectors’ motivations were also important as different reasons were given for raising and lowering offers by selectors working for courses with similar market conditions.

### 3.2.3 Clearing

For all recruiting programmes at the pre-1992 universities, candidates who failed to achieve offer conditions were considered once results were known. However, the amount of discretion involved at this selection stage varied between courses.

At Central Research University, strong selection was used to determine which applicants would receive places from the cohort of those who ‘missed’ target grades,

with these courses avoiding clearing itself. Ranking criteria included mitigating circumstances, subject combinations and how narrowly offer conditions had been missed. At Northern Town University less discretion was exercised. Applicants who missed target grades were automatically confirmed in their offer if they achieved a new ‘clearing benchmark’ which was set below the original standard offer.

This new benchmark, which was the same for new and existing candidates, was set according to the numbers of empty places which needed to be filled. Academic factors, such as whether the applicant could complete the course, were not dominant at this stage of the admissions process for determining access. This led to some unease about this selection stage amongst academic members of staff.

‘I am deeply unhappy about taking students at that lower grade’ *Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Northern Town University*

Thus, discretion at this stage for the Northern Town University courses was dictated by economic considerations while selector preferences played a stronger role at Central Research University. This difference can be attributed to the relative popularity of these courses.

#### *3.2.4 Equity of Access*

The interviews for these less popular courses were designed to facilitate recruitment rather than select-in capable students. Nonetheless, as discussed for the selecting courses at old universities, interviews may have influenced which students applied to the course thus impeding equity of access. This would suggest that removing interviews where they do not inform the selection decision may remove a potential constraint on applicant choices which may be associated with candidates’ backgrounds (Whitehead et al 2006).

However, interviews did facilitate the selection of students according to potential where they tested students’ motivation for the course and evaluated attributes linked to applicants’ ability to succeed which were not contained on the UCAS form. For example, using interviews to exclude candidates who could not communicate and who could therefore not succeed on the engineering and technology courses at Central Research University was consistent with equity of access because it allowed students

to be selected according to potential. Therefore, interviews may influence candidates' choices but may be necessary for an equitable selection process where attributes related to potential are assessed. The balance between these two phenomena will vary between different contexts.

In common with the selecting courses at the old universities, contextual data were used to facilitate the entry of students according to potential rather than attainment. This could influence conditional offer requirements in a manner consistent with equity of access as the benchmark which students needed to meet to qualify for entry was adjusted according to educational background. There was also evidence that potential unrelated to educational or social context also informed the setting of conditional offers. Candidates who were predicted to under-perform at A Level could receive a lower offer of admission if the selector judged them to have sufficient potential to succeed on the course in a manner consistent with equity of access.

However, as for selecting courses at these institutions, the use of contextual data to measure potential varied between different courses. This can be seen to reflect differences in selector preferences. Although this may not be important when considering equity of access for one course, it may influence equity of access to an institution as selector subjectivity plays a strong role in determining which students receive offers. A student who applied unsuccessfully to one degree programme might have been successful had they applied to a different course at the same institution because of a difference in selector preferences rather than their capabilities.

In terms of clearing, new applicants were considered to a much greater degree for these recruiting courses than for selecting courses at the same institutions. Although this practice is consistent with equity of access within a degree programme, it may indicate that access across the degree programmes at these universities is not. New entrants at clearing may be directed to particular programmes and have a constrained choice set as a result of the timing of their applications rather than their potential.

### ***3.3 Post-1992 and Selecting***

These courses included programmes in nationally popular subjects at Southern Rural University, which staff labelled 'prime courses', and accredited courses at Eastern New University which trained students for professional careers.



### 3.3.1 Interviews

All selecting courses at Eastern New University interviewed applicants, as did two prime courses in creative arts at Southern Rural University, which had performance-related elements. At Eastern New University, interviews were mandated by accrediting bodies, but selectors showed a strong preference for their use. In each case, interviews and performance tests were designed to assess candidates against complex criteria to gain information about their suitability for the course.

Several academic members of staff were involved in selection decisions for all of these courses. For the accredited courses, professionals and service users could also play a role in the assessment of candidates.

Although interviews were used at both post-1992 institutions, the reason for the interview and the role it played in the selection process varied. At Eastern New University, the tests determined whether an applicant would be suitable for a linked profession. At Southern Rural University, additional selection stages were used to assess candidates' practical performance in the course subject. Interviews were thus useful selection tools because the tested attributes related to skill and potential rather than the characteristics given on the UCAS form.

“some of our most outstanding students who actually progress really well... are sometimes ones who arrive with the lowest academic profiles” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Education, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Although interviews had the impact of managing over-sized applicant pools at Eastern New University, this was not given as a reason for using them. Conversely, at Southern Rural University, the additional selection stages were used to reduce the applicant pool to a manageable level. Although the mixture of additional submitted work, auditions and interviews was used to screen out applicants rather than cream the best of the pool, this was necessary to control numbers.

One selector used contextual data to equalise the assessment of both more privileged and disadvantaged applicants at this stage. This was undertaken to level the playing field as school background was felt to disadvantage certain candidates:

“independent school children... haven't gone through a normal national curriculum [and] don't have the same level of understanding [about an interview question]... I wouldn't hold it against them” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Education, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

That this selector used contextual information could be attributed personal preference. However, it could also relate to the nature of the department or discipline. As an academic working in the field of education, this selector had links with schools and teachers, engendering a strong understanding of the ways in which educational context could influence candidates' performance.

Thus, selectors used interviews to facilitate the enrolment of students who could perform well on the course. Although selectors felt that additional selection might promote recruitment, increasing conversions was not the primary objective. This can be attributed to the relative popularity of these courses.

### 3.3.2 *Conditional Offers*

Administrative officers, who made decisions at this stage for selecting courses at Southern Rural University and the main campus of Eastern New University, did not exercise discretion at this stage. All successful applicants received the same standard offer. This standardisation was thought beneficial and necessary for several reasons unrelated to course characteristics. The key aim was to promote the subjective wellbeing or happiness (Dolan and White 2007) of students and staff. Standardisation aided university teachers by ensuring all students were at a minimum level prior to admission, made admissions staff members' jobs easier from a technical and emotional perspective and enabled staff to avoid student complaints:

“if you were sitting next to someone who had had an offer of two Ds and you'd been asked for two Bs, you'd be a little bit annoyed” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

However, market factors were also important. At Southern Rural University admissions staff felt it was safer to offer similar conditional offers and exercise

discretion during the clearing stage when it was known whether there were places available rather than risk over-recruiting students:

“tutors... are more willing to be flexible at results time... earlier in the year they don’t know how well they’ll recruit, so they don’t want us to make [lower] offers to people that have the lower results” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

However, courses at the secondary campus of Eastern New University did use discretion at this stage, with course offers lowered where an acceptable candidate could not achieve the standard offer. In these cases, applicants were referred to academic staff members to determine suitability for the course, or had been evaluated by academic staff during a second selection stage.

Although *administrative* officers for these courses preferred to give the standard offer to all applicants, an *academic* admissions tutor for a course systematically raised and lowered offers for applicants. Applicants who performed poorly at interview were given higher offers, which were designed to motivate them to work hard and earn their place. A lower offer was given to candidates who performed well at interview. This was communicated to applicants in a personal letter to encourage their enrolment:

“if it's a really good candidate we want them to come to us... suddenly a handwritten letter arrives from me saying ‘congratulations, you really did make a wonderful impression on us and this is reflected in the offer’, they suddenly have a big smile on their face” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Education, Eastern New University*

Here discretion was exercised in order to promote the entry of high-performing candidates, rather than to equalise offers. In contrast with other selectors in this group, there was no reticence that this might be resented by students following enrolment. Candidates were told clearly why their offer conditions were lower than expected.

It could be argued that this was made possible because of the interview stage, which involved a number of different assessments. However, this description of the selection

process could equally describe other selective, interviewing courses which did not use discretion at this stage. Thus, the difference in discretion between this course and similar courses at these institutions can be attributed to the personal attributes of this admissions tutor, who had undertaken research with teachers and students to determine whether discretion would be received well by applicants.

### 3.3.3 Clearing

For selecting courses at new universities, there was evidence that less discretion was exercised over the acceptance of missed applicants in comparison to recruiting courses at these institutions. None of the courses in this group routinely entered clearing. This can be partly attributed to popularity as places were filled without clearing, and partly as a result of loyalty towards applicants who had shown a commitment to the course and university.

“last year... I’d got a choice between a student who applied to us through clearing [who had initially rejected the course] and a student who missed [their offer]... as it was I offered the place to the student who had actually accepted us” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Education, Eastern New University Secondary Campus*

However, for the accredited courses at Eastern New University, which had complicated second selection stages, avoiding clearing was also seen as easier than accepting new applicants. In order to qualify for admission, clearing candidates would have to complete interview stage assessments which selectors felt would be impossible to ensure were comparable to tests undertaken by the accepted cohort.

For some courses, spaces were available after A Level results had been published. This was of greater concern for selecting courses at the new universities compared to the pre-1992 institutions. The selecting courses at Eastern New University had pressures to meet targets because, as numerus clausus courses, target student numbers were set by external bodies and were thus inflexible. Southern Rural University, which attracted middle class students, faced the problem of candidates who had achieved better than expected results asking to be released so that they could apply to more prestigious institutions.

“so many people... want to be released because they’ve done better and we’ve also had the snotty ones going ‘Oh, did you really think she was going to come to you’” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

For these courses, strong selection methods were used to allocate places. Applicants who missed conditional offers were ranked according to academic attainment, particularly in subjects linked to the degree course, interview performance where possible and mitigating circumstances. Thus, where there were spaces to fill, discretion was high, with candidates ranked in a strong selection process. However, for many courses discretion was not possible at this stage because there were no course spaces left to fill.

### 3.3.4 Equity of Access

It could be argued that the way in which interviews were used for these courses was more consistent with equity of access than for some of the pre-1992 institutions’ courses. The interviews were used to select students according to their performance in an area related to the degree programme or associated profession rather than to stimulate recruitment and student engagement. As these attributes could not be evaluated on the basis of information on the UCAS form, the interviews were useful for assessing potential. Therefore, although they may have influenced candidates’ course choices, student potential as indicated by interview performance rather than academic attainment determined admissions outcomes in a manner consistent with equity of access.

Furthermore, there was evidence that contextual information was used to equalise selectors’ evaluation of candidates’ performance. Although this may facilitate equity of access by allowing applicants’ capability to be assessed independently of their background, the manner in which it is used is likely to vary between selectors. This is demonstrated by the different approaches taken between interviewers for this group.

Similar variation was shown for the use of contextual data at the pre-1992 universities. However, dissimilarity between selectors may be particularly important for equity of access to these courses because several different individuals interviewed applicants for the same degree programme. Thus, selector preferences and the use of contextual data may have differed *within* courses. This is likely to result in applicants’

potential being assessed differently depending on which selectors are involved in the assessments, which is not consistent with equity of access.

However, there was evidence that selectors were aware of this problem and had taken steps to counter it. For example, the accredited medical-related course at Eastern New University used a 'stock set' of questions which were asked of all candidates to try and ensure all applicants had the same tests.

For most courses, contextual data and student potential did not play a role in determining conditional offer levels, which may impede equity of access by increasing the importance of candidates' A Level attainment in the admissions process. However, where evidence suggested variation in conditional offers, it could be argued that this was consistent with equity of access. Conditional offers were lowered on the basis of student potential identified through interview performance. Thus, although the intention was to facilitate the recruitment of high-performing students, this would allow students with potential to succeed on the course who under-performed at A Level to enter the institution.

In common with courses at the pre-1992 universities, students who missed conditional offers were used to fill spaces at clearing. This approach would prevent students from enrolling on the course because of the timing of their application rather than their potential to succeed. However, for these courses it could be argued that this was consistent with equity of access because it was unfeasible to arrange selection tests which were similar to those delivered during the main admissions round, meaning that student potential could not be assessed in the same way. Thus, filling places with known applicants was more consistent with equity of access for these degree programmes than for other courses considered for this research.

### ***3.4 Post-1992 and Recruiting***

This group included the majority of courses at Eastern New University and nationally less popular degrees at Southern Rural University, such as science-based courses.

#### ***3.4.1 Interviews***

Recruiting courses with a performance or creative element at both new universities involved a second selection round where applicants' technical and creative aptitude

was assessed via audition or portfolio inspection. None of the admissions officers or tutors for creative courses at Eastern New University participated in this research. Two selectors for creative courses at Southern Rural University, one academic and one administrative, were included. Here, it was felt that an interview stage was necessary to test qualities which could not be assessed via the UCAS form alone:

“there’s nothing on the UCAS form that would substitute in my view for the live audition” *Department Head, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

There was some evidence that academic selectors did use contextual data to temper their ranking of applicants to recognise that educational background could affect candidates’ performance. For example, details about the amount of contact time pupils had with teachers could help contextualise portfolio calibre. However, this did not occur evenly across the courses in this category.

“there probably have been occasions when [context has] been discussed... It’s probably more common for that to happen on other courses... other courses have more variability in terms of the background of their applicants” *Department Head, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

Thus, although discretion could be used by all courses, it occurred less often where the applicant pool was more homogeneous. Some creative arts courses recruited very few students from less advantaged backgrounds, reducing the opportunities for contextualising attainment.

In common with interviews across the case institutions, selectors used the opportunity to ‘sell’ the course and university. This was particularly important for the creative arts courses where, as well as universities, specialist providers such as conservatoires and art colleges were competing for students:

“a lot of the applicants that come to us will also be going to interview and audition at our competitors as well... the interview is an opportunity for us to actually have a personal chat” *Department Head, Creative Arts, Southern Rural University*

Academic selectors also saw the interview as an opportunity to direct ‘less suitable’ applicants to a lower level course, such as the less popular foundation degrees. In consequence, applicants deemed as unsuitable on the basis of their UCAS forms were interviewed. Foundation degree staff attended interviews, gave feedback to candidates and discussed the foundation degrees to increase recruitment for these less popular courses.

The recruiting element of the interview was thus slightly more robust for less popular courses, in particular foundation degrees, demonstrating the role that selection practices could play in promoting recruitment where necessary.

#### *3.4.2 Conditional Offers*

Most of these recruiting courses did not use discretion to vary the conditional offer. Due to the centralised nature of the admissions process, the same staff members made selection decisions for both selecting and recruiting courses at the new universities. The reluctance to avoid discretion resulted from a desire to promote staff and student wellbeing as previously discussed. This motive was also seen in staff working solely for recruiting courses at these institutions.

There was however some evidence that discretion was used to lower offers for particularly desirable students following a second selection round. Candidates who had already achieved their qualifications and could not meet standard requirements were given conditions which varied from the generic offer. This suggests there was only willingness to vary offers where it was necessary.

Therefore, the level of discretion exercised was low for both selecting and recruiting courses at these institutions, except where academics made selection decisions. This suggests that selection practices do not solely relate to market factors, but depend on who makes selection decisions in terms of role and personal preferences.

#### *3.4.3 Clearing*

The use of discretion at clearing varied between recruiting and selecting courses at the new institutions. Additionally, the level of discretion used varied between Southern Rural University and Eastern New University, with evidence of higher discretion being used at the former compared to the latter institution.



At Southern Rural University, some courses entered clearing but even in this recruiting group of courses many did not need to. As for more popular courses, selectors preferred to fill places with applicants missing their grades who had originally been accepted, rather than re-open the competition. This was because selectors preferred applicants with whom the university had a pre-existing relationship as they had undertaken necessary pre-enrolment administrative tasks, such as applying for accommodation. It was also felt that existing candidates were more likely to enrol and stay on at the institution than clearing applicants.

“if they firmly accepted an offer... they are kind of committed to us... so [it’s] for retention purposes really” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, for the least popular courses, including foundation degrees, applicants were brought in via clearing. Clearing was also an important source of students for Eastern New University, which was overall less popular than Southern Rural University and consequently had more capacity to fill at this stage.

The clearing process was similar at the two institutions, although what selectors looked for differed slightly between them. At both universities new applicants needed to meet a clearing benchmark, in which case they could receive an offer from a non-academic staff member. Candidates who did not meet these requirements could be approved for admission by an academic admissions tutor. However, the level of professional involvement was higher at Southern Rural University, where admissions staff made all decisions. At Eastern New University, temporary clearing workers, who could be current students or the children of staff members, were authorised to make offers to applicants meeting the clearing benchmark.

At both institutions, applicants who had missed their grades but who had originally chosen selecting courses were given an alternative offer for a recruiting course. Thus, the additional selection round was used to balance student numbers, by swelling the applicant pool for less popular degrees. Which course an applicant was directed to depended on their interests and academic performance:

“if they’ve got... a B in [a language course] and D in [a media course] we’d probably sway them towards a combined [languages and media/communications]

award. If it's the other way round we'd... offer them media" *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

For both new universities the nature of the selection for recruiting courses at this stage was weak. Applicants who achieved more than the clearing benchmark were offered places and were not ranked in order of preference. However, at Southern Rural University, the new clearing benchmark was kept as close as possible to original requirements, with more popular courses maintaining higher requirements. At Eastern New University the clearing benchmark was the same for all recruiting courses: 80 UCAS points lower than the original standard offer<sup>72</sup>.

There was some concern that the clearing benchmark at Eastern New University was insufficiently demanding to ensure that only successful students were admitted to courses. This view was expressed in particular by selectors at the secondary campus:

“are we getting people who shouldn't be here on the courses just so we don't lose them?” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

The low entry requirements were thus seen as a result of Eastern New University's reluctance to reject students. This may relate to Eastern New University's overall levels of popularity, as this institution had the most places to fill at clearing of the four case institutions. However, the admissions officer who felt entry requirements were too low was also concerned that the university was in danger of over-recruiting:

“[a senior manager] has said... just keep recruiting. Well hang on there's a financial penalty to the university if we over recruit” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

Therefore, the reluctance to reject students may instead reflect this university's access 'mission', and a desire to admit as many students as possible to higher education who wanted to study:

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<sup>72</sup> All of these courses also had the same standard offer as discussed in the previous chapter. 80 UCAS points is equivalent to one C grade at A Level.

“it’s always been an access institution... we could move up the league table if we were to increase our entry requirements... [But] we like doing what we do”  
*Marketing Manager, Eastern New University*

Thus the level of discretion used between the new universities varied, with selectors at Southern Rural University applying more selective criteria than those at Eastern New University. At Southern Rural University, criteria were used to cream the best of the applicant pool while Eastern New University’s clearing benchmark was not solely determined by market factors, but was used to increase access to higher education.

#### *3.4.4 Equity of Access*

In common with the interviews for selecting courses at the post-1992 universities, interviews for these recruiting courses were used to assess candidates according to their potential in areas which could not be evaluated via UCAS form information. Thus, as discussed in section 3.3.4, although interviews may influence candidate choices, it could be argued that their use was consistent with equity of access because they were used to evaluate candidates’ ability to succeed on the course. Furthermore, contextual data could play a role in candidate evaluation, facilitating equity of access by allowing admissions outcomes to reflect applicants’ potential rather than attainment or performance.

However, as previously demonstrated, the way in which contextual data were used could vary between courses within the same department. Here the variation was attributed to different course clientele. Courses with a heterogeneous applicant pool had a greater capacity to take account of contextual data than courses where most applicants were from affluent, educationally-advantaged backgrounds. Thus, the use of contextual data varied according to opportunity rather than selector preference. Although the admissions practices may therefore not impede equity of access, this may indicate that the applicant pool is shaped by the marketing mix<sup>73</sup> in a manner inconsistent with equity of access.

In common with selecting courses at the new universities, contextual data did not play a role in the allocation of conditional offers. However, it could be argued that this was

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 7 for further details.

less necessary than for the old institutions because a new lowered 'clearing' benchmark was applied to courses which had spaces, reducing the importance of conditional offer levels in determining admissions outcomes. However, the increased emphasis placed on academic attainment as opposed to potential may impede equity of access, as discussed for selecting courses at these institutions.

As the previous section suggests, the clearing benchmark for courses at Eastern New University were set to the same level for new applicants and those who had applied during the main admissions round and had missed their grades. This is consistent with equity of access as new applicants were considered against the same criteria as existing candidates, meaning that admissions outcomes were influenced by selection criteria rather than application timing.

However, it could be argued that the preference for existing candidates shown by selectors at Southern Rural University would facilitate equity of access given their justification for the practice. Selectors suggested that existing candidates were more likely to persist with their chosen institution and course than new clearing applicants. Applicants who are less likely to drop out do have a greater potential to succeed on the course, regardless of A Level attainment, and prioritising their selection is thus consistent with equity of access.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There is some evidence that institutional reputation and course popularity are important factors in determining selection procedures in the manner hypothesised in Chapter 2.

**Hypothesis 1:** Selectors for popular courses at old universities will use applicants' background information to *contextualise attainment* and facilitate the entry of candidates from less privileged backgrounds.

For Central Research University, there was some evidence to support this hypothesis, as student background could inform offer conditions and be taken into account if requirements had been missed. The presence of an additional form to communicate applicant disadvantage, which was not found at the other universities, facilitated this process. This is likely to facilitate equity of access, particularly given Central

Research University's overall strategy was to *cream* the best applicants. Because candidates were evaluated in accordance with academic attainment rather than potential to a greater extent than at other institutions, it could be argued that contextualising attainment was more necessary than for other courses and institutions.

However, there was no evidence of contextualising attainment at Northern Town University. This may result from Northern Town University's admission of a wider range of students from different backgrounds than Central Research University, meaning the use of contextual data was unnecessary. However, the evidence suggests that selectors did not contextualise attainment because it was seen as synonymous with affirmative action, which they felt was unfair. This demonstrates that measures to facilitate equity of access may not be used because they are perceived to be contrary to procedural fairness.

There was also unexpected evidence that both selecting and recruiting courses at Eastern New University and Southern Rural University could take applicants' backgrounds into account during interviews, with applicants' backgrounds used to contextualise their performance. This did not always facilitate the entry of less-affluent students, but is consistent with equity of access as it permits candidates' potential rather than their performance to inform selection decisions.

**Hypothesis 2:** Selectors for less popular courses at old universities will be *risk averse* and select students who are similar to previous intakes (Francis et al 1993).

There was no evidence that recruiting courses at the old universities used risk-averse selection procedures. At Central Research University, selectors used contextual data in a way which informed the setting of conditional offers. Although contextual data were not used at Northern Town University, the findings suggest that the observed actions cannot be attributed to the risk aversion of selectors given the degree to which new, more risky applicants were accepted at clearing. That contextual data did not influence conditional offer requirements may therefore reflect Northern Town University's strong intake of students from non-traditional HE participating backgrounds as discussed in the previous section.

Similarly, the fact that some recruiting courses did not take contextual data into account at Central Research University suggests that differences in admissions behaviour between selecting and recruiting courses may be explained by considering the individual preferences of the selectors rather than course popularity. In particular, admissions tutors appeared more willing overall to contextualise attainment than admissions officers.

This suggests that personal preference and the selector's role may influence selection behaviour in a manner which may not facilitate equity of access. Therefore, although contextualising attainment does promote the possibility of selection according to potential rather than attainment, the overall influence of individual preference may prevent equity of access across different courses. As contextual data are used differently by various selectors, a students' chance of entering a particular institution may depend on who is making the selection decisions rather than students' potential to succeed on the course.

**Hypothesis 3:** Selectors for popular selecting courses at new universities will *cream* high-achieving students and give preferential offers to encourage their enrolment.

There was evidence that admissions practices for selecting courses at both new universities were used to cream the best applicants. After A Level results were published, applicants were ranked according primarily to academic criteria, with high achievers more likely to secure places than those with lower grades. Therefore, the evidence suggests that higher numbers of applicants per place did facilitate selectivity.

Both universities showed a desire to avoid clearing, and preferred to select existing candidates rather than opening the competition to new applicants. Although the desire to avoid clearing shown at Southern Rural University could demonstrate this more popular institution's desire to raise its reputational standing, selectors' discussed their desire to fill places with existing candidates because they were more likely to 'fit' with the university and be satisfied with their choice. In contrast, at Eastern New University clearing was avoided because it was deemed unfeasible to organise selection tests which would mirror the competition candidates entered during the main admissions round.

It could be argued that this might impede equity of access by prioritising students according to the timing of their application rather than their potential. However, the justification for prioritising existing candidates does not support this interpretation. Choosing candidates who have undergone similar selection tests is likely to facilitate equity of access by ensuring that potential has been measured in the same way for all applicants. Facilitating the selection of candidates who are more likely to be satisfied with their chosen course is also consistent with equity of access, as it recognises that motivation and wellbeing influence candidates' potential to succeed on the course.

However, it could be argued that risk aversion reduced creaming opportunities at the new universities. Unlike selective courses at Northern Town University, clearing was not used to cherry pick new but high attaining applicants. For both selecting and recruiting courses, preference was given to known applicants from the original pool, even where they were potentially lower achievers, because they were seen as safer prospects in terms of enrolment and completion.

**Hypothesis 4:** Less popular recruiting courses at new universities will *open doors* and facilitate the entry of applicants who are unable to enter other institutions in order to fill places.

There was evidence to support the above hypothesis among recruiting courses at the new universities as clearing benchmarks at both universities were lowered according to course popularity. Courses with more places to fill had lower entry requirements after the A Level results had been published that those which had more applicants. This would to promote applicants' access to higher education in a manner consistent with opening doors. However, at Eastern New University in particular, the justification for this approach was not just to fill empty places. Selectors suggested that lower requirements were used to promote the university's access mission, which is discussed further when examining institutional recruitment policies<sup>74</sup>.

This approach could be argued to promote equity of access because it enables students to enter higher education who have the potential to succeed but who have lower levels of academic attainment. Similarly, that the competition for places was opened to new

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<sup>74</sup> Recruitment policies are discussed in Chapter 7.

applicants would facilitate the admission of students according to their potential rather than the timing of their application.

However, although opening doors may facilitate equity of access, some selectors argued that to lower entry requirements in the manner described was unfair to students as it allowed some candidates who could not complete the course to enter the institution. Therefore, although the allocation of places for each course may have been fair, the needs of the students were not adequately recognised. Thus, selectors felt that the allocation of places benefited the university at the extent of its students in an unjust manner.

Therefore, market conditions do influence institutional behaviour. Although the effects are mediated by institutional ethos and selectors' roles and preferences, selecting courses tend to cream applicants while recruiting courses open doors to students with lower levels of achievement. This dynamic would ultimately direct students with lower levels of attainment to less popular courses and those with higher levels of attainment to more popular courses, which may not be consistent with equity of access. However, some actions on the part of selectors such as the use of contextual data and interviews to assess potential could mitigate this effect. Nonetheless, human as well as market factors play an important role in institutional selection behaviour and this may impede equity of access by allowing applicants' admission to be determined by selector preferences rather than candidates' potential to succeed on the course.



## Chapter 6 **Direct Selection: Help and Hindrance via Conditional Offers**

### 1. Introduction

This chapter investigates to what extent university admissions policies and practices are affected by institutional reputation and course popularity and how this facilitates equity of access. Specifically, the chapter will present an analysis of data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)<sup>75</sup> to examine:

- 1b. How are university reputation and course popularity associated with admissions outcomes?
- 1c. To what extent do university admissions policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?

Specifically, universities' admissions behaviour in terms of the use of *conditional offers* will be analysed.

The chapter gives a brief overview of the use of conditional offers for admissions purposes, before discussing the methodology and data used for the analysis, to help with the interpretation of the results. The results of three models are then presented, all of which examine different types of variation in the use of conditional offers.

The first model presented shows what factors are associated with, and whether there is or is not evidence that course selectors vary conditional offers between different candidates. Having identified *which* courses vary conditional offers between applicants, two models which look at *how* the conditional offers are used will be examined. The second model therefore looks at what factors are associated with an application being given a 'helpful' offer which assists entry to the course; the third examines what factors are associated with the receipt of a 'hindrance' offer which makes entry to the course more difficult for the applicant.

Finally, the chapter will discuss whether the results suggest that universities' admissions policies facilitate or impede equity of access before presenting conclusions about how conditional offers are used in the admissions process.

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<sup>75</sup> Further details about the UCAS data set provided for this research are available in Chapter 3.

## 2. Conditional Offers

University selectors (academic tutors and administrative officers) can use conditional offers to facilitate or obstruct the entry of students to higher education courses. As discussed in the previous chapter, university selectors who decide to admit applicants on the basis of information gathered in the first two selection stages (an evaluation of the UCAS form and an optional interview assessment), can choose to give successful applicants 'conditional' offers to enrol on the course. This is necessary in most cases because most candidates apply to enter higher education before they have completed post-compulsory qualifications such as A Levels.

Therefore, university selectors generally allocate conditional offers, which stipulate what grades and other requirements an applicant has to meet to secure their place. As the previous chapter shows, selectors can make one of three different types of offer. Applicants can receive the 'standard offer' which is generally advertised in university prospectuses. Alternatively, university selectors are at liberty to raise or lower requirements so that they vary from the standard offer, thus obstructing or facilitating the entry of the applicant respectively.

The results of the qualitative analyses presented in the previous chapter suggest that there are strong incentives for university selectors to give standard offers to all applicants, in particular this is seen as being 'fairer' to staff and students. However, there was also evidence that some selectors do vary offers to help and hinder particular applicants, with selectors at the research-intensive, highly competitive university more inclined to do this than their counterparts at other institutions.

To test how generalisable this finding is, this chapter tests the null hypothesis: conditional offer levels do not vary between applicants according to academic and background characteristics.

### 3. Methodology: Data, Sampling and Analyses

The data used for these analyses were obtained from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and cover students who were seeking to enter higher education in the 2006/07 academic year<sup>76</sup>.

#### 3.1 The Sample

UCAS supplied data for 16,000 home-domiciled applicants who were taking A Level qualifications only and were aged between 17 and 20 on 1 September 2006. Sampled applicants presented AS, A2 (full A Level), vocational ‘A Levels’ (AVCEs) and double AVCE qualifications. Further details about the sample are given in Chapter 3.

The sample, which is stratified by socio-economic status, differs in composition from a random probability sample. The differences between the population of prospective students and that contained in the sample are shown in Table 6.1<sup>77</sup>.

Table 6.1: Population and Sample of UCAS Applicants for 2006/07 Entry

	Population <sup>78</sup>	Sample
<b>Parental Occupation (SES)</b>		
Higher Managerial/Professional	67,250	2,000
Lower Managerial/Professional	97,668	2,000
Intermediate	46,518	2,000
Lower Supervisory/Technical	24,524	2,000
Semi-Routine	15,113	2,000
Routine	45,661	2,000
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	19,490	2,000
Unknown SES	115,972	2,000
<b>Total</b>	432,196	16,000

As previous research shows that applicants’ *predicted* grades are important for the purposes of university selection (Germon and Gro 1993), it was deemed important to obtain data on candidates’ predicted grades, as well as the results they eventually achieved for their qualifications.

<sup>76</sup> This system of student finance reflects the arrangements that were in place at the time of the primary qualitative research and writing.

<sup>77</sup> Applications to institutions across the UK (including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) were included, as tests demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of discretion between institutions located in different countries, for any of the models presented.

<sup>78</sup> Data from UCAS statistical services (UCAS 2011f). This information was used to construct weights for this analysis.

Applicants applying to enter higher education in 2006/07 could make up to six applications for different courses and institutions in the main admissions round<sup>79</sup>. If unsuccessful in achieving a place for any of these chosen courses, prospective students could make additional applications to courses which still had places to fill via UCAS Extra<sup>80</sup> or during the ‘clearing’ period after the publication of A level results. The 16,000 applicants in the sample together made 91,294 applications, with each prospective student making an average of 5.88 applications for different courses at the same or different institutions. In total, the 16,000 prospective students applied to 16,061 different courses. These were provided by 254 higher education institutions.

For the purposes of analysis, only applicants presenting two or more A Levels were included. An examination of the data showed that there was cause for concern about the accuracy of information for some applicants presenting one A Level. These students were older, were taking an A Level in one subject, such as Further Mathematics, and received conditional offers based on this A Level alone. This suggests that these applicants were re-taking qualifications or adding to their academic portfolio with prior information unrecorded by UCAS.

### ***3.2 The Data: Variables and Data Structure***

A list of the variables included in the analyses is given in Table 6.2 below<sup>81</sup>.

General studies and critical thinking are considered separately to A Levels in other subjects for this analysis. This is to recognise that some universities including the members of the Russell Group explicitly advise potential students that these subjects do not prepare learners as well for higher education and therefore treat these A Levels differently to other subjects in the admissions process (Russell Group 2011)<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> In 2008/09 when the qualitative research was carried out, applicants could apply for up to 5 different courses and institutions. In 2006/07 and 2008/09, applicants could apply for up to four different medicine courses and use remaining applications to apply for non-medical degrees such as biomedical sciences.

<sup>80</sup> UCAS Extra is an additional process where candidates holding no offers can apply for a course with spaces remaining after other candidates have selected ‘firm’ and ‘insurance’ courses (UCAS 2011g).

<sup>81</sup> UCAS do not at present collect information about applicants’ parental income, although this may change if responsibility for assessing student eligibility for financial support is given to UCAS (DBIS 2011). Although collected, applicants’ GCSE results are not made available to researchers.

<sup>82</sup> For example, the Russell Group advise students not to rely on general studies and critical thinking for university applications, but should take it in addition to other subjects (Russell Group 2011) Although some subjects are considered less useful to prepare students for certain courses, general studies and critical thinking are singled out as being less useful for admissions purposes for all degree courses across a group of institutions.

Table 6.2: Variables Included in the Analyses<sup>83</sup>

Variable	Description	Coding Scheme
<b>Unique ID</b>		
Application ID	Unique identifier for application	Supplied by UCAS
Applicant ID	Unique identifier for student	Supplied by UCAS
Course ID	Unique identifier for course	Created by combining known information about the courses and institutions.
HEI ID	Unique identifier for institution	Supplied by UCAS
<b>Application Level</b>		
Conditional Offer	AS and A Level requirements of conditional offers expressed as UCAS tariff points score (excluding non-A Level requirements)	Continuous variable from 60 to 420 <i>120 points equals an A Level grade A</i>
Conditional Offer Direction*	The conditional offer given to the applicant compared to the weighted mean course offer	<b>Standard offer</b> if applicants' conditions were within 10 UCAS tariff points of weighted mean course offer; <b>Helpful offer</b> if conditions were 10 points or more lower than weighted mean course offer; <b>Hindrance offer</b> if conditions were 10 points or more higher than weighted mean course offer.
Relative Tariff Rate	The difference between the applicant's predicted grade score and the mean A Level score of all applicants for the chosen course	Continuous variable from -247 to 368
<b>Applicant Level</b>		
SES	Applicants' parental occupation	Classification taken from UCAS.
School Type	The type of school applicant attended	Classification taken from UCAS.
Ethnicity	The applicant's ethnicity (self-defined)	White; Pakistani and Bangladeshi; Indian; Black African; Black Caribbean; Chinese; Mixed Race; Other Ethnicity; Unknown
Gender	The applicant's gender	Male; Female
Age	Applicant's age 1 September 2006	18; Under 18; Over 18
Predicted Grades excluding GS	Applicant's predicted grades excluding general studies and critical thinking expressed as a points score	Continuous variable from 80 to 600

<sup>83</sup> For all applications for which an offer was received. For all applicants presenting AS and A2 qualifications only, attempting 2 or more A Level examinations in 2005 and/or 2006 and all courses receiving five or more applications in the sample.

Predicted Grades for GS	Applicant's predicted grades for general studies and critical thinking expressed as a points score	Continuous variable from 0 to 240
Number of A Levels excluding GS	No. A Levels taken 2006 excluding general studies/critical thinking	Continuous variable from 1 to 5
Number of A Levels GS	No. general studies/critical thinking A Levels taken 2006	Continuous variable from 0 to 2
Points in 2005	Number of points applicant achieved in 2005 for AS and A2 qualifications	Continuous variable from 0 to 240
<b>Course Level</b>		
Discretion Course*	Evidence of variation in conditional offer levels for the course	<b>No discretion</b> , same conditions given to all successful applicants; <b>Discretion</b> , at least one applicant received a different conditional offer from the other successful candidates
Weighted Mean Course Offer	Mean conditional offer given to applicants for the course, weighted	Continuous variable from 60 to 401
Mean A Level score Accepted Applicants	Mean A Level score (expressed in points) of applicants given an offer	Continuous variable from 40 to 509
Competitiveness (log transformation)	The number of applicants divided by the total number of accepted applicants (applications per place proxy). Log transformation.	Continuous variable from 0.68 to 5.88
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Rate	Percentage of successful applicants who do not choose the course as firm or insurance choice weighted.	Continuous variable from 0 to 100
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Rate	Percentage of applicants who chose the course as a firm or insurance choice who decline their offer after results are published, weighted.	Continuous variable from 0 to 100
Course Subject	The subject line of the course (using UCAS coding scheme)	Categories combined to facilitate analysis using UCAS course code scheme. Medicine and dentistry courses have course codes beginning with 'A' and were combined while course codes beginning with 'B', subjects allied to medicine, were given a separate category (UCAS 2011h)
Course Level	The level of the course	Degree; Sub-Degree (Foundation, HND)
<b>Institution Level</b>		
Institution Type	Type of institution	Russell Group; Pre-1992 University; Post-1992 University; Non-University HEI (university college or other institution)

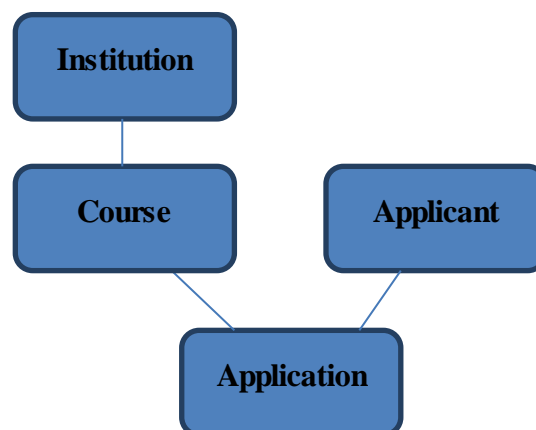
\* Dependent Variable

As each prospective student can apply for up to six applications, the applications in the sample cannot be said to be independent of one another. Rather, they are clustered within applicants: the applications made by a single prospective student will have some factors in common.

Similarly, each application is clustered within the chosen course. As the previous two chapters have shown, the same course selector or selectors evaluate applications from different students using the same criteria and assumptions about student performance. Furthermore, as previous chapters have discussed, institutional policy and ethos have an impact on selection behaviour. Therefore courses supplied by the same institution are not independent of one another: courses are clustered within institutions.

The applications in the sample are therefore clustered not only within applicants, but also within courses, which in turn are clustered within institutions. A representation of the data structure is presented in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Cross-Classified Data Structure



The structure of the data when examining application level variables is therefore clustered, but rather than being strictly hierarchical it is cross-classified. Applications are clustered within applicants and within courses, but applicants are not clustered within courses.

### ***3.3 Method of Analysis***

Given the structure of the data, analyses assuming case independence such as ordinary least squares (OLS) regression cannot be used. Using OLS regression techniques to

analyse clustered data can lead to type 1 errors, a false positive result where evidence is found to reject the null hypothesis because of an underestimation of the size of parameter standard errors (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008). Therefore, multilevel modelling, which can take account of clustered data, was used to analyse the data (Rabash et al 2009).

Multilevel modelling, which can be used to fit both hierarchical and non-hierarchical models, is widely used in educational research (for example Leckie 2009; Rasbash et al 2010), and has been used to analyse UCAS data (Gittoes and Thompson 2007). This method is capable not only of analysing clustered data more successfully than OLS regression but also provides information about where unexplained variance may be located, for example whether at the level of an organisation such as a school or university or the people studying and working within it (Rabash et al 2009).

To build and fit the models, specialist multilevel modelling software program MLwiN was used<sup>84</sup>.

## **4. Offer Variation**

The following section presents the results of the analyses carried out to investigate variation in conditional offers.

### ***4.1 Varying Offers***

Ideally, information about the standard offer for each course would be compared with the conditional offer received by a particular applicant to identify whether a higher or lower offer level than standard had been received. However, this information was not available. UCAS do not collect this information and, because the UCAS data were anonymised, it was impossible to combine information about standard offer requirements available in institutional prospectuses with the data supplied by UCAS<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> Estimates for hierarchical models, the parameters for random and fixed effects were obtained using iterative generalised least squares (IGLS) estimation techniques. Parameter values for cross-classified model were obtained using Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) estimation having first obtained starting values using IGLS as recommended by Browne (2009). Diagnostic tests to check the convergence of model parameters and the assumptions of homoscedasticity and normality of distribution of residuals at each level were checked. No cause for concern was identified and so no remedial action was taken.

<sup>85</sup> Combining information from other sources with the data supplied by UCAS would also have breached the license agreement between the researcher and UCAS.



Therefore, a proxy value for the standard offer was used. For this, the mean conditional offer for each course in the sample was calculated and a weight applied to this to take account of the stratified nature of the sample. In order to increase the reliability of the estimated weighted mean conditional offer, and thus increase the validity of this measure, only courses for which information from five or more applications was available were included in the analyses.

Applicants who had received a conditional offer which was more than 10 points greater than the 'standard offer' were deemed to have received a 'hindrance' offer while those receiving requirements which were 10 points or more lower than the standard offer received a 'helpful' offer. The 10 point cut-off mark was chosen as this represents a difference in one grade at AS level: a grade B at AS Level is 50 UCAS points, with an A grade at AS Level worth 60 points (UCAS 2011e).

The data suggest that a significant minority of courses did vary conditional offers between applicants. Of the 3,046 courses in the sample, 1,413 (46 per cent) exhibited some differentiation in the conditional offers which were allocated to applicants. A slight majority of courses, 1,633 (54 per cent) gave all applicants who were sampled the same conditional offer.

Offer variation could therefore potentially result from either a systematic allocation of two 'standard offers' which differed by 20 UCAS points or one A Level grade, or as a result of genuine 'discretion', where a selector lowered or raised an offer for a particular candidate. It is not possible to infer from the data therefore whether 'variation' is synonymous with 'discretion', but analyses of the data can show what factors are associated with 'variation', and whether this would facilitate or impede the entry of particular applicants according to social and academic characteristics.

The sampled courses which showed evidence of variation in conditional offer levels gave 23,280 offers to applicants. As Table 6.3 shows, the majority of these offers were indistinguishable from 'standard' with 68 per cent of offers being less than 10 points different from the weighted mean course offer. Where course selectors did vary requirements, similar numbers of offers were made which were above and below the standard. The use of variation in conditional offers was similar across different types

of university, although there is some indication that non-university HEIs are more likely to raise or lower requirements than institutions with university status.

**Table 6.3: Offers Given by Institution Type, Discretion Courses Only**

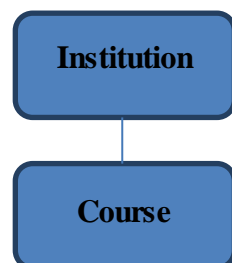
(%)	Standard Offer	Helpful Offer	Hindrance Offer	Total (n)
Russell Group	69	15	16	10,126
Old University	68	15	17	7,375
New University	67	15	18	5,336
Non-Uni HEI	44	21	35	443
<b>Total</b>	68	15	17	23,280

Chi Square = 144.599 (p<0.001)

#### ***4.2 Discretion or Standard Offers for All***

In order to investigate what factors are associated with conditional offer variation, a binary logistic regression model was built. For Model 1, the dependent variable is whether the course shows evidence of variation in offers as opposed to giving all students the same standard offer.

**Figure 6.2: Data Structure Model 1**



As this model examines behaviour at the course level, a random intercept, two-level hierarchical model (courses within HEIs) was built using Iterative Generalised Least Squares (IGLS) estimation<sup>86</sup>. The model allows each institution to have a different intercept to account for the clustered nature of the data, shown in Figure 6.2<sup>87</sup>. In total, 2,905 courses were included, which were clustered within 134 institutions.

<sup>86</sup> Second order non-linear PQL estimation techniques were used for Model 1, as these provide more accurate parameter estimates for fixed effects (Browne 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Random slopes allow each level one case (course) to have a different gradient for a specified parameter (Rabash et al 2009). Random slopes were tested but did not improve model fit.

Table 6.4: Offer Variation - Parameter Estimates Intercept Only and Model 1

Reference Category: Course does not vary offer	Intercept Only		Model 1	
	Parameter	SE	Parameter	SE
Residuals at level 2 (institution) $\sigma u_i$	1.196	0.197	0.899	0.159
Constant	-0.360	0.113	0.080	0.284
DIC Diagnostic (using MCMC)	3764.036		3588.987	

Table 6.5: Model 1 – Offer Variation Fixed Effects

Reference Category: Course does not vary offer between students	Model 1 Fixed Effects		
	$\beta$	SE	Exp( $\beta$ )
Constant	0.080	0.284	
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-grand mean)	-0.486**	0.115	0.615
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	-0.000	0.002	1.000
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	0.005*	0.002	1.005
Mean A Level Score of Accepted Applicants	0.002*	0.001	1.002
Course is Sub-Degree Level (ref: degree)	-0.927	1.312	0.396
Course Subject (ref: Social Sciences ex. Law)			
Medicine and Dentistry	-0.508	0.540	0.602
Subjects Allied to Medicine	0.579*	0.232	1.784
Biological Sciences	0.541**	0.189	1.718
Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences	-0.216	0.448	0.806
Chemical and Physical Sciences	0.496*	0.206	1.642
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	0.531*	0.222	1.701
Engineering	0.494*	0.225	1.639
Technologies	-0.553	0.900	0.575
Architecture	0.228	0.336	1.256
Law	0.356	0.235	1.428
Business Studies	0.036	0.200	1.037
Communications	0.131	0.293	1.140
Linguistics	0.137	0.237	1.147
European Languages	-0.086	0.291	0.918
Other Languages	-0.195	0.494	0.823
Humanities	0.271	0.226	1.311
Creative Arts	-0.010	0.297	0.990
Education	-0.044	0.366	0.957
Combined Subjects	-0.021	0.181	0.979
General Courses	1.602**	0.612	4.963
Institution Type (ref: Russell Group University)			
Pre-1992 University	-0.353	0.311	0.703
Post-1992 University	-1.086**	0.325	0.338
Non-University HE Provider	-0.496	0.444	0.609

\*\* p&lt;0.01 \* p&lt;0.05

#### 4.2.1 Fixed Effects

Table 6.5 shows that course popularity is negatively associated with the odds of a course varying conditional offers. Courses which are more competitive<sup>88</sup> are less likely to vary offers than their less popular counterparts, controlling for the other variables in the model. Similarly, courses which lose a higher proportion of their applicants after A Level results have been published (the attrition rate at stage 4 which is a measure of recruitment insecurity) are more likely to vary offer levels between candidates. However, the attrition rate at stage 3, the proportion of applicants who leave the selection process for a course after selecting firm and insurance course choices, is not associated with variation in conditional offer levels.

This suggests that course popularity is associated with selector behaviour, and that more popular courses are less likely to vary conditional offers. This finding is partly supported by results from the previous chapter which show that some courses which were insecure in terms of recruitment made lower than standard offers in order to fill places. Conversely, at the more popular Southern Rural University it was felt that varying conditional offers would place too great a workload on admissions officers. However, this association could reflect other relationships which did not emerge from the qualitative findings.

HEI reputation and course selectivity are also associated with the likelihood of a course selector varying conditional offers between applicants. Courses which are more selective in terms of the mean A Level score of accepted applicants are more likely to vary conditional requirements than their less selective counterparts. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that courses provided by post-1992 universities are less likely to vary conditional offer requirements than those provided by Russell Group institutions.

This supports the results presented in the previous chapter which showed that the new universities were resistant to varying conditional offer requirements. In contrast, there was evidence of offer variation across courses at Central Research University, particularly where academic admissions tutors made conditional offers. Therefore, the association shown in Model 1 may reflect an indirect association between institution

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<sup>88</sup> Course competitiveness was found by dividing the total number of applications received by the number of accepted applicants, who received an offer of admission to the course.

type and offer variation. Russell Group universities may use admissions tutors to a greater extent than institutions which gained university status more recently.

Finally, Model 1 suggests that selectors for courses in particular subject areas, mainly in science, maths and engineering departments, are more likely to vary conditional offer requirements between candidates than selectors working for social science courses. This partially supports research which suggests that there is a cross-institutional departmental ethos which influences selection decisions (Francis et al 1993; Featherstone 2010).

However, the indication that selectors for general studies courses, and most STEM courses (excluding Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science and Technologies courses) are more likely to vary conditional offers than their counterparts working for social science courses may reflect that there is greater scope for flexibility for these courses. Further work is needed to understand the nature of this association more fully.

Interaction effects between institution type and course subject, institution type and course popularity and institution type and course academic selectivity did not show significant associations. Weighted percentages of applicants to the course from each socio-economic and ethnic group were also not associated with course discretion. These variables were therefore excluded from the model. Random slopes were tested for all included variables, with none adding to the model's explanatory power.

#### *4.2.2 Random Effects: Course and Institution*

The Deviance Information Criterion (DIC) diagnostic test shown in Table 6.4 is used to assess how well the model fits the data<sup>89</sup>. This suggests that adding the fixed effects does improve the model, but that there may be a large amount of unexplained variation. The variance partition coefficient<sup>90</sup> which shows how much unexplained variation in the dependent variable is contained at each level suggests that 21 per cent of the unexplained difference is clustered at the university level. As discussed in the previous chapter, this may relate to institutional characteristics which have not been

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<sup>89</sup> Models with smaller DIC values are preferable. A difference of 10 points or more in DIC value is 'considered substantial' Leckie (2009: 542). A DIC value of 0 can suggest that a "saturated model" has been achieved (Browne 2009: 28).

<sup>90</sup> The VPC was calculated using the latent variable approach. The formula for calculating the VPC adopted by Snijders and Bosker (1999) is  $\sigma_{u_j} / \sigma_{u_j} + \pi^2/3$  ( $\pi^2/3$  is approximately 3.29) as recommended by Browne (2011).

controlled for, such as university ethos. For example, some staff at Southern Rural University felt conditional offer variation would be contrary to the institution's relaxed, non-competitive atmosphere.

However, most of the unexplained variation is contained at the course level, suggesting that course characteristics which have not been controlled for may better explain differences in conditional offer variation. As discussed in Chapter 5, one of the key factors in determining whether a course selector exercised their power of discretion to vary offer conditions reflected the selector's role and preferences. Some academics showed evidence of varying offer conditions to achieve fair outcomes or attract desirable applicants. In contrast administrative officers were inclined to make standard offers to all to increase staff and student satisfaction.

The generalisability of this finding based on qualitative research cannot be tested. However, that a large proportion of the unexplained variation in course discretion is contained at the course level and is independent of course popularity, selectivity and subject, is consistent with the theory that selector discretion is related to selectors' roles and individual motivations.

#### *4.2.3 Conclusion*

The results suggest that course popularity, subject and institutional reputation are associated with conditional offer variation. More popular courses are less likely to vary requirements than selectors overseeing admissions for similar, less popular courses. This suggests that course selectors facing more secure applicant bases because they are oversubscribed, can take a more rigid approach to student selection.

However, although this model has some explanatory power, the evidence suggests that there is variation which is not explained by the fixed effects included in the model. This is consistent with the findings presented in Chapter 5 which showed that conditional offers were varied according to the role of the selector and their intrinsic motivations.

## 5. Help or Hindrance: How Variation is Used

In order to examine whether the entry of particular candidates is facilitated or impeded systematically according to candidates' social and educational background, two four-level cross-classified binary logistic regression models were built<sup>91</sup>. Model 2 examines what factors are associated with receiving a 'helpful' offer which is lower than standard requirements. Model 3 examines what factors are associated with receiving a 'hindrance' offer which is higher than standard requirements. Only applications where information for all variables of interest was available and only courses which received five or more applications in the sample were included.

Both Model 2 and 3 showed that unexplained variation was found at the course and institution levels to a greater degree than the student level. Therefore, a three-level hierarchical multinomial model where applications are nested within courses, which in turn are nested within institutions, was also built. The results of this model substantially confirm these results, adding to the confidence which can be placed in the analysis. This alternative model, alongside the results for Model 2 and 3 which include 95 per cent confidence intervals for parameters, is presented in Appendix 4.

### 5.1 Helpful Offers – Facilitating Applicant Entry

Model 2, presented in Tables 6.6 and 6.7 below, examines what factors are associated with the likelihood of receiving a helpful offer rather than standard requirements, excluding applications which received a 'hindrance' offer.

Table 6.6: Helpful Offer. Parameter Estimates for Intercept Only and Model 2

Reference Category:	Intercept Only		Full Model	
	Parameter	SE	Parameter	SE
No difference with weighted mean offer				
Residuals at level 2 (student) $u_{0ijl}$	0.002	0.001	0.130	0.156
Residuals at level 3 (course) $v_{0ijl}$	3.384	0.223	3.820	0.298
Residuals at level 4 (institution) $f_{0ijl}$	0.398	0.122	0.472	0.139
Constant	-1.523	0.092	-2.300	0.209
DIC Diagnostic	13709.839		12686.736	

<sup>91</sup> Binary cross classified models were built rather than a multinomial model due to difficulties in estimating the starting matrix for the multinomial model. This may potentially indicate a problem with multicollinearity between help and hindrance responses (Rigdon 1997) which means the binary models presented here are more appropriate. Of the 1,367 courses which varied offers and had no missing values for variables of interest, 513 (38 per cent) gave both helpful and hindrance offers to applicants.

Table 6.7: Model 2 - Offer Helps Student Fixed Effects

Reference Category: No difference with weighted mean offer level	Full Model		
	$\beta$	SE	Exp ( $\beta$ )
Constant	-2.300	0.209	
SES (reference Higher Managerial/Professional)			
Lower Managerial/Professional	-0.091	0.101	0.913
Intermediate	-0.184	0.100	0.832
Lower Supervisory and Technical	0.038	0.101	1.039
Semi-Routine	-0.074	0.102	0.929
Routine	0.202*	0.102	1.224
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	0.133	0.102	1.142
Unknown	0.050	0.101	1.051
School Type (reference Independent School)			
Grammar School	0.165	0.115	1.179
State School	0.521**	0.085	1.684
Further Education College	0.896**	0.130	2.450
Sixth Form College/Centre	0.448**	0.104	1.565
Other School Type	0.870**	0.170	2.387
Unknown School Type	0.928*	0.427	2.529
Candidate's Ethnicity (reference White)			
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.046	0.151	1.047
Indian	0.130	0.116	1.139
Black African	-0.046	0.219	0.955
Black Caribbean	0.629	0.324	1.876
Chinese	0.119	0.215	1.126
Mixed Race	-0.016	0.172	0.984
Other Ethnicity	0.049	0.168	1.050
Unknown Ethnicity	-0.076	0.279	0.927
Female (reference Male)	-0.061	0.056	0.941
Age 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2006 (reference 18 Years Old)			
Under 18 Years Old	1.603**	0.480	4.968
Over 18 Years Old	0.274**	0.072	1.315
Predicated Grades Point Score (-grand mean)	-0.007*	0.003	0.993
Points for General Studies (-grand mean)	-0.004	0.004	0.996
No. A Levels ex. General Studies (-3)	0.930**	0.113	2.535
No. General Studies and Critical Thinking A Levels	-0.036	0.347	0.965
No. A/AS Level Points Achieved in 2005 (-grand mean)	-0.001	0.001	0.999
Relative Tariff Rate (-grand mean)	-0.009**	0.003	0.991
Mean Points Score Accepted Applicants (-grand mean)	-0.005	0.003	0.995
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-grand mean)	0.008	0.164	1.008
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	-0.015**	0.003	0.985
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	0.006*	0.003	1.006
Institution Type (reference Russell Group University)			
Pre-1992 University	-0.111	0.239	0.895
Post-1992 University	-0.440	0.282	0.644
Non-University HE Provider	1.302*	0.550	3.677

\*\* p<0.01 \* p<0.05



In total, 19,321 applications were included (3,550 of which received a ‘helpful offer’). These applications were made by 9,885 students for 1,594 courses within 113 institutions<sup>92</sup>.

#### *5.1.1 Fixed Effects: Student Background and Educational Context*

As Table 6.7 shows, candidates’ ethnicity and gender are not associated with receiving a ‘helpful’ as opposed to a standard conditional offer, controlling for other factors in the model. This supports results presented in the previous chapter which showed that admissions officers or tutors were reluctant to contextualise attainment to facilitate the entry of students according to their demographic characteristics. In the case of ethnicity, the absence of association may be partly explained by the absence of this information on the UCAS form, although Shiner and Modood (2002) argue that applicants’ ethnicity can be identified from applicants’ names which are given to selectors.

However, there is some evidence that applicants with parents who work in routine occupations are more likely to receive helpful offers than those from professional backgrounds. There was no evidence of this in the qualitative research and further work is needed to understand what factors may underpin this relationship. However, the direction of the association is consistent with equity of access as students from lower socio-economic groups are likely to face disadvantages when applying to universities which are not faced by their more affluent peers (Reay et al 2005).

Applicants’ age is also associated with selectors varying offer conditions to facilitate entry. Older and younger applicants are more likely to receive helpful offers than ‘standard aged’ applicants who were 18 years old on 1 September 2006. It could be argued that this demonstrates that university selectors are willing to take background information into account in a way which was not shown in the qualitative research complementing this analysis<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>92</sup> The model was built using MCMC estimation techniques, as recommended by Browne (2009). The structure of the data is shown in Figure 6.1. The model was built using 30,000 iterations.

<sup>93</sup> Selectors who received applications from *mature* students discussed accrediting prior learning (APL), for example resulting from work experience, to determine whether applicants would be offered places. However, no selector discussed varying offer conditions for older, non-mature applicants taking A Levels, as sampled for this analysis.

The age 'effect' is independent of the points achieved for AS and A Levels taken in 2005, the year prior to application. This suggests that it is applicants' age rather than their previous attainment which is associated with the receipt of helpful offers of admission. On the other hand, it could be argued that age may be used by selectors as a proxy for academic potential and commitment. That older and younger applicants are more likely to be given helpful offers than similarly qualified standard-aged applicants may suggest that selectors view non-standard applicants in terms of age as more motivated or committed than standard-aged counterparts.

In addition to taking applicants' age into account, the results suggest that selectors are more willing to give helpful offers to candidates who come from less privileged educational backgrounds. Applicants at non-selective state schools, further education colleges and sixth form centres are more likely to receive helpful conditional offers than their counterparts attending fee-paying independent schools. The effect is strongest for those applicants whose educational background is unknown and those attending further education colleges, for whom the odds of receiving a helpful offer are 145 per cent higher than applicants attending independent schools, controlling for the other fixed effects.

This supports results presented in the previous chapter which suggest that, where contextual data were taken into account by selectors, information about applicants' schools was used. Even where school type was *not* taken into account, there was evidence that selectors were aware of the advantages associated with attending a selective school and the impact this could have on student selection. Model 2 suggests that the sector as a whole not only shares this perception but is willing to take applicants' educational context into account when setting conditional offer levels.

### *5.1.2 Fixed Effects: Student Academic Attainment*

As Table 6.7 shows, the probability of receiving a helpful offer is positively associated with the number of A Levels in subjects other than general studies and critical thinking applicants have taken, controlling for the other factors in the model. Taking a fourth A Level is associated with an increase in the odds of receiving a helpful offer by 154 per cent compared to a similar applicant taking three A Levels. As this effect is independent of predicted grade score and academic attainment in 2005, this suggests that course selectors value students who take a wider range of

subjects at post-compulsory level, and are prepared to facilitate their entry to the institution.

However, the level of academic attainment, in terms of predicted grades score and the candidate's score relative to the rest of the applicant pool are negatively associated with the probability of receiving a helpful offer as opposed to standard requirements. This suggests that higher achievers in terms of absolute and relative academic achievement are less likely to receive helpful offers than those who achieve at lower levels. This partly supports the results discussed in the previous chapter which suggested that offers could be dropped for applicants achieving at lower levels if the candidate was deemed acceptable but could not be expected to meet the standard requirements. However, the results do suggest that conditional offer requirements are not lowered to facilitate the entry of higher achievers.

### *5.1.3 Fixed Effects: Course and University Characteristics*

There is some evidence that institutional reputation is associated with the probability of an applicant receiving a helpful offer as opposed to standard requirements. However, there is no difference between the behaviour of institutions with university status: non-university HE providers are more likely to allocate helpful conditional offers than selectors at Russell Group institutions. This suggests that among universities, once a course selector has decided to vary conditions there is no systematic difference in the use of 'helpful' offers according to status. However, among courses which vary conditional offers between applicants, those supplied by different types of university are equally likely to give helpful offers of admission.

The number of applications per place is not associated with the probability of a helpful offer being given. However, there is some evidence that attrition rates are associated with the use of helpful offers. Courses which lose a greater percentage of applicants after firm and insurance choice selections have been made, and thus have a higher attrition rate at stage 3, are less likely to lower offers. More specifically, losing 10 per cent more applicants than average after candidates have decided which courses to select as firm and insurance choices is associated with a decrease in the odds of a helpful offer being given by around 14 per cent.

This may indicate that selectors perceive that conditional offer requirements are used by candidates as an indicator of course quality. Therefore, courses which face higher stage 3 attrition rates may try and prevent the loss of applicants by keeping offers at the standard level rather than lowering requirements.

Selectors for courses which lose more applicants after the A Level results have been published and thus have a higher attrition rate at stage four are more likely to make helpful conditional offers than their more secure counterparts. This may suggest that courses which lose applicants who fail to achieve offer conditions or reject their offers after results are known try and retain applicants at this stage by lowering offer conditions to make them more achievable. This suggests that recruitment security rather than initial popularity influences selection decisions.

#### *5.1.4 Random Effects: Student, Course and Institution*

Table 6.8 below shows that course characteristics which have not been included in the model are likely to account for most of the large amount of unexplained variation in the allocation of helpful offers. This confirms the evidence presented in the previous chapter which suggests that individual admissions staff and course characteristics which are not contained in the model, such as whether applicants undertake additional selection tests, are important factors determining whether an application will be given a conditional offer which is lower than standard.

Other factors such as prospective students' personal statements are also likely to account for some of this unexplained variation, as the previous chapter demonstrated candidates' commitment to the course and extra-curricular activities could be important in influencing admissions staff members' decisions.

Table 6.8: Variance Partition Coefficient Model 2<sup>94</sup>

<b>Application</b>	<b>Applicant</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Institution</b>
43%	2%	50%	6%

For Model 2, adding the student level to the model did improve model fit. Without a random intercept at the student level, the DIC diagnostic test value was 12,769.868. Adding the student level to the model thus resulted in a reduction of approximately 80

<sup>94</sup> Percentages rounded to the nearest whole per cent. Numbers do not sum due to rounding.

points in the DIC value. That a very small percentage of the unexplained variance is contained at the applicant level thus suggests that a candidate's characteristics other than their social class, ethnicity, age, gender and academic attainment do have a small effect on admissions decisions for courses which vary conditional offers. This could relate to background variables, such as whether the applicant lives in a low participation neighbourhood, or to non-background characteristics such as the quality of the personal statement and school reference.

#### *5.1.5 Conclusion*

Across the sector, there is evidence to suggest that course selectors do vary offers to take account of candidate's contextual information. Selectors are more likely to give those attending non-selective state schools and FE colleges lower conditional offers than standard compared to their similarly qualified peers at independent schools. Older but non-mature applicants aged 19 and 20, and younger candidates are also more likely to be given helpful offers than those aged 18 when they enter university.

This finding partially supports results presented in the previous chapter which showed there was a willingness amongst some academic selectors to use information about applicants' schools. Several admissions tutors reported exercising discretion in the setting of conditional offer levels to take account of mean school attainment and academic policy into account. Although some participants and administrative officers in particular, felt that using school data would be unfeasible or unfair, the statistically significant association between school type and the likelihood of an application being given an offer lower than standard suggests that these checks on behaviour are not felt systematically across the HE sector.

The positive association between the number of A Levels taken, controlling for achieved and predicted academic attainment, suggests that admissions staff are prepared to make helpful offers to applicants who present additional qualifications. This relationship was not shown in qualitative evidence, but the association may reflect that students taking additional qualifications are more likely to have a broad subject mix. The previous chapter demonstrated that a broad subject mix was viewed favourably by some selectors. That course selectors are more willing to lower conditional offers for those achieving at lower levels in absolute terms and relative to

the rest of the applicant pool may suggest that helpful offers are used to facilitate the entry of lower achievers rather than to attract high achievers to the course.

Course competitiveness is not associated with the likelihood of a selector giving a helpful offer to an application. This contradicts findings presented in the previous chapter which suggested that some recruiting courses made lower offers than standard to some applicants in order to help fill places. These qualitative results based on case study research are not necessarily representative of the population. However, the use of lower offer requirements to increase the number of successful candidates to fill places is indicated by the positive association between the course attrition rate after A Level results are published and the likelihood of a helpful conditional offer being made.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that course popularity does influence admissions staff behaviour, as courses which higher proportions of applicants declining conditional offers are less likely to lower requirements than those with lower rates of attrition. This could indicate that more popular courses are able to take a flexible approach to the conditional offer to aid applicant entry. However, the direction of causality is unclear: it could be argued that lowering conditional offers *prevents* applicant attrition<sup>95</sup>.

Similarly, it could have been concluded from the previous chapter that helpful offers were more likely to be given by selectors working for Russell Group institutions than in other universities, but the quantitative analysis does not support this. The results suggest that, among universities, institutional status is not associated with the likelihood of a course selector giving a helpful conditional offer. Interaction effects between course popularity and institutional type were not significant (and therefore excluded from the model) suggesting that the absence of associations are not due to a difference in behaviour between recruiting and selecting courses at different universities<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> In other words, the negative association between stage 3 attrition rate and the likelihood of a helpful offer being given may indicate that courses which are more flexible in their approach to conditional offers are able to retain a greater proportion of applicants.

<sup>96</sup> Interaction effects between applicant SES and institution type were also not significant.

Therefore, the impact of institutional reputation and course popularity on admissions behaviour is unclear, but there is evidence to suggest that selectors are willing to lower conditional offers for applicants from less privileged educational backgrounds.

### 5.2 Hindrance – Obstructing Applicant Entry

Model 3 is also a four-level cross-classified model (see Figure 6.1), used to analyse what factors are associated with the probability of a conditional offer being allocated which is higher than standard requirements. These ‘hindrance’ offers thus obstruct the entry of particular candidates when compared to other successful candidates who receive standard offers<sup>97</sup>.

For Model 3, applications which received a ‘helpful’ were excluded from the analysis. In total, 19,730 applications were included (3,959 of which received a ‘hindrance offer’). These applications were made by 9,805 students for 1,612 courses, which were provided by 114 institutions<sup>98</sup>. The results are shown in Tables 6.9 and 6.10 below.

#### 5.2.1 Fixed Effects: Student Background and Educational Context

The results of this analysis suggest that student educational background is associated with the probability of an applicant receiving a higher offer than standard. Table 6.10 below shows candidates from non-selective state schools, Sixth Form Centres and other establishments are less likely to receive an offer which hinders their entry than similar applicants from independent schools. This supports the results presented in Model 2 which show that selectors were willing to lower offers for students from less privileged educational backgrounds to facilitate their entry.

Table 6.9: Hindrance Offer - Parameter Estimates for Intercept Only and Model 3

Reference Category:	Intercept Only		Full Model	
	Parameter	SE	Parameter	SE
No difference with weighted mean offer				
Residuals at level 2 (student) $u_{0ijl}$	0.034	0.038	0.003	0.001
Residuals at level 3 (course) $v_{0ijl}$	10.965	0.765	11.487	0.803
Residuals at level 4 (institution) $f_{0ijl}$	0.782	0.318	0.719	0.300
<b>DIC Diagnostic</b>	10106.581		9826.142	

<sup>97</sup> As with the previous model, the initial estimates for the random and fixed parameters were obtained using IGLS, before running the model using MCMC to allow the results to reflect the non-hierarchical nature of the data structure. The model was built using 30,000 iterations

<sup>98</sup> Interaction effects between university type and student SES and ethnicity were not significant and were thus not included in the model.

Table 6.10: Model 3 - Offer Hinders Student Fixed Effects

Reference Category: No difference with weighted mean offer level	Full Model		
	$\beta$	SE	Exp( $\beta$ )
Constant	-1.634	0.314	
SES (reference Higher Managerial/Professional)			
Lower Managerial/Professional	0.121	0.107	1.129
Intermediate	-0.337**	0.109	0.714
Lower Supervisory and Technical			
Semi-Routine	-0.053	0.116	0.948
Routine	0.045	0.112	1.046
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	0.084	0.118	1.088
Unknown	0.150	0.113	1.162
School Type (reference Independent School)			
Grammar School	-0.091	0.115	0.913
State School	-0.138	0.113	0.871
Further Education College	-0.246**	0.083	0.782
Sixth Form College/Centre	-0.060	0.159	0.942
Other School Type	-0.270*	0.107	0.763
Unknown School Type	-0.442*	0.213	0.643
Candidate's Ethnicity (reference White)			
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.534	0.490	1.706
Indian	0.297	0.179	1.346
Black African	0.266*	0.133	1.254
Black Caribbean	-0.000	0.275	1.000
Chinese	0.776	0.425	2.173
Mixed Race	0.299	0.213	1.349
Other Ethnicity	0.441*	0.186	0.643
Unknown Ethnicity	0.026	0.195	1.026
Female (reference Male)	0.061	0.322	1.063
Age 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2006 (reference 18 Years Old)	-0.005	0.064	0.995
Under 18 Years Old			
Over 18 Years Old	0.551	0.533	1.735
Predicated Grades Point Score (-grand mean)	0.012	0.086	1.012
Points for General Studies (-grand mean)	0.016**	0.005	1.016
No. A Levels ex. General Studies (-3)	0.014**	0.004	1.014
No. General Studies and Critical Thinking A Levels	-1.461**	0.145	0.232
No. A/AS Level Points Achieved in 2005 (-grand mean)	-1.163**	0.450	0.313
Relative Tariff Rate (-grand mean)	-0.003**	0.001	0.997
Mean Points Score Accepted Applicants (-grand mean)	-0.002	0.004	0.998
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-grand mean)	-0.015**	0.004	0.985
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	-0.061	0.270	0.941
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (-grand mean)	-0.022**	0.005	0.978
Institution Type (reference Russell Group University)	0.013**	0.004	1.013
Pre-1992 University			
Post-1992 University	-0.389	0.381	0.678
Non-University HE Provider	-0.646	0.532	0.524
	2.849**	0.815	17.271

\*\* p&lt;0.01 \* p&lt;0.05



There is some evidence that candidates' social background is associated with receiving a hindrance offer. Candidates with intermediate parental occupations are less likely to receive hindrance offers than those from professional backgrounds. Mixed Race and Indian applicants are more likely to receive hindrance offers than their White peers.

These findings overall do contradict the results presented in the previous chapter which suggested that admissions staff were unwilling to take account of candidates' social background when setting offer levels. The associations may therefore potentially be explained by intervening factors which have not been included in the model, such as the quality of the school reference or personal statement.

In contrast to Model 2, there is no association between age and offer variation: the likelihood of receiving an offer which impedes applicant entry is the same for 18-year-olds and those who are older and younger. This suggests that course selectors may be unwilling to give applicants higher offers than standard because of their age, but are willing to facilitate the entry of applicants who are older or younger than the majority of their peers.

### *5.2.2 Fixed Effects: Student Academic Attainment*

The points students are predicted to achieve for general studies, critical thinking and other subjects are associated with the likelihood of receiving an offer which would obstruct applicants' entry to the course. Applicants predicted to attain at higher levels are more likely to receive a higher conditional offer than similar applicants achieving at lower levels. This supports the results presented in Model 2 which showed that selectors were more likely to lower offer conditions for lower achieving applicants.

However, the opposite effect is seen in terms of achieved qualifications. Candidates achieving more points for AS and A Level qualifications in 2005 (the year before proposed HE entry) are less likely to receive higher conditional offers than standard compared to their less qualified counterparts. This supports evidence presented in the previous chapter which shows that students achieving lower results for their AS qualifications in the year prior to entry were given higher offers by some selectors to ensure that they achieved an 'equivalent' level of attainment to the rest of the successful applicant pool.

Students taking a higher number of A Levels in the year before entry, excluding general studies and critical thinking, were less likely to receive a hindrance offer than those taking fewer qualifications. Taking four A Levels as opposed to the usual three in 2006 is associated with a *reduction* in the odds of receiving a higher conditional offer than the standard by 77 per cent. This would suggest that selectors value students who have studied a wide variety of subjects, and are less likely to allocate offers which will impede the entry of these candidates. This supports the results of Model 2 which suggest that HE selectors are more likely to give helpful offers to those students taking a higher number of qualifications.

### 5.2.3 Fixed Effects: Course and Institutional Reputation and Popularity

There is some evidence that institutional reputation and course selectivity are associated with the allocation of a 'hindrance' offer. Table 6.8 shows that less prestigious institutions which have not gained university status are more likely to make hindrance offers than research-intensive Russell Group institutions, although there is no difference in behaviour between different types of university.

Non-university HEIs include specialist drama and agricultural colleges as well as institutions which provide a broader selection of courses that have not gained university status<sup>99</sup>. As these institutions were not included in the qualitative research, this relationship cannot be explained with reference to the previous chapters.

This, to some extent, contradicts the research presented in the previous chapter where, excluding courses with a second selection stage such as an interview, evidence of hindrance was found in much greater abundance amongst courses at elite Central Research University. It could be argued that this association reflects a ceiling effect. As Russell Group universities have higher standard offers than institutions without university status, it may be more difficult for Russell Group universities to raise an offer above standard requirements.

As Table 6.11 shows, the mean 'standard' offer for courses in non-university HEIs was 244 UCAS points (slightly more than three C grades at A Level) compared to a mean standard offer of 315 for courses at the Russell Group (slightly less than ABB grades at A Level). Thus, the association may reflect a 'ceiling effect' where selectors

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<sup>99</sup> HEFCE funding allocation documents such as 2011//07 contain a list of HEIs for further information.

at Russell Group institutions have less capacity for raising offer conditions above standard requirements than their non-university counterparts.

**Table 6.11: Mean 'Standard' Offers for Different Types of HEI<sup>100</sup>**

<b>Institution Type</b>	Russell Group	Pre-1992	Post-1992	Non-Uni HEI
<b>Mean Standard Offer</b>	313.28	292.12	224.76	224.74

However, as the average standard offer at post-1992 institutions is similar to courses at non-university HEIs, this does not fully explain why courses at non-universities are more likely to give hindrance offers than their counterparts at Russell Group institutions. There is no evidence of a difference in the use of 'hindrance' offers between Russell Group institutions and new universities, despite the fact that new universities potentially have more scope for raising conditional offers than HEIs without university status.

This suggests therefore that the findings presented in the previous chapter are not representative of the population of universities, as would be expected given the nature of the research. Rather, the qualitative findings reflect Central Research University's partly devolved admissions system, and the inclusion of an AS level in standard requirements, which were the focus of offer variation for some selectors at this university, rather than its status as a Russell Group institution.

There is mixed evidence about the effect of course popularity on admissions decisions. The number of applications per place is not associated with the likelihood of a hindrance offer being made, but course attrition rates are. Courses which lose more applicants after A Level results are published (have a higher attrition rate at stage 4) are more likely to allocate hindrance offers than those with lower attrition at this stage.

Courses which lose more applicants after prospective students have selected firm and conditional course choices (have higher attrition rates at stage 3) are less likely to give offers which are higher than the standard. An increase in the initial attrition rate by 10 percentage points above the mean is associated with a 20 per cent decrease in the odds of a hindrance offer being made.

<sup>100</sup> Base 3,046 courses. The difference between the mean 'standard' offers for post-1992 universities and non-university HEIs was not statistically significant.

#### 5.2.4 Random Effects: Student, Course and Institution

The variance partition coefficient, presented in Table 6.12, shows that the majority of the large amount of unexplained variance in the allocation of ‘hindrance offers’ is clustered at the course level. A negligible percentage of the unexplained variance is contained at the applicant level. In fact, for Model 3, adding a random intercept at the student level did not improve model fit, with the DIC value not changing after removing the student level. This suggests that applicants’ characteristics, particularly those unrelated to academic attainment, do not influence selectors’ use of ‘hindrance’ offers.

Table 6.12: Variance Partition Coefficient Model 3

<b>Application</b>	<b>Applicant</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Institution</b>
21%	<1%	74%	5%

This supports evidence presented in the previous chapter which suggests that individual admissions staff – their preferences and role – have a strong influence on the use of discretion in conditional offers. The residuals at institution level suggest that institutional policy, for example admissions policies, may also explain some variation in the allocation of offers which hinder entry as opposed to the standard offer.

#### 5.2.5 Conclusion

The evidence presented above suggests that some applicant characteristics unrelated to academic attainment are associated with the probability of receiving a higher conditional offer than standard. The evidence suggests that Indian candidates and those who are Mixed Race are more likely to receive an offer which is higher than standard compared to their white peers. Prospective students from intermediate social backgrounds are less likely to receive an offer which impedes their entry than their counterparts from professional backgrounds. However, these results do not prove that applicants’ background is taken into account by selectors, particularly when interpreted alongside the results presented in the previous chapter. Factors which are not controlled for in the model may explain these associations.

However, there is some suggestion that applicants from non-selective state schools are less likely to receive an offer which hinders their entry which is supported by the

qualitative results previously presented and is confirmed by Model 2 which shows that students from state schools are more likely to receive a lower offer than standard compared to those from independent schools. This would suggest that selectors are willing to take account of candidates' educational or school background when determining offer levels.

However, some candidate characteristics were associated with the receipt of a 'hindrance' offer, as those who take more A Level qualifications and achieved more points in 2005 were less likely to receive a conditional offer which was higher than standard requirements. This partially supports the results regarding 'helpful' offers and the findings presented in the previous chapter. Where breadth of subject was mentioned, students taking a wider range of subjects were seen as being of higher calibre. The findings presented in Model 3 suggest that this view may be held systematically across the HE sector and result in applicants presenting fewer qualifications being more likely offers which impede their entry relative to their counterparts taking a greater number of A Levels.

However, candidates predicted to achieve at higher levels were more likely to receive a higher conditional offer than standard compared to lower achievers. This may suggest that conditional offers are raised and lowered to match candidates' predicted levels of achievement. This may reflect admissions staff members' desire to indicate course quality to applicants, which is perceived to be associated with entry requirements.

There was some evidence that institutional reputation is associated with the probability of a course giving an offer which is higher than standard. Courses at Russell Group universities are less likely to give hindrance offers than similar courses at non-university HE providers. However, there is no evidence that Russell Group Universities behave differently to other institutions with university status in terms of varying conditional offer levels.

In terms of popularity, in common with the findings presented in Model 2, courses with higher attrition rates at stage 3 are less likely to treat applicants with flexibility. Again, this may indicate that courses with a less secure applicant base use variation in offers to try and improve their position, in this case using higher offers than the

standard to indicate quality to applicants. This supports findings presented in Chapter 4 which showed that course selectors viewed standard offers as a means for indicating course quality. However, it may also indicate that courses which give higher offers lose fewer applicants after the firm and insurance course choices have been made. This may explain why courses with higher attrition rates at stage four are more likely to have given higher offers than standard to applicants. Rather than reflecting course behaviour, the associations may show applicants' response to conditional offers.

## **6. Conditional Offers and Equity of Access**

The evidence presented in Models 2 and 3 above suggests that university admissions policies and practices were somewhat consistent with equity of access. The analyses show that, for courses where conditional offers were varied, requirements were lowered for students from non-selective state schools and raised for similar pupils from independent schools. Given that state school pupils are more likely to receive first class degrees than those achieving similar A Level results from independent schools (Hoare and Johnston 2011) this would seem to be consistent with equity of access. Selectors who vary conditional offers or change selection decisions on the basis of candidates' schools are more likely to bring about equitable entry outcomes than those who do not vary conditional offers, as they can make selections according to applicant potential rather than academic attainment.

However, although variation courses did show a tendency to recognise context, the impact of this was likely to be limited. As previously discussed, the majority of courses (54 per cent) did not vary offers between applicants. This may partly be explained by the nature of the admissions process at some universities, as administrative officers working in centralised admissions offices were less willing to vary offer levels between applicants than academic admissions tutors. Therefore, the tendency for admissions decisions to be centralised following the recommendations to increase transparency and consistency in admissions by the Schwartz report (2004) may reduce the extent to which institutions vary conditional offers below the levels identified in this chapter.

The evidence presented in Model 3 also suggests that students from Indian and Mixed Race backgrounds were more likely to receive offers which would hinder their entry compared to white candidates. This may be explained by factors which were not

included in the model and requires further investigation before any potential impact this has on equity of access is evaluated. However, it may be an indication that, for some groups, the use of conditional offers is not consistent with equity of access.

Models 2 and 3 suggest that applicants who have more A Levels are more likely to receive a helpful offer of admission and less likely to receive an offer which impedes their entry than their counterparts taking fewer A Levels. It could be argued that this is consistent with equity of access if it recognises that applicants of equal ability and who are equally motivated may achieve lower A Level results if they take additional subjects because of the extra workload. By raising offers for students who take fewer qualifications and lowering offers for those who take more qualifications, this dynamic is recognised in the admissions process in a manner which is consistent with equity of access.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that conditional offer levels were raised for those expected to achieve at higher levels, and conversely lowered for those who were predicted to attain lower results. It could be argued that this was not consistent with equity of access because it raised entry requirements for students who were expected to achieve at higher levels, who arguably *deserve* to have a greater chance of entering their chosen course than similar pupils expected to attain lower results. This is particularly the case if predicted attainment is taken as a function of pupil ability and effort (Saunders 1990).

Therefore, while variation in offer levels by candidates' educational background and the number of A Levels taken could be argued to be consistent with equity of access, changing offer requirements to fit with candidates' predicted attainment may impede equity of access.

## **7. Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed how offer variation was used in universities in 2006/07 using a multivariate analysis of UCAS data to address the research questions set out at the beginning of the chapter.

Firstly, this chapter examined how university admissions behaviour in the use of conditional offers was associated with institutional reputation and course popularity.

The analyses suggest that the decision about whether or not to vary conditional offers is partly associated institutional reputation and course popularity. Russell Group universities are more likely to vary offer conditions than post-1992 universities. More popular courses are less likely to vary conditional offers than their less popular counterparts. Finally, courses which lose a higher proportion of applicants after firm and insurance course choices have been selected are less likely to raise or lower offer conditions for particular candidates than those which retain a higher proportion of applicants at the third admissions stage.

That more popular courses, controlling for institution-type, are less likely to vary conditional offers than less popular courses partly supports the research presented in the previous chapter where evidence suggested that large numbers of applications per place could deter selectors from varying offers.

However, there was a large amount of unexplained variation in the different approaches to the allocation of conditional offers. This supports evidence presented in the previous chapter which showed that selectors' roles and preferences had a strong influence in the use of discretion in conditional offer levels, as did the presence of an additional selection stage such as an interview. Across the case institutions, variation in offer levels was seen to a greater degree among academic selectors than administrative officers. Some academic selectors also avoided varying conditional offers, for example because it was felt to be fairer to applicants to give all the same standard requirements.

There was mixed evidence as to whether admissions behaviour in terms of conditional offer variation would facilitate or impede equity of access. Where conditional offers were varied, the previous chapter suggested that this was done to recognise candidates' academic profiles and educational contexts. Offers were varied to make 'equivalent' offers to candidates from different educational backgrounds in terms of school achievement and policy. This chapter partly supports these findings: students from non-selective schools were more likely to receive helpful offers and less likely to receive higher offer than standard compared to their equally-qualified but more privileged counterparts in a manner consistent with equity of access.



However, the evidence presented here suggests that conditional offers are more likely to be lowered for applicants predicted to achieve at lower levels. Although this may seem unexpected given the clear desirability of high achievers demonstrated in the previous chapters, there was no evidence in the qualitative findings that offers were lowered for students with higher levels of predicted attainment. This association may suggest therefore that conditional offers are not used to facilitate the entry of desirable applicants predicted to achieve at high levels, but are used to *entice* desirable applicants. As the previous chapter showed that there was a perception amongst admissions staff that conditional offers were viewed by candidates as indicators of course quality, this may have created an incentive to raise conditional offers as high as possible to match candidates' predicted grades.

However, although raising conditional offers for those predicted to achieve at higher levels may assist universities to recruit a sufficient number of applicants, the behaviour is not consistent with equity of access. It could be argued that pupils with a higher level of ability or who work more diligently deserve to enter university to a greater extent than their peers who are predicted to achieve at lower levels, controlling for social and educational background.

Therefore, university reputation and course popularity do influence whether conditional offers are varied. Although different types of university are equally likely to lower or raise offer levels, there is some evidence to suggest the course popularity is associated with the way conditional offers are used. Offers are raised and lowered for different students according to their academic and educational characteristics. Although in some cases this may be consistent with equity of access, it could be argued that raising offer levels for those predicted to achieve at higher levels is likely to impede equity of access to higher education.

## Chapter 7 **Influencing the Size and Shape of the Applicant Pool**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will examine how university recruitment is used to change the size and shape of the applicant pool, discussing the different strategies taken by the case universities to sustain current recruitment trends and expand into new markets. The analyses will focus on institutions' mainstream recruitment activities to attract applications from potential home students<sup>101</sup> to address the research questions:

- 2a. To what extent and why do recruitment strategies differ between universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity?
- 2c. To what extent do university recruitment policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?

Although this research primarily considers the UK home student market, recruitment activities aimed at EU and overseas students are also discussed<sup>102</sup>. Programmes aimed to maximise recruitment from specific sub-sections of the prospective student population, under the aegis of widening participation, will be considered separately in the following chapter.

This chapter will develop typologies for institutional recruitment strategies based on the types of students which were targeted and the geographical scope of activities, discussing whether the evidence suggests that strategies facilitate or impede equity of access.

This chapter will conclude that reputation and popularity do inform institutions' recruitment strategies in the manner hypothesised in Chapter 2<sup>103</sup>, and this does have implications for equity of access. However, the hypotheses do not adequately capture university's aims to recruit a balanced mix of students or the pressures on universities to constantly evolve and improve.

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<sup>101</sup> A description of how each institution organised its recruitment activities is available in Appendix 5

<sup>102</sup> Home and EU students are considered the same for funding purposes by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, but institutions can recruit freely from outside the UK and EU without reference to HEFCE target numbers (West and Barham 2009)

<sup>103</sup> The hypotheses are restated in the conclusions to this chapter.

## **2. Recruitment Strategies: Who is targeted?**

This section will discuss which students universities want to recruit via stated targets and as a result of the different elements of the marketing mix. The case institutions differed both in the *types* of students sought and in the *scope* of their activities (local, regional, national or further afield). Considering institutional recruitment programmes and priorities both in terms of ‘type’ and ‘scope’, three different strategic approaches towards students recruitment were identified: demand creation; catch-all focus; and creaming. Within each of these strategies, universities could focus their efforts on the immediate local vicinity, a wider regional base or concentrate on students from across the national and even international consumer market.

Although the main recruitment strategies of each institution can be effectively characterised by this typology, there were variations in approach between different courses within institutions according to their levels of reputation and popularity.

### ***2.1 Demand Creation***

This strategy involves creating demand which would otherwise not exist in order to enlarge the prospective student pool. Institutions and courses adopting this approach could concentrate recruitment efforts on students located the immediate vicinity, making links with schools in the nearby conurbations (as with Eastern New University), or aim to create demand from a wider area for specific courses with lower levels of applications per place (Southern Rural University and Northern Town University).

#### ***2.1.1. Localism to Target the Non-Traditional Student***

For many recruiters, local students and students from widening participation backgrounds were one and the same. Local students were described as being from lower income and non-traditional HE participating backgrounds. In contrast, students from more advantaged and high-achieving backgrounds were perceived as coming from a more diffuse area.

For some institutions, local less-privileged applicants were targeted by mainstream recruitment activities rather than widening participation initiatives. The recruiting Eastern New University used this approach, and there was some evidence of a similar local focus at Southern Rural University and Northern Town University. Promotional

activities such as school liaison work, taster events and open days were utilised by all three non-Russell Group universities to create demand locally. However, Eastern New University showed a particular desire to target local students, with a bursary for students attending partner colleges in the area and through the purchase of an additional campus in a nearby but different town.

“we thought we could recruit from both sites because [the secondary campus] has a different catchment to [the main campus]” *Associate Dean, Business and Administration, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

One reason non-Russell Group institutions concentrated on the local area was that staff had identified that recruitment relied on interest from these students. Activities were used to support existing recruitment patterns, ensuring that potential students continued to give the universities custom:

“there are some courses which are national sellers but ... a vast majority of our home students come from [a local area] so that’s the area we concentrate on”, *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“we’ve noticed a considerable trend in the last couple of years that a lot of our students are... coming from on our doorstep... I’ve got more scope now to focus locally” *Recruitment Officer, Southern Rural University*

### 2.1.2. Demand Creation and Course Popularity

For the majority of courses at Southern Rural University and Northern Town University, regionally-bounded activities were intended to persuade applicants to enrol at the institution rather than a named competitor. In other words, the local focus was used to differentiate these universities and create a ‘brand’:

“traditionally we’ve taken groups of students from lower income and non-traditional university backgrounds... given our local competitors it’s the niche that we have” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, for the recruiting Eastern New University, focusing on the local vicinity was undertaken to encourage potential students to enter HE rather than haemorrhage to the job market:

“the sorts of students who choose us are... deciding whether to go to university or whether to get a job” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Therefore, local ‘demand creation’ does not perfectly characterise the regional recruitment strategies for the popular, new Southern Rural University and the recruiting, old Northern Town University. However, there was some evidence of demand creation strategies at both of these institutions. Both focused on the regional and national landscapes with the strategy varying between different courses.

Less popular and less highly-regarded programmes needed to focus on the nearby vicinity and expend more effort on adjusting elements of the marketing mix to promote student recruitment than courses with more comfortable market positions. For example, at Southern Rural University an additional bursary was available to students enrolling on less popular STEM courses<sup>104</sup>. However, subject-specific demand creation for less popular courses was discussed with particular strength at Northern Town University:

“we have selecting [medical related] courses... we currently do not... spend a lot of time... chasing or forcing academics to do [recruitment activities]... but there are other courses where... we definitely want to increase the number of students” *Associate Dean, Science Courses, Northern Town University*

“I’m doing this outreach work because I think that it’s necessary for the department and in order to be able to recruit in the future for us all to be stable in our jobs” *Admissions Tutor, Social Sciences Course, Northern Town University*

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<sup>104</sup> As shown in Chapter 1, STEM courses have particular recruitment difficulties.

Similarly, although the main strategy of Eastern New University was demand creation, there was evidence of a difference between less popular courses and those more popular courses which had connections to professional careers:

“people used to say... the top students won’t come to you... People come to do certain subjects... from a lot of very high and solid backgrounds in terms of academic tradition” *Associate Dean, Creative Arts and Sciences, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

### 2.1.3 Demand Creation for Community Relations

Another discourse in relation to the local focus of university recruitment strategies emerged, with an institution’s role in the community inextricably linked with its mission as an access university. Therefore the desire to concentrate recruitment efforts on the local area did not solely stem from a desire to maintain the current consumer base, but also from the deeper motive of wishing to provide educational opportunities. Concentrating on the local area allowed institutions to provide a natural progression link from FE into HE for first-generation HE students attending local colleges and supplied the local economy with particular skills.

“[the introduction of a maths/computing course is] creating that provision for... the local population, the local economy... [this] university prides itself on its links with the community, with the city” *Associate Dean, Maths/Computing and Communications, Northern Town University*

“we need to be very closely working with our partner colleges in the region... in terms of encouraging progression” *Marketing Manager, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

The impact of this can be seen to cement these universities as the natural “next-step” progression institution for students in the local area. By creating demand for higher education in the local vicinity, universities were able to maintain a consumer base in particular for less popular courses, but were also able to fulfil a desire to play a positive role in the local community.

### *2.1.4 Equity of Access*

The evidence suggests that the extent to which demand creation was used varied according to institutional reputation and course popularity. Newer institutions and more recruiting courses focused to a greater extent on demand creation, pulling in local applicants who otherwise might not enter higher education. Where course popularity levels and universities' reputations are more secure, demand creation is not the chosen strategy. The exception was where courses experienced particular difficulties regarding recruitment, as with STEM courses at Southern Rural University where demand creation focused on the national rather than the local market. However, institutional ethos also played a role in the extent to which mainstream recruitment activities were used to create demand and widen access to non-traditional students.

Thus, demand creation is likely to facilitate access to HE for non-traditional participants, but only for less-popular courses and less prestigious institutions. Although demand creation and a local focus may encourage increased access for those who are less confident about their place in higher education (Reay et al 2005), the differential use of the strategy across different courses and universities may impede equity of access. Non-traditional students were encouraged to see their local institution as the natural progression route and this may have discouraged them from moving away from home. There is no evidence that students who study locally have less favourable outcomes than those who move away to study. However, this dynamic may potentially impede equity of access if localism constrains student choices (Le Grand 1991).

It could be argued that the absence of local demand creation at Central Research University demonstrates that institutional recruitment policies are inequitable. However, this interpretation does not take account of the widening participation initiatives at the Russell Group case institution which are discussed in the following chapter. Therefore, although general recruitment at Central Research University did not target local, non-traditional students, this segment was targeted at each university.

## **2.2 Catch All Consumers**

Universities also tried to maintain sufficient interest from potential students by targeting as many consumers as possible. This 'catch-all' approach could take two forms: either the university could aim to appeal to all students without reference to

academic or socio-demographic characteristics (non-differentiation) or the institution could aim to attract students from several different identified parts of the market (multiple segmentation). These strategies best characterise mainstream recruitment at Southern Rural University and Northern Town University respectively.

Both Southern Rural University and Northern Town University used their marketing mixes to attract all applicants who desired to enrol at these institutions. This contrasts with the strategies of Eastern New University and Central Research University, where particular students were categorised as being particularly desirable or identified as right to target according to background or academic factors. However, although there was a strong discourse regarding ‘non-targeting’ at both ‘catch-all’ institutions there was variation in this between the two universities.

### *2.2.1 Attract All Consumers to Find the ‘Right’ Student*

The popular, new Southern Rural University did not identify desirable consumers via socio-demographic or academic characteristics. In practice, this meant that recruitment efforts were focused on the entire consumer base. However, this was not because the university did not have a preference for certain types of consumer, with a clear and consistent conception of the ‘right’ student given by recruitment managers and officers.

“we are trying to... recruit people who will benefit and will be the right kind of student... for what we do” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

“the lessons are a bit smaller and you’re getting a little bit more one-to-one tuition... you know the type of students that are going to fit into... this type of working environment” *Recruitment Officer, Southern Rural University*

For Southern Rural University, the motives for recruiting the ‘right’ student were not based on a repositioning of the university in terms of reputation or undertaken to achieve adequate student numbers. There was no evidence that the ‘right’ student would facilitate creaming or create demand. Rather, the discourse of the ‘right’ student demonstrated an understanding about how fixed elements of the marketing mix would appeal to certain consumers. In particular, the teaching ethos, the reduced range of courses on offer and the small, rural campus were considered attractive by



certain students but deterred others. Recruiting students who did not ‘fit’ with the institution was seen as a prelude to student dissatisfaction and attrition.

Thus, the recruitment strategy adopted by Southern Rural University was in part *determined* by the less malleable elements of its marketing mix: as it could not adapt its campus to attract particular students, it sought out particular students who would ‘fit’ with the campus. Given the fixed programme and delivery elements of the marketing mix, it was felt that promotional material and activities such as campus visits and schools liaison activity should give an accurate a picture of the university so that only the ‘right’ students would chose to apply.

“we have to work to get good retention rates. We accept that we are... a slightly different university... so we want people to come and see us and... make sure it’s right for them” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

### 2.2.2 *Attract All Consumers to Fill Student Places*

For the less popular, pre-1992 Northern Town University the catch-all strategy was intended to facilitate the recruitment of *all* students. Explicit reference was made to the fact that there was no preference regarding student type, or no ‘ideal’ student. The goal was to recruit any student who might wish to study on one of the university’s programmes:

“I wouldn’t say that there is a particular type of student, because we’ll have any type of student” *Associate Dean, Maths/Computing and Communications, Northern Town University*

This approach meant using the marketing mix to target as many consumers as possible. This was most clearly demonstrated in Northern Town University’s compact scheme and summer school<sup>105</sup>. Rather than restrict eligibility to these programmes, as was the case at other institutions, all potential students could participate making them mainstream recruitment activities rather than widening participation initiatives.

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<sup>105</sup> These are described more fully in Appendix 5.

### 2.2.3 *Catch All and Popularity*

Thus, both Southern Rural University and Northern Town University desired that there should be a universal, catch-all, student policy in terms of socio-demographic and academic backgrounds, although there was a stronger given identity of the ‘right’ student at Southern Rural University. This can be attributed to the differences in popularity between the two institutions, with Northern Town University having, on average, fewer applicants per place than the new university.

Although both universities were concerned with meeting HEFCE recruitment targets, this was a more difficult task for Northern Town University, which needed to enter clearing to a much greater degree. Thus, rather than turning the ‘wrong’ students away, different approaches were needed to help retain enrolled students. In particular, price factors were used to ensure students did not drop-out for academic reasons or fail to progress. Bursary eligibility was conditional on academic engagement, and bursary amounts increased for third-year students to help those near degree completion to cope financially.

### 2.2.4 *Regional Focus for Pragmatism but not Reputation*

Both catch-all institutions focused their activities on a wide but geographically-bounded slice of the surrounding area, encompassing neighbouring regions and the immediate vicinity<sup>106</sup>. This was due to consumer and university resource constraints, with staff recognising that it would be too costly for them and for applicants to travel a significant distance for university recruitment activities.

“we’re getting more and more people booking [on to open days] from you know Scotland, abroad, because it’s very easy, but they don’t necessarily turn up”,  
*Marketing Officer, Southern Rural University*

“we do get applicants and enquiries from [further away]... but trying to spend money to get them could be better spent elsewhere. So it is more of a regional campaign”  
*Marketing Officer, Northern Town University*

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<sup>106</sup> Northern Town University and Southern Rural University both focused recruitment activities outside of their own Nomenclature Territorial Unit for Statistics (NUTS) region.

However, there was a minority view expressed by staff working at Northern Town University that concentrating recruitment efforts on regional market might negatively affect the university's reputation because local students were seen as being lower-attaining, widening participation students:

“if you haven't got that [national] standing, if you haven't got that academic profile and... reputation, it can be very damaging for you. You can get into a downward spiral of attracting only students... with less abilities”, *Marketing Manager, Northern Town University*

Thus, pressures to contain costs could be viewed as constraining the institution from recruiting candidates from the national arena, associated with maintaining a strong reputation. However, this problem was not identified by the new universities, which chose to focus on the region or local vicinity in contrast to the pre-1992 Northern Town University which was less over-subscribed than other institutions of this type.

#### 2.2.5 Equity of Access

The catch-all approach to recruitment was used at two different institutions for different reasons. It was a means for recruiting for the less popular Northern Town University, but was adapted to permit indirect selection<sup>107</sup> for the more popular Southern Rural University.

Although the motivations underpinning the strategies were different, that no particular students were targeted by the principal recruitment strategies of either Northern Town University or Southern Rural University was consistent with equity of access. By including all types of applicant in recruitment activities, students from particular backgrounds were less likely to be deterred from or attracted to these institutions because of university recruitment behaviour. Therefore pupil choices were less likely to be constrained systematically by university actions, facilitating equity of access.

However, because of practical reasons these universities focused activities on geographically-bounded regions. This approach was not intended to exclude certain candidates according to background characteristics. However, some recruiters at

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<sup>107</sup> As Chapters 4 and 5 show, Southern Rural University used weak selection mechanisms for the most part and the personal statement and school reference played little role in selector decision-making. Thus, student 'fit' was not assessed during the admissions process.

Northern Town University felt this approach could damage institutional reputation demonstrating that local students were seen as being lower academic achievers from non-traditional backgrounds. Therefore, restricting recruitment activities to a particular geographic area may impede equity of access by encouraging localism in a similar way to local demand creation<sup>108</sup>.

Furthermore, the evidence also suggests that although university staff members could manipulate certain elements of the marketing mix, some parts of this such as campus location were outside of their control. Although this does not show that university recruitment behaviour affects equity of access, it does demonstrate that the marketing mix can influence which consumers find institutions attractive. As research suggests that some elements of universities' marketing mix may systematically appeal to or deter students from particular backgrounds (Pugsley 2004; Reay et al 2005), this lack of control over parts of the marketing mix may impede equity of access in a way which cannot easily be mitigated by institutions.

### *2.3 Skimming the Cream*

There was evidence of cream-skimming in the recruitment strategies of each case institution. However, whether it was a primary or a secondary strategy and whether it was undertaken only for specific courses varied between the different universities.

#### *2.3.1 National Cream-Skimming*

Only the popular, Central Research University used cream-skimming as the principal means for attracting the students it wished to enrol and used all malleable elements of the marketing mix to facilitate this aim. The ideal 'top quality' student was clearly conceptualised across the university as intelligent and hard-working but also in terms of their extra-curricular activities and contribution to campus. Thus, the cream of the student population was not defined in terms of background attributes, but in terms of academic capability and personal character<sup>109</sup>.

“we do pride ourselves in having an extremely diverse and capable

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<sup>108</sup> See section 2.1.4 for more details.

<sup>109</sup> Not only was this vision of the ideal student consistent across the university, but it was also supported by admissions criteria, which ranked candidates not only according to academic attributes but also on extra-curricular activities and community engagement, as discussed in Chapter 4.

demographic... who are involved in a wide range of activities outside of academia in addition to scoring very highly in that role” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

There were several reasons for desiring capable, active students which would fit with the university’s offering. There was a wish to promote student harmony, to recruit a student body which would enrich campus atmosphere and to assist the university to play a positive role in the community.

“we do offer something that isn't just the standard curriculum, but has a wider aspiration... we are looking for applicants who can take advantage of that and really be in a position to make a strong contribution to society” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

The lively campus atmosphere, achieved as a result of recruiting ‘ideal’ students, was seen as being an important component of the university’s reputation and brand. However, this atmosphere was also perceived to demonstrate that students were appreciative of their university’s position in the institutional hierarchy and that they were thus keen to support the benefits this would confer in terms of post-graduation employment. Thus, student calibre and university prestige were inextricably linked:

“it fascinates me to see how busy our students are... [there is a] significant investment on their part to making sure that they are the ones that employers want to recruit in addition of having the benefit of coming from such a prestigious university” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

The university used the programme and promotional elements of its marketing mix to encourage the recruitment of this segment of the student population. Unlike the other universities which participated in this research, school UCAS score played a more significant role than location in determining whether or not promotional activities were delivered there, meaning that recruitment activities could reach across the UK.

Similarly, new courses were introduced and existing courses re-developed to attract high-quality applicants. For example, a social studies department had introduced a joint degree with a maths/computing department as this specialised degree required a

versatile and creative mind to successfully engage with the course. In contrast to the other case institutions, some course designers at Central Research University considered the calibre of the potential student above course popularity:

“Although it’s only a small number of students compared to our total... we’re looking at very high-quality students” *Admissions Tutor, Social Studies, Central Research University*

Although high-quality students were not defined in terms of socio-demographic factors, this vision of the ideal student did, apparently unintentionally, overlap with some background characteristics. Although widening participation recruitment programmes were aimed at students from non-traditional HE participating backgrounds, the work of the mainstream recruitment officers was devoted to a very particular demographic of students; a specific segment of the consumer market defined both in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity. This was partly because of their suitability for the university in terms of ‘fit’ but also because they were pre-disposed to think highly of the university and thus were an easy market to target:

“we do obviously attract high-achieving [students]... this is a terrible stereotype but... white, middle class... we target those people because they’re the most likely people to come and the most likely people to achieve” *Recruitment Officer, Central Research University*

Thus, although Central Research University was a selecting institution with a strong reputation, a great deal of effort was expended on ensuring that desirable applicants were attracted. The admissions process could then whittle these applicants down to a high-quality pool of students to whom places were then offered.

### 2.3.2 *Creaming from Home and Abroad*

There was evidence of a secondary recruitment strategy to cream academic achievers at the less-selective Eastern New University. Elements of the marketing mix at this institution were used to appeal to high-attaining segments of the consumer market, based in the UK and in the EU, which differed from the university’s primary market of local, non-traditional students.

High-achieving home students were targeted via place and price factors, in particular using bursaries to reward academic attainment and sporting prowess. Although this can be interpreted as a clear signal to these consumers of their desirability to the institution and reward those who chose to study at Eastern New University over other institutions, these were not the terms in which this bursary package was described. Rather, the academic and sporting bursaries were discussed as a means for the institution to recognise the historical development of its secondary campus, which had specialised in education and sport. Thus, the bursaries were used to emphasise the university's history and consequently its reputational standing.

“[the secondary campus] has a rich history of sport... a lot of the activity there is teacher training... A level points are important in that environment. So, we set aside some bursaries for academic... and sporting excellence” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Main Campus, Eastern New University*

This also demonstrates that the secondary campus, which had been purchased prior to 2008/09 was used to reposition Eastern New University. Institutional reputation increased via the incorporation of a prestigious campus<sup>110</sup>. This suggests that, as well as creating demand, the university hoped to attract a different segment of the consumer market; namely those placing a higher premium on institutional reputation.

“[The secondary campus] is brilliant because that's... teacher training... We've got good reputation from that” *Associate Dean, Creative Arts and Sciences, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Eastern New University also targeted markets where cream-skimming was easier because there was no competition for students from other UK institutions. The university targeted students from EU accession countries which joined the Union after 2004. Academic bursary eligibility was extended to EU-domiciled students. A dedicated member of staff worked to increase applications from accession countries and an English language summer school was used to facilitate potential students' transition into the university. This was undertaken to enrich the educational and

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<sup>110</sup> The university also rebranded itself after purchasing the secondary campus to disassociate itself from its previous, less reputable incarnation and the town in which the main campus was located.

cultural experience of all students by promoting diversity, but was also a deliberate strategy to cream-skim high-quality students.

“there were all these new students coming on to the market and nobody was really bothering to look at them... The university saw it as a method of getting higher calibre students” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

### 2.3.3 Indirect Creaming: Recruitment Strategies to Further Selection

There was evidence of attempts to manipulate the marketing mix at the other case study universities in order to facilitate cream-skimming. At Southern Rural University and Northern Town University, although the university-wide strategy was to catch students from across the consumer market, there was some evidence of creaming.

At Northern Town University, there was evidence that admissions tutors for selecting courses could use promotional elements of the marketing mix to increase applications above an already secure base to facilitate direct selection<sup>111</sup>. Increasing the number of applicants was seen as a way of enabling the selector to skim the cream of the applicant pool, rather than to recruit sufficient numbers of students:

“By upping the levels of recruitment and having a lot of choice then I can... get the top quality students” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related Course, Northern Town University*

At the more popular Southern Rural University, there was evidence of desire to remove elements of the marketing mix which contributed positively to demand creation. Academic members of staff were keen to remove the HE Diploma courses from the institution’s offerings. The justification for this was related to equity; academic staff felt that it was possible for lower-achieving students to use HE Diplomas as a ‘back door route’ to a place on a full degree programme, which would have been denied to them if they had applied for a degree directly. However, removing HE Diplomas would remove an option for study from lower-achieving students.

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<sup>111</sup> This is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.



Thus, for the more popular courses at the less-oversubscribed Northern Town University and the popular new Southern Rural University, there was evidence of recruitment strategies being used to further the aim of enrolling a more selective intake. At Northern Town University, increasing total recruitment allowed admissions staff members to choose a more selective cohort. For Southern Rural University, which was becoming increasingly popularity, this was to be achieved by eliminating elements of the marketing mix such as degree programmes which would appeal to students with lower levels of attainment.

#### *2.3.4 Equity of Access*

The evidence suggests that cream-skimming is associated with both reputation and popularity. Central Research University displayed the strongest evidence of the four case institutions of creaming. More popular courses at Northern Town University also aimed to cream-skin, although here this was undertaken by a catch-all strategy to raise popularity levels so that creaming could be undertaken during the admissions process.

The focus on high-achievers at Central Research University was not intended to exclude students according to their demographic or social characteristics. However, recruitment staff acknowledged that promotional elements of the marketing mix would have this effect. Consequently, Central Research University's primary recruitment strategy did not facilitate equity of access, but rather encouraged stable enrolment patterns from advantaged students. Given the association between attendance at a Russell Group university and post-graduate earnings (Chevalier and Conlon 2003) this is also likely to restrict social mobility.

There was also evidence of cream-skimming at the new and recruiting Eastern New University. However, this strategy ran in parallel with a recruitment programme designed to create demand for HE locally. Therefore, recruitment activities were designed to open up the university to more markets than at Central Research University. Thus, although targeting high academic achievers could exclude students according to social and educational background, when accompanied with a demand creation strategy this would facilitate equity of access as no student groups were systematically excluded via institutional recruitment activities.

At Southern Rural University, there was evidence of desire to select-out undesirable students by removing HE Diplomas from the marketing mix. Although it could be argued that this suggests a desire to cream-skim, the strategy was not justified in these terms. Rather, these demand-creation elements of the marketing mix were seen as inequitable, as they provided a ‘back door’ route into the university. However, pressures to remove sub-degree courses is not consistent with equity of access, because it deprives students who have the potential to succeed at university but who have under-achieved at school level from accessing higher education.

#### ***2.4 A Desire for Balance: Targeting ‘Absent’ Groups***

All the case study institutions expressed a desire to recruit a balanced intake or a heterogeneous group of students. However, the way ‘balance’ was defined, and the way the universities aimed to achieve it, varied between the different institutions.

##### *2.4.1 Catch-All Balance*

Balance was a strong concern at both Southern Rural University and Northern Town University, with a heterogeneous student population widely spoken of as desirable across these institutions. Both had similar goals of recruiting a balanced student population in terms of demographic characteristics. This is what makes these institutions ‘catch-all’: the fact that these universities desired to achieve a balanced intake in terms of demographic, geographic and academic characteristics.

“we want our student population to be as representative of the general population as it can be” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

“I would say that the ethos of the university... is that we want all different types of students” *Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

Staff members at both universities felt that balance would enhance the student experience academically and culturally, and enable the university to fulfil its social obligations by recruiting students from across the population rather than a privileged minority.

“nobody wants to go somewhere where everybody’s the same... it contributes to the whole learning experience” *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

“they’ll meet types of people that they’ve never come across before... it makes them better prepared to be future citizens... university has a role to play in improving society” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, the ‘absent groups’ who were missing from campus and who thus needed to be targeted via recruitment initiatives differed between the two universities. This resulted in different emphases in recruitment efforts.

For Southern Rural University, concern was expressed about the recruitment of ethnic minority students. This can be attributed to the absence of this student group on campus, which resulted from fixed elements of the marketing mix such as the university’s rural location and the arts/humanities focus in course provision. Balance at this university was deemed desirable not only as a good in and of itself, but because of the vicious circle for diversity associated with having a white student intake: the student population was itself an element of the marketing mix was acted as a deterrent to students from minority ethnic groups.

“it’s very white dominated and it would be nice just to have a bit more diversity... sometimes that can put people off... seeing a load of white faces” *Recruitment Officer, Southern Rural University*

Conversely, Northern Town University recruited a significant proportion of students from less-affluent and locally-based ethnic minority communities. Balance was thus seen as a need to promote the recruitment of middle-class students and those living across the UK. Although a minority view for desiring this student group was to maintain the university’s reputation as discussed in the previous section (cf sect. 2.3.3), recruiting absent groups was more strongly discussed in relation to promoting diversity to enhance the learning experience.

“we may want to have more middle class students... [Students] want to be exposed to certain debates and certain discussions and you get that from a very balanced student body” *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

Thus, both Southern Rural University and Northern Town University used elements of the marketing mix to ensure that their recruitment strategies were genuinely catch-all. This resulted in a multiple segmentation strategy, with these universities targeting different pockets of the student population.

For example, both universities offered a mixed portfolio of courses in terms of academic level. Unusually for an old institution, Northern Town University offered foundation years in addition to traditional degree courses, enabling students without the necessary qualifications for full degree entry to enrol at the institution. Southern Rural University similarly had a mixed portfolio of courses, with HE Diplomas at the university and Foundation Degrees offered by partner colleges catering for students without the necessary qualifications for full degree entry. This element of the marketing mix was supported by the admissions processes of each institution with non-A Level qualifications equalised via the UCAS tariff.<sup>112</sup>

Similarly, both Southern Rural University and Northern Town University used price elements of the marketing mix to support the recruitment of a diverse student body, by extending bursary schemes to middle income groups in an attempt to support or, more explicitly, to attract students from different segments of the market:

“somebody in that [high] income bracket probably [doesn’t feel the bursary is] a lot of money, but it’s possible if they went to another institution they wouldn’t get anything” *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Southern Rural University*

Thus, both catch-all universities had secondary goals of achieving heterogeneous intakes, using elements of the marketing mix to further this process.

#### 2.4.2 Access for Balance

Central Research University also aimed to recruit a balanced student intake. Widening participation activities were used to target ‘absent’ students from lower income

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<sup>112</sup> See Chapter 4 for further details.

backgrounds and less high-attaining schools. In common with the other universities, student diversity was seen as being important to enhance the academic and social elements of the student experience and to enable the university to contribute positively to the community.

“part of the reason for coming to university is about having a diverse student body, different experiences, different angles... that kind of diversity really makes universities lively places... A university has to be an integral part of the community” *Recruitment Officer, Central Research University*

Here, diversity of the home market was seen as being entirely driven by widening participation activities. This suggests that, for Central Research University diversity was to be achieved through the targeting of the non-traditional HE students. To this end, elements of the marketing mix were used to attract prospective students from this segment with the *potential* to achieve at the same level as the university’s traditional consumer base. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 8.

#### 2.4.3 International and Postgraduate Recruitment

International student recruitment was discussed by selectors at all of the case institutions<sup>113</sup>. The discourse surrounding the desirability of international students focused on the additional revenue they would bring to the university.

“recruitment abroad and international students obviously is very important to us as well and to every university because of financial implications” *Admissions Tutor, Biological Sciences, Northern Town University*

However, at Eastern New University, the recruitment of international and EU students was discussed in relation to the recruitment of a balanced intake as well as financial reward. Here, international student recruitment brought benefits to the learning experience and the social development of the students.

"[Balance] brings in an international curriculum deliberately enforced by the fact that you have diversity. You've got to have difference within your curriculum to

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<sup>113</sup> Although the interview schedules focused on home undergraduate recruitment, other desired sections of the consumer market and in particular international students, were discussed by respondents spontaneously, demonstrating the importance of this market to university recruiters.

appeal to different people and to give a balanced view of the world" *Associate Dean, Creative Arts and Sciences, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Promotional elements of the marketing mix in particular were used to attract international students, with visits to particular countries and a senior member of staff being deployed to encourage students from overseas to apply to Eastern New University. International student recruitment was perceived to be particularly important by university staff.

Some staff members expressed concern that the drive to recruit international students ran contrary to the goal of maintaining a diverse student intake and was detrimental to the learning experience:

“there is so much pressure on us to recruit international students, we don’t concern ourselves if we end up with a class here where let’s say 50 of the students from India, 20 from China and five are from the UK... we’re... driven by targets and income” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Similarly, there was evidence that Central Research University looked to enhance the diversity of its student population via the recruitment of international students. However, in contrast to the other case universities, postgraduate students from home and abroad were spontaneously discussed as being strongly targeted in the recruitment strategy. As well as being linked to the promotion of student diversity, international and postgraduate student recruitment was associated with institutional prestige. The recruitment of these segments of the consumer market was seen to enable the institution to climb in global university league tables.

This had led to a process of review of undergraduate recruitment programmes, which was on-going at the time of the research, to see if resources could be better spent by directing them towards postgraduate recruitment. This was partially to support the university’s bid to increase its reputation but also because, as a popular and selecting university, Central Research University staff felt that undergraduate recruitment could be safely de-prioritised.

“postgraduate... [is] a tougher and more competitive market... Undergraduate we are in a much firmer, more stable market position” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

Thus, a quest for diversity, the stability of the university’s current consumer base and a desire to improve the institution’s reputational standing had resulted in a re-evaluation of Central Research University’s undergraduate recruitment expenditure.

Therefore, although Eastern New University and Central Research University differed in terms of their reputational standing and popularity, both used international rather than home recruitment as a means to promote the recruitment of a balanced student intake. This suggests that the ‘missing group’ of students were perceived to be those from other countries. The home student creaming activities both of these universities, to a greater or lesser extent, were not discussed with reference to promoting a balanced intake. This contrasts with the situation at Northern Town University, for example, where nationally-based, middle-class students were seen as necessary to promote student diversity.

#### *2.4.4 Equity of Access*

All of the case institutions used their marketing mixes to target missing student groups and promote balanced intakes. However, differences in the universities marketing mixes, including reputation and popularity levels, meant that the missing groups of student were different at each institution.

For Eastern New University, targeting international students to increase the financial resources of the university also brought benefits in terms of student diversity, whereas for Central Research University, it was widening participation activities or demand creation that were necessary to promote balance. For the other two universities, the missing groups were discussed in terms ethnicity, with one recruiting more successfully from the white cohort (Southern Rural University) and the other attracting students from a particular minority ethnic group (Northern Town University). Both of these catch-all universities also tried to promote balance by targeting more affluent, middle-class students.

The use of the marketing mix to promote the intake of a balanced cohort of students is consistent with equity of access. By trying to ensure that any 'missing' students were attracted to each institution, university recruitment staff members aimed to increase the extent to which a broad selection of students were included in recruitment strategies. This is likely to allow consumers to exercise freer choices over where they wish to study, enabling admissions outcomes to reflect student preferences without reference to their background characteristics. For example, by encouraging increased interest from ethnic minority students, Southern Rural University aimed to prevent students' choices being constrained by their ethnicity as opposed to their potential to succeed at the institution.

However, the fact that there were 'missing' student groups indicates an existing inequity of access. Although each case institution demonstrated a desire to counter this, the evidence suggests that each of them had failed to attract sufficient interest from particular consumer segments. As previously discussed, this may result from elements of the marketing mix which are difficult to alter, such as university location, but may also result from promotional activities which are within staff members' control. Therefore, although strategies to increase intake balance are consistent with equity of access, the fact that such an approach is necessary indicates that the marketing mix needs to be adjusted to facilitate equity of access.

### **3. University Recruitment: Case Institution Strategies**

Therefore, each case institution pursued different recruitment strategies, although there was some overlap, particularly in relation to Southern Rural University and Northern Town University which shared goals and approaches to student recruitment.

#### ***3.1 Multiple Segmentation***

Both the popular new Southern Rural University and less popular old Northern Town University aimed to target multiple segments of the consumer market, maintaining current consumer bases whilst recruiting from additional and different markets. This was undertaken with a view to promoting student diversity and filling the places of less popular courses.

The overall effect of this was for a catch-all policy to be used, with promotional activities, price factors and programme characteristics all directed to maximise the



institutions' appeal as widely as possible. Student diversity was supported via the provision of different types of course, student bursaries and, to a lesser extent, promotional activities. Northern Town University, which had a greater freedom to develop its campus than Southern Rural University, was also in the process of rebuilding and upgrading its campus facilities to make them more inclusive to students from different backgrounds and improve the aesthetic attributes of the campus to increase recruitment more generally.

Within this overall strategy for both universities there was evidence of both creaming and demand creation for more and less popular courses respectively. This suggests that over-subscription levels could modify the universities' overall strategies.

Both institutions concentrated their efforts in a regional-bounded area for both pragmatic motives and reasons of principle. These institutions showed a strong desire for community engagement as well as aiding cost-effective expenditure of recruitment resources. However, although there were strong pressures to ensure that promotional activities were concentrated in the local areas, this could serve to prevent the achievement of a balanced student intake, desired by both institutions.

### ***3.2 Strong Segmentation***

Both the less popular Eastern New University and the highly over-subscribed Central Research University focused their efforts on well-defined, narrow slices of the consumer population. However, the focus of recruitment activities differed between the two institutions.

For Eastern New University, three markets were identified as particularly desirable. The first, locally-based non-traditional students, was targeted via customer maintenance and demand creation. Second, students from across the UK who were academic and sporting achievers were sought by manipulating the method of delivery, though the acquisition of an additional campus, and price factors. Finally, students from EU accession countries and overseas, seen as being a way of skimming the cream and promoting student diversity, were targeted mainly via promotional activities. However, the latter two markets were secondary rather than primary markets, allowing Eastern New University's strategy to be characterised for the most part as local demand creation.

For Central Research University, there were two strands of undergraduate recruitment. The first objective was to maintain the current consumer base of high-achieving students, who tended to come from white and middle-class backgrounds. In addition, some mainstream elements of the marketing mix such as a limited number of sub-degree courses<sup>114</sup> and scholarships were used to increase applications from the non-traditional student population. In addition, this university aimed to recruit postgraduate and international students, refocusing undergraduate recruitment resources to further this end.

Eastern New University's strategy shows attempts to reposition the university in the institutional hierarchy. Original markets were being maintained and extended, but efforts were in progress to improve the institution's reputational standing and to cream more high-achieving applicants. This quite dramatic repositioning was facilitated by the purchase of a campus and rebranding exercise, which allowed the institution to move more quickly up the hierarchy than it would otherwise have been able to do, by co-opting the historical reputation of the alternative site. This was also achieved through the recruitment students from EU accession countries, for which the institution did not face intense competition from other universities. Thus, the fact that the university is a new, recruiting institution did not prevent it from cream-skimming.

Similarly, there was evidence of using student recruitment to promote institutional market repositioning in the strategy adopted by Central Research University, with this institution seeking to allocate resources to maintaining the recruitment of its current consumer base and towards the recruitment of postgraduate and international students. This was seen as being a useful way of promoting student diversity, but was also linked with the goal to raise the university's standing in global league tables. This suggests that mainstream undergraduate recruitment, although important for Central Research University, was given a lower level of priority by this institution than by the other universities which participated in this research.

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<sup>114</sup> Central Research University provided a 2+2 degree option for one department. Students studied for two years in a college of further education before joining the second year of the university degree programme.

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that institutional reputation and course popularity do influence university recruitment strategies. Although differences between the behaviour for different courses were not as stark as for admissions behaviour, there was some evidence that course popularity did result in particular recruitment efforts being made in some cases.

**Hypothesis 5:** Old universities supplying popular courses will take a *laissez faire* approach to student recruitment, relying on their strong brand to attract consumer interest.

Where reputation was particularly strong and courses were in a position to select students as a result of over-subscription, it was hypothesised that universities would take a *laissez faire* approach to student recruitment (Nicholls et al 1995). There was some suggestion of this at Central Research University where there were plans to direct undergraduate recruitment resources to the postgraduate market due to security felt about undergraduate numbers. Similarly, departmental staff members working for more popular courses at Northern Town University were under less pressure to pro-actively recruit students than those working for recruiting courses.

However, overall the evidence suggests that Central Research University did engage in a strong marketing effort. Malleable elements of the marketing mix were used to *cream* high-achievers. The desire to cream students was also shown by some staff members at Northern Town University, who felt that attracting more students from across the UK would help the university recruit high-achievers and promote institutional reputation.

**Hypothesis 6:** Old universities supplying less popular courses will try and increase demand from desirable consumer groups using *strong segmentation*.

There was some evidence of the expected strong-segmentation or creaming among courses at Northern Town University, but it was for one of the more popular courses where this evidence was found. For less popular courses, a strategy of *multiple segmentation* or even non-differentiation was found, with Northern Town University's primary marketing approach being best characterised as 'catch-all'.

This can be attributed partly to Northern Town University's desire to play a positive role in the local community and provide educational opportunities for students in the area. However, it also reflects a desire to promote a balanced intake seen across the case study institutions. Student balance was seen as a means for promoting the learning experience, suggesting that factors other than institutional reputation and course popularity influenced university recruitment behaviour.

**Hypothesis 7:** New universities supplying more popular courses will use *multiple segmentation* to increase overall demand, and allow course selectors to cherry-pick applicants.

There was evidence to support this hypothesis as Southern Rural University did try to catch all students. However, rather than this strategy resulting from the possibility of cream-skimming via admissions policies, the catch-all approach was used to try and attract the 'right' student. As these students could not be identified by characteristics usually used to classify market segments such as socio-demographic factors (Kotler and Fox 1995), the university needed to appeal to as many different types of consumer as possible in order to fill places with students who wanted them.

The selection process was thus intended to be one of *student self-selection*, with as many students targeted and informed about the offering as possible so that they could opt in or out of Southern Research University as they wished, facilitating 'fit'.

**Hypothesis 8:** Universities supplying less popular courses will work to *create demand* among consumer groups which do not traditionally participate in HE in order to fill places.

There was evidence that demand creation strategies were used by the less popular Eastern New University, where feeder schools and colleges in the disadvantaged local area were targeted. Where course popularity was insecure, universities tried to increase recruitment by appealing to sections of the student market which might otherwise not enter higher education. All elements of the marketing mix were used in order to do this.

There was also evidence of demand creation strategies being used by Southern Rural University and Northern Town University for less popular courses in particular. On the whole, these universities competed with other institutions rather than the labour market. However, there was some suggestion of the need for community and outreach work for less popular courses at Northern Town University, and an attempt to make less popular STEM courses more attractive by raising bursary levels at Southern Rural University, which research suggests would appeal more to non-traditional students than conventional HE entrants (Connor et al 1999a).

Thus, although some evidence supports the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2, there were several areas where the case institutions did not behave as expected.

First, although the use of demand creation strategies was partly prompted by market factors, it partly resulted from institutions' desire to play a positive role in creating educational opportunities for the local community. This demonstrates the association between the background of targeted consumer groups and the locality in which they were located. As suggested by previous research (Rolfé 2003) non-traditional students targeted by demand creation strategies tended to come from the local vicinity whereas universities covered broader geographical areas to recruit students with higher levels of academic attainment.

This interaction between geography, student attainment and institutional reputation and mission, is likely to impede equity of access. Although encouraging non-traditional HE participants to consider studying at university is consistent with equity of access, equity is unlikely to be achieved if students are encouraged to consider local institutions above more distant options. This is because students' choices of HEI may be constrained if they consider a more narrow range of options (Pugsley 2004). If choice constraint is linked to students' backgrounds then this will impede equity of access; students will choose HEIs on the basis of their constrained choice set rather than their ability to succeed and appetite for a particular programme of study (Le Grand 1991).

Second, the findings suggest that the recruitment strategies at Southern Rural University and Northern Town University were similar despite apparent differences in reputation and popularity. This may be because they were in fact more similar than

expected. Although Northern Town University was an old institution, its self-identity was not clearly defined as a research institution. It had a strong desire to play a role in the local community, which gave it some features of an access university. Thus, the hierarchical differences between the two universities were not as stark as expected. Furthermore, although Southern Rural University appeared to be a popular institution, staff did not feel secure about institutional recruitment. Not only were some courses less popular than others, as shown in Chapters 4 and 5, but recruiters were concerned that there were lower levels of conversions from accepted applicants than they would have desired. This was attributed to the popularity of the institution as a 'fifth choice' for many applicants, who would be unlikely to actually enter the institution. Overall numbers of applications per place are thus not a perfect indication of popularity.

Third, contrary to expectations Eastern New University attempted to *cream-skim* high-achievers at home and abroad. The evidence suggests that this institution was intent on improving its position in the hierarchy via the purchase of a new campus, and concurrent efforts to attract 'high quality' students with generous scholarships and work to recruit higher-calibre applicants from EU accession countries.

Further the hypotheses did not predict the prioritisation of 'balance' at each case institution. At each university, a heterogeneous student intake was desired in order to improve students' learning experience and fulfil obligations to society. However, the 'absent group' varied between each institution depending on existing recruitment patterns. For example, at Central Research University, widening participation activities and generous bursaries targeted at low-income students to counterbalance the conventional middle-class demographic, whereas at Northern Town University, middle class students were needed to achieve a balanced intake.

The marketing strategies used by the case universities had implications for equity of access. The fact that each institution identified a missing group of students suggests that elements of their marketing mixes influenced student choices systematically according to background characteristics. In other words, consumer preferences were influenced by university recruitment behaviour in ways which prompted their access to certain institutions because of their backgrounds rather than their potential to succeed in higher education. However, although this demonstrates that university

recruitment behaviour may have impeded equity of access, each case institution aimed to overcome this and recruit a balanced intake.

For example, although Central Research University aimed to cream skim high-achieving students, it also used widen participation initiatives to increase interest from consumers who would not traditionally consider Russell Group institutions. Although this behaviour does not support Hypothesis 5, it fits with the institution's predicted selection technique of contextualising attainment (Hypothesis 1). Consequently, the 'post-code premium' may explain this behaviour (Coates and Adnett 2003). However, HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund was not mentioned by recruiters, with WP activities being justified with reference to the university's desire to achieve a balanced intake, as well as to play a positive role in the local community rather than the desire to secure extra income<sup>115</sup>.

Furthermore, the fact that funding was potentially to be diverted from undergraduate to postgraduate recruitment at this institution does not entirely support the *laissez faire* hypothesis. The university had a clear strategy for recruitment and devoted considerable resources to these activities. Rather than resting on its prestige, Central Research University aimed to use its marketing mix to enhance the institution's reputation, explicitly stating that postgraduate recruitment would enable it to climb to a higher place in the global university league tables.

This illustrates another factor underpinning strategies developed by each institution. The universities aimed to *improve* rather than maintain their market positions. Central Research University, although highly ranked among UK institutions, intended to use its marketing mix to catapult itself into the upper echelons of the global league tables. Similarly, Southern Rural University and Eastern New University showed evidence that marketing mixes were used to improve their positions within the national market.

The evidence suggests that Northern Town University aimed to *maintain* rather than improve its position. This can be attributed to the pressures towards localism, which meant this institution was working to keep its reputation against a downwards flowing current. The effort made regarding positioning was thus to secure Northern Town University's place in the hierarchy against downwards pressures.

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<sup>115</sup> This is discussed more fully in Chapters 8 and 9.

The hypotheses developed from the theoretical literature do not anticipate a market where pressures to move upwards, or at least not to move downwards, are felt by all institutions regardless of reputation or popularity. These pressures to improve can be attributed both to increased globalisation and to the removal of the distinction between polytechnic institutions and universities: institutions are now competing against a larger number of providers both at home and abroad in an increasingly marketised system (Browne 2011). In order to compete effectively in a global market and an increasingly competitive national market, universities need to keep raising their game, attracting more applicants and more of the 'right' applicants.

The need to improve may have implications for equity of access. Because university reputation and student attainment were linked by university recruitment staff across the case institutions, universities could try and improve their reputation by targeting academic achievers and excluding students with lower levels of attainment for post-compulsory qualifications. This may impede equity of access by excluding students from non-traditional HE participating backgrounds who have the same potential to succeed as targeted students because of their school performance.

This is shown most clearly by efforts at Southern Rural University to remove HE Diplomas. Although this was justified with reference to procedural fairness, the policy also reflects this institution's growing levels of popularity and pressures to increase selectivity. Removing HE Diplomas would remove an insurance policy for students who have the ability to succeed in HE but who have under-achieved at school level or who have made 'bad' choices about their post-compulsory qualifications and subjects.

Thus, although there is some evidence in support of the research hypotheses, there is also evidence which does not. The picture is a complex one, in which university behaviour is modulated by a number of factors in addition to perceptions about reputational standing and course popularity. It is possible to attribute some of these differences to institutional idiosyncrasies such as ethos, but to do so would mask underlying trends in terms of competitions for students, and universities' role in society which prompt activities to improve institutional reputation, to promote balance and to widen participation. These have contradictory implications for equity of access. Strategies to increase balance will facilitate equity but efforts to improve institutional reputation may undermine these attempts.



## Chapter 8 **Aspiration, Attainment and Affordability to Widen Participation**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the means used by the four case study universities to attract students from groups who do not traditionally participate in higher education to address the research questions:

- 3a. How far are university widening participation programmes influenced by government priorities?
- 2b. How far do widening participation goals and activities vary between universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity and why?
- 2c. To what extent do university recruitment policies and practices facilitate or impede equity of access?

This will be done through an examination of the four case study institutions' access agreements, bursary details given in undergraduate prospectuses and interviews with staff members responsible for widening participation.

The chapter will examine how the government and case universities define 'widening participation students' who are targeted to increase access to higher education. The extent of agreement and disagreement between government objectives and university widening participation (WP) policies and whether this is influenced by university reputation and popularity will be discussed. Second, the chapter will investigate how the case universities try to attract these students, focusing on activities aimed to raise aspiration, attainment and affordability<sup>116</sup>. Whether universities hope to benefit their own institutions or higher education generally is then considered, followed by an examination of whether WP initiatives facilitate or impede equity of access.

The chapter will conclude that there is evidence of convergence between institutions and government priorities. Evidence of convergence is particularly strong where universities were seeking to increase interest in higher education in general amongst the target group rather than promote their own recruitment specifically.

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<sup>116</sup> Brief descriptions of the widening participation activities undertaken by each case institution can be found in Appendix 5.

## 2. Who Does Not Traditionally Participate?

The official definition of a non-traditional HE participant, eligible for state-funded WP interventions, has changed over time. However, there has been an understanding that interventions should be focused on potential students from lower socio-economic groups and those from deprived backgrounds living in low participation neighbourhoods where few young people enter HE. Within these groups, those pupils with no parental HE experience are given an additional priority (HEFCE 2007/12).

As discussed in Chapter 1<sup>117</sup>, in 2008/09 universities had clear guidelines about which groups were priority candidates for interventions to widen participation including disabled students and children in care, gifted and talented students and those from low socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods (LPN).

It might therefore be expected that universities facing different market conditions would focus on trying to increase participation rates from the same groups of students. This section investigates how government priorities for WP as identified by HEFCE and university market conditions in terms of reputation and popularity feed into institutions' chosen target groups to widen participation.

### *2.1 Government Targets: The Extent of University Compliance*

There was some evidence to suggest that universities were aware of HEFCE priorities in determining their target groups for WP activities. This section will investigate the extent of university compliance by analysing institutions' access agreements<sup>118</sup> and data from interviews with staff with responsibility for widening participation.

#### *2.1.1 Disabled Students and Children in Care*

The case study universities used some elements of their marketing mixes to attract students identified by the government as being in particular need of interventions. Each institution mentioned targets to increase the enrolment of students eligible for the Disabled Student Allowance in their access agreements, with this priority mirrored by the four universities' widening participation managers. Adjustments to make the universities more attractive to and accommodating of disabled students were

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<sup>117</sup> See section 3.4

<sup>118</sup> Access Agreements were submitted by all institutions to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in 2004. Universities needed to gain approval of their bursary packages and other measures to widen participation in order to realise their proposed tuition fee schedules (OFFA 2008a).

mentioned widely by staff working in both admissions and recruitment at both of the post-1992 case universities<sup>119</sup>.

“we’re pursuing links with disability groups... so that they’re aware of how to contact us and what we do” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

“students... who come here for a support interview actually do end up coming to us, because we put the support in place for when they get here, and it's not dealt with... when they get here<sup>120</sup>” *Administrative Selector, Secondary Campus, Eastern New University*

Although children in care were identified at a later point as a priority for WP activities, all of the case universities discussed having a specific focus on adapting the university to welcome children who were formerly in care. Admissions managers at Eastern New University ran summer schools and residential programmes for care leavers. An additional support grant was available for children in care at Central Research University and Northern Town University, with Southern Rural University contemplating the introduction of a care leavers’ bursary.

Children in care were mentioned in later versions of two case institutions’ access agreements (Southern Rural University and Northern Town University) where they were absent in the original documents submitted in December 2004. This suggests that HEI widening participation activities were, at least to some extent, influenced by government priorities:

“we would always seek to listen to OFFA... one of the ideas that came out of [a seminar] was that... institutions who give particular bursaries to care leavers, they were looking very favourably upon... we’re now thinking about whether we might like to do the same” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, there was also a suggestion that identifying targets for widening participation activities could flow from universities to the government:

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<sup>119</sup> Disability was not a specific focus of the WP interview schedule (given in Appendix 1). Elements of the marketing mix used to attract disabled students were mentioned by interviewees spontaneously.

<sup>120</sup> Candidates with declared disabilities were identified during the admissions process using information on the UCAS form.

“we [campaign] for the care leavers tick box on the UCAS form... we’re proud of that. We don’t have many care leaves but... we give them the support we can”.

*Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

### 2.1.2 Gifted and Talented

Only the elite Central Research University mentioned programmes aimed to foster the recruitment of prospective students identified as gifted and talented (G&T). Students in this category were mentioned in this institution’s access agreement as well as by staff with responsibility for widening participation. This university participated in a programme of residential gifted and talented summer schools which aimed to raise the aspiration and attainment of high-performing pupils from particular schools. This initiative had originally been part of a government scheme aimed at G&T pupils; when the government’s focus changed the university continued to provide G&T interventions because it fitted with the institution’s priorities and ethos.

“when the entire landscape was changed by DCSF<sup>121</sup> the university... [decided to] stick with the gifted and talented initiative... because that could sit alongside the other widening participation work”. *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

Gifted and talented students were also mentioned as targets for interventions by Northern Town University. A scholarship was available to students at partner schools who completed an additional university-level study programme which was co-ordinated by the widening participation department while still in the sixth form.

“gifted and talented is a big remit obviously for the government and in schools... [the scholarship is] a way of perhaps recognising that... just because they’re gifted and talented... doesn’t mean to say that they’re rich”. *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

### 2.1.3 Socio-Economic Status and Low Participation Neighbourhoods

Access agreements of all of the case universities indicated institutional goals to increase participation from students living in low participation neighbourhoods (LPN)

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<sup>121</sup> The Department for Children Schools and Families was renamed the Department for Education in 2010.

in their access agreements. Three of the universities gave specific goals to increase participation from students from lower socio-economic groups, referring to students from social groups 4-7<sup>122</sup> by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) scheme used by HEFCE, with Southern Rural Campus focusing on income as a measure of WP status rather than socio-economic background.

Although the language of HEFCE documents was used extensively in institutions' access agreements, there was some evidence of socio-economic status and low participation neighbourhoods were part of university policy *because* they were informed by government priorities. This was seen at Southern Rural University where the link was made explicitly, and at Central Research University where staff members used the language of HEFCE targets when discussing widening participation.

“because Aimhigher money is public money and HEFCE money is public money, we have a duty to stick to the targeting advice that we get from the government... I think it was 2006 the government revised the targets to concentrate on the socio-economic and low participation neighbourhoods” *Widening Participation Manager, South West Rural Campus University*

“socio-economic groups is... not a success story at the moment... [there is] very little movement indeed on SC7<sup>123</sup>” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

For the less popular pre-1992 Northern Town University the focus was similar to those set out in government targets, but the description of the groups varied. This indicated that institutional motives had a role identifying target groups, but that there was some overlap with the government's agenda.

“you've heard the expression NEETs [Not in Education, Employment or Training]... well most of those are white working class boys, so it's about re-

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<sup>122</sup> The NS-SEC is a measure of occupational conditions; social groups 4-7 comprise small employers and own account workers, and those in technical, semi-routine and routine occupations (ONS 2011)

<sup>123</sup> SC7 is shorthand for the lowest group in the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) used by HESA to monitor HEI enrolment against widening participation targets (e.g. HESA 2009b)

engaging with them and actually saying this place is for you” *Widening Participation Manager, Northern Town University*

For Northern Town University, the socio-economic target was thus also defined in terms of ethnicity and gender. Socio-economic status (SES) was not mentioned specifically by widening participation staff working for Eastern New University. It could be argued that this relates to the composition of the student population at these universities, which both recruited a higher percentage of students from lower socio-economic groups than necessary in order to meet their HESA benchmarks. For example, Eastern New University mentioned socio-economic status and low participation neighbourhood in its access agreement, but the aim was to ‘continue’ current recruitment patterns rather than increase participation from these groups.

“our low socio-economic groups is [much higher than sector average]... Low neighbourhoods [LPN], we’re well above benchmark”, *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

“once... you understand your institution and the types of students that are coming, play to your strengths. You try and widen [access], of course you do, but... we know that a lot of our students are doing vocationally-orientated courses and are coming from FE colleges as opposed to schools” *Recruitment Manager, Main Campus, Eastern New University*

## **2.2 Different Priorities**

However, it was also apparent that one of the reasons for this break between the targets discussed by staff and those detailed in access agreements related to particular institutional circumstances and priorities. Both Northern Town University and Eastern New University mentioned focusing on asylum seekers for example, reflecting the nature of their diverse student bodies and the multi-national, multi-ethnic communities in which they were located.

Universities were able to undertake some of this work with funding from non-HEFCE sources, including institutional funding, money raised from private donors and staff and students working voluntarily. This allowed university staff greater freedom to focus on institutionally-defined priority groups. Activities could thus focus on

disadvantaged ‘niche’ groups which were specific to the university’s location and priorities, including those of individual staff members.

“a lot of staff in [a science] department are working with... a [nearby institution] more for people with... behavioural issues... that is not funded by anything at all. That's just sheer goodwill<sup>124</sup>” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

“although the black and minority ethnic groups are represented in higher education now... we still feel that our diversity isn’t what it should be at [this] university so we still work and with our local black and minority ethnic family group” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

### **2.3 A Focus on Parents**

Although not mentioned as targets in government documents, parents of students also formed an important focus of widening participation activities at each case institution. At Northern Town University and Southern Rural University, specific initiatives were aimed at parents while at Eastern New University and Central Research University specific provision was made for parents in recruitment activities aimed at their children. Parental attitudes and aspirations were seen as pivotal for increasing access from under-represented groups in higher education.

“because they were first generation a lot of [parents]... wanted to know the things the student wants to know... more and more parents are coming to open days... they're seeing what it is and they want to be involved in the whole process with tuition fees for instance” *Recruitment Manager, Eastern New University*

“we run modules for parents in primary schools<sup>125</sup>, which is about understanding school and say, ‘you need to make sure your kids get a C’ and once the penny’s dropped then the kids are encouraged to work harder at school” *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

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<sup>124</sup> Academic members of staff in this university volunteered their time to work with these pupils.

<sup>125</sup> Course modules run for parents of children in primary schools in the local area.

Although parents were not mentioned specifically in government documents, the need to focus on parents was identified by each case institution indicating similarity in aims between different HE providers. It could be argued that this relates to the government's objective to concentrate on first-generation students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and low participation neighbourhoods. However, it may also relate to the way in which widening participation was organised, with Aimhigher working with a number of universities via regional associations. There is also evidence of the development of a 'Widening Participation community', allowing information and ideas to be shared between institutions:

“what happens with widening participation practitioners and Aimhigher partnerships is very much into sharing best practice... we all network at the same conferences”, *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

Thus, institutional WP priorities could differ according to individual university characteristics, but the structure of the widening participation community also encouraged the share of information, leading to some similar approaches being found across the universities independently of stated government targets.

#### **2.4 Conclusion**

The identification of widening participation students is partially related to institutional circumstances, including staff connections, location and current student populations. Nonetheless, government priorities are important for the identification of which students should receive widening participation interventions. Although this is more clearly displayed in the language of official access agreements, there is evidence that objectives defined by HEFCE and OFFA have played a role in determining how institutions define widening participation<sup>126</sup>. These priorities therefore have a degree of standardisation across the HE sector.

However, even though government priorities do, at least to a degree, dictate institutional priorities with regards to widening participation activities, there is also evidence of divergence between the institutions within areas of governmental priority. For example NS-SEC socio-economic status was a more overtly used WP criterion at

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<sup>126</sup> The motivations behind compliance and divergence with government objectives for both widening participation and other recruitment priorities, including a discussion of how government can influence university behaviour, are presented in Chapter 9.



Southern Rural University and Central Research University, where students from these groups make up a smaller proportion of the populations compared to Northern Town University and Eastern New University. It could thus be argued that, even where government priorities are influential in determining institutional access policies and practices, widening participation targets as interpreted by the universities themselves reflect institutions' locations in the marketplace.

### **3. Aspiration, Attainment and Affordability**

The widening participation initiatives undertaken by the case institutions had two aims: raising the *aspirations* of the target group so that they had the ambition and self-belief necessary to engage in further study; and raising student *attainment* so that they had the means to secure a place in higher education and succeed academically once enrolled. Another key feature of university WP activities was student bursaries: payments to make university *affordable* could either be directed at disadvantaged students or those with low parental income.

This section discusses aspiration, attainment and affordability initiatives at the case universities. Where programmes combined both aspiration and attainment raising components, they have been classified according to their primary goals.

#### **3.1 Aspiration**

Raising aspiration for higher education and particular courses and institutions was, for the most part, delivered through the promotional elements of the case universities' marketing mixes. These include activities off campus, such as outreach initiatives, and activities based at the universities, such as summer schools.

##### *3.1.1 Off Campus: Outreach and School Liaison*

In terms of promotional activities, all of the case universities used outreach projects working with specific niche or carefully selected target groups in their schools and communities to try and raise aspirations. This work could be carried out under the direction of widening participation departments and the central university or by particular departments and academic staff acting on their own initiative.

“[There’s a project working with] a group of people who were in the sex industry... there is obviously a lot of background of drug abuse, physical abuse,

exploitation, poor educational attainment, low self-esteem, health issues, and they all need to be worked on” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

“more and more we’re being asked to go into schools... [to give] input into a careers day or a revision day” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, for recruitment staff at Eastern New University and some academics at Northern Town University, working with schools in the local area via generic school liaison activity was equated with widening participation. This was due to the nature of the local areas and the schools located in close proximity to these universities catering for a large number of potential first generation HE students:

“we’re now focusing our efforts to schools and colleges within that catchment area.... all the time looking to encourage them and enthuse them and break down barriers” *Recruitment Manager, Eastern New University*

“we work with the [city] schools because... we want to raise aspirations... it’s new for the parents, it’s new for the students” *Associate Dean, Biology and Medical-Related Courses, Northern Town University*

Thus, outreach activities could be targeted on particular groups or throughout schools in the local area to try and make university seem an achievable and desirable goal. In terms of normalising higher education, students working as volunteers or as paid Aimhigher Associates could form an important part of outreach activity by enabling target groups to see current students as ‘normal’ rather than something extraordinary or alien to them.

“it’s a very important message for the young people to see that students are just like them and they’re not something really odd or unusual” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

“[we] try to match up... people from particular widening participation backgrounds to go and speak to people from that background themselves because

they've got a very specific tale to tell of how they have overcome those specific problems” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

Activities off campus could also be seen as being an important means for increasing student self-confidence. This was particularly so for one-off events rather than continual interventions with the same pupils. For example, Northern Town University took a small group of young people on a canal-boat trip, while Eastern New University had taken a group of disadvantaged pupils, including three children in care, abroad as sports ambassadors.

### *3.1.2 Campus Visits and Summer Schools*

As well as visiting target groups in their schools and communities, widening participation staff at each case institution undertook activities on campus. As well as conveying information about higher education, campus visits were used to normalise HE by introducing target groups to university and building pupil confidence. Activities could convey information about the institution specifically and higher education in general, or could work to show participants what studying at a university entailed via taster lectures and other learning-based activities. As a result, campus-based and residential activities were seen by staff working to widen participation as being more effective than outreach projects.

“particularly things like the [year 12] summer schools... they have the biggest impacts. Obviously they have the students for longer and you're taking them out of their environments, you're bringing them here and it's going to be a more powerful influence” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Medical Related Course, Northern Town University*

Although residential programmes were generally seen as effective, there were some problems experienced by universities providing summer schools on campus. Summer schools were not universally viewed as an effective recruitment tool, particularly for those more reliant on student atmosphere as a means of promoting the campus.

“we've never got into the residential summer school... you've seen this campus, there's nothing up here... There're no social facilities up here in the summer. I

think it wouldn't give them a good picture of university" *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

There were also concerns that summer school provision aimed at younger cohorts could attract participants who were interested in living away from home rather than those committed to learning more about higher education. This could cause difficulties for staff tasked with monitoring participants:

"loads of young people, first time away from home, own bedrooms, it's a recipe for disaster quite frankly" *Widening Participation Manager, Northern Town University*

Thus, campus events could be seen as more effective than outreach activities because they could have more impact in terms of normalising the HE experience. But some institutions felt that they were inappropriate or difficult to run, demonstrating that what worked for one university would not necessarily work for another.

### **3.2 Attainment**

Widening participation activities run by the case universities also aimed to give target groups and individuals the academic results they needed to successfully apply to enter an institution, and succeed once they got there. These attainment-focused elements of WP programmes could encompass both programme and delivery elements of the marketing mix, including offering a mixed portfolio of different types of HE qualification and delivering learning in the community via tutoring initiatives.

#### *3.2.1 Course Types: Non-degree Level Study*

In terms of programme elements of the marketing mix, all of the case universities used non-standard degree courses such as 2+2, extended and foundation degrees<sup>127</sup> which could be delivered in conjunction with partner colleges, and foundation years to facilitate access for non-traditional students. These courses were intended to increase access to HE for widening participation cohorts and non-standard groups of

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<sup>127</sup> All of these courses are sub-degree level programmes. For 2+2 degrees, students undertake two years of study in an FE college and join the university providing the degree in the second year. Extended degrees are aimed at mature students who need an additional year of study before they can progress to degree level. Foundation degrees last 2 years and combine work-based learning with academic study.

consumers such as mature students. These programme elements of the marketing mix were therefore not mainstream recruitment tools but were designed to attract particular consumer segments in order to widen participation. By enabling students to enter higher education at a level below bachelor's degree, universities were able to recruit students who would otherwise not have been able to enter HE, or who might have chosen to enter an institution with lower entry requirements.

“we're helped by the fact that we've got a very strong partnership with FE colleges within the region, so a lot of our WP-type performance indicators are met through that [named] partnership”. *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

“we felt there were local people who had not got to a stage of qualification we would normally take... so we introduced foundation years” *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

Thus, sub-degree courses were linked with widening participation and were used to increase access to higher education. Although each university offered some sub-degree level study, Central Research University did not do this to the same extent as the other case institutions.

### 3.2.2 Tutoring

Universities also delivered tuition to potential students on and off campus to raise their level of academic attainment prior to entering higher education. Off campus, student tutors and Aimhigher Associates played a role in delivering teaching. Although the primary goal of this was seen as aspiration raising, as meeting current undergraduates would have the effect of normalising higher education, there was a secondary attainment-raising aim to these programmes.

“the mentoring projects, that's where you can start helping with raising attainment. It's no good raising aspirations and awareness if they don't get the grades to go to university” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

Some of the universities had programmes which were designed to raise attainment for highly-desired potential students<sup>128</sup>. For Central Research University, the goal of this programme element of the marketing mix was increase academic success for gifted and talented WP groups.

“[the gifted and talented] programme is about is enabling students to make empowered, informed applications... and stand a very good chance of succeeding.” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

However, programme elements of the marketing mix aimed at raising attainment did not always explicitly form part of a widening participation agenda. As discussed in Chapter 7, Northern Town University organised a summer school available to *all* applicants who had participated in the institution’s compact scheme. Those who were intending to enter the university and successfully completed this summer programme received some UCAS points towards their conditional offers facilitating their entry. However, although the summer school was open to all students, it was felt by staff to have a positive effect in terms of widening participation:

“the summer school has always been open to everyone, but essentially most of the students completing it... didn’t have parents who went to university... most of the students who do it tend to be very local... a lot of those tend to be in the more deprived areas” *Marketing Manager, Northern Town University*

### **3.3 Affordability**

There was scepticism amongst the case institutions as to the efficacy of bursaries for influencing potential student decisions, which supports research showing that bursaries do not play a strong role in students’ preference formation (Callender 2009a). Nonetheless, the case universities did use price elements of the marketing mix to make HE participation more affordable for target groups. This section triangulates data from interviews with managers and finance officers at the case institutions with

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<sup>128</sup> The new universities ran or had previously organised summer schools for accepted students to assist with retention. Although these did assist with widening participation by preventing student drop out, the programmes were not aimed at *potential* students in contrast to the summer schools organised by the old universities.

details of bursary schemes given in the universities' 2009 prospectuses, except for Northern Town University where the 2010 prospectus was used<sup>129</sup>.

All case institutions provided bursaries to low-income students, in line with the provisions of the Higher Education Act (2004) which set a minimum bursary level for students whose parental income made them eligible for the full maintenance grant (HMSO 2004)<sup>130</sup>. However, beyond this, the case institutions varied their bursary and scholarship packages to fit with their particular widening participation objectives.

For the old, more popular Central Research University, the main bursary scheme was seen as being a key tool for making higher education affordable for WP target students, defined in line with government priorities as those from lower socio-economic groups. This institution gave the largest maximum bursary of all the case universities, with students receiving this if their parental income was below £35,000-£40,000 per annum<sup>131</sup>. This threshold and amount were deliberately chosen to facilitate the entry of students from lower socio-economic groups. Students with higher parental incomes did not qualify for an institutional bursary, enabling all fee income to be focused on the, comparatively, lower income groups.

“at the university we'd seen... those on the low socio-economic groups don't necessarily have low, low income, but tend to have low to medium incomes... we didn't want people who were on... middle incomes to be deterred... on the basis of affordability.” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Central Research University*

For the other universities, institutional bursaries were not so strongly focused on the low income groups. Although each case university gave the highest bursary rate to the lowest income bracket, eligibility for bursaries extended further up the income spectrum than for Central Research University, with amounts tailing off to smaller amounts as parental income rose.

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<sup>129</sup> The bursary scheme for this institution did not change between 2008/09 and 2009/10.

<sup>130</sup> Students with parental incomes of less than £25,000 were eligible for a full maintenance grant (Directgov 2011b).

<sup>131</sup> Bandwidths have been placed around bursary amounts and income-based eligibility criteria to protect institutions' identities.

This reflects the institutions' recruitment patterns. Central Research University, in common with other providers of this nature, had difficulty meeting its HESA WP benchmarks and thus had a greater incentive to make the institution particularly attractive for low-SES students. In contrast, both Eastern New University and Northern Town University recruited well from WP target groups, exceeding their HESA benchmarks. Southern Rural University did not recruit as large a proportion of its students from WP target groups, and consequently had designed its bursary so that middle and higher income students would be attracted, but not at the cost of alienating students from lower income backgrounds:

“traditionally we've taken groups of students from lower income and non-traditional university backgrounds... We were just anxious not to turn those people off... we just therefore wanted a bursary scheme that would not make the £3,000 so scary to them that they stopped coming.” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

For the two institutions which recruited well from WP target groups (Northern Town University and Eastern New University) the maximum bursary level was less than £1,000 per annum, allowing larger amounts of fee income to be allocated to students higher up the income spectrum. Thus, although increasing the affordability of HE for low income groups to a greater extent than for higher income groups, these institutional bursary schemes were not so strongly focused on WP target groups.

However, related to institutional desire to raise attainment and thus facilitate success for students in higher education, the two less popular case institutions (Eastern New University and Northern Town University) gave students in their second and/or third years an increased or additional bursary payment to help with affordability in later years of study. This suggests that bursary schemes were not only used to attract students by making higher education seem more affordable, but were also used to facilitate retention. This indicates that, for these institutions which recruited well from WP target groups, affordability of study in later years was an important factor for students which the universities had tried to take into account with price elements of the marketing mix.



In addition to the main bursary schemes, all of the case universities used bursaries aimed at particular WP target groups to make higher education a more affordable option for these potential students. Bursaries were offered to care leavers at Eastern New University and Northern Town University, which also offered a support package to these students which included 365-day accommodation and help purchasing text books. Plans to introduce a bursary for care leavers were being discussed at Southern Rural University (c.f. Sect 2.1.1). Northern Town University also offered scholarship payments to students who had been classified by the institution as gifted and talented, and Central Research University had offered an in-work bursary scheme, which was withdrawn as it was deemed ineffective with a low take-up rate.

At Northern Town University and Eastern New University price mechanisms were used more generally to make HE a more affordable option for students living in the local area. At Northern Town University, bursaries were available for students undertaking pre-degree foundation years who were seen as being local students who needed to keep costs down by studying from home. At Eastern New University, students who had attended feeder institutions in the surrounding areas were given a small bursary (£200-£500) on top of their main bursary entitlement, with those living in a particularly deprived part of the region qualifying for a considerable bursary of £1,000-£1,200 funded by an alumni donation. This was intended to reflect the local access mission of Eastern New University.

“[Foundation Year students] get a [£400-£600] bursary... lots of those students will live in the local area as well and get [maintenance] grants so they’re usually not coming out with any debt from that year at all.” *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

“we believe we’re a local university, and a university that works in partnership with FE colleges... so partner college students coming on get a special bursary too.” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Main Campus, Eastern New University*

### **3.4 Localism**

Thus, although some initiatives could have a wider reach, the majority of programmes designed to raise aspiration and attainment were focused on students in the local area.

Local schools and local community groups frequently formed the focus for widening participation interventions.

This localism can be explained for two reasons. First, it was considered more cost effective for institutions to provide programmes for potential students who were located near to the university. Staff members and volunteers not only found it easier to deliver outreach and tuition to students who were easier to reach, but also found that potential students who lived nearer to the university were more likely to attend on-campus activities. This is similar to the perspectives shown by staff members who were tasked with increasing mainstream students recruitment as discussed in the previous chapter:

“it was literally logistics because you know, going out to schools [further away] costs us money, it costs travel time... we pay the students for travel time, travel expenses, so there’s also a budget element”, *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

However for widening participation activities organised through Aimhigher, the local focus was also due to the way the programme was organised. The wording of Aimhigher guidance indicates that the organisation was designed to deliver local initiatives and work on a regional if not local basis to widen access (HEFCE 2008/05). Aimhigher Area Partnerships therefore worked with local clusters of schools, colleges and universities, encouraging practitioners to work at a local level<sup>132</sup>. For example, staff members at Eastern New University had specifically used Aimhigher to access students living in a local ‘catchment’ area close to the university.

This had the impact of encouraging local progression routes from schools to local HEIs, which was the intention of the programme:

“we expect Area Partnerships to forge close relationships with the relevant schools, colleges, HEIs and work-based learning providers so that they can offer each targeted learner a clear route to progress through to higher education” (HEFCE 2008/05: 4)

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<sup>132</sup> Aimhigher Area Partnerships were encouraged to work with regional partners where this would facilitate the delivery of cost-effective programmes.

Thus, in addition to having similar types of initiatives, each case university demonstrated a local focus in their WP activities. This partly reflected cost considerations but also resulted from the way in which Aimhigher was organised.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Each case university used elements of their marketing mixes to raise potential students' aspirations, and attainment and tried to make higher education a more affordable option for target groups. These programmes aimed to make higher education a desired and feasible choice for locally-based potential students from non-traditional backgrounds.

There were some particular initiatives which were unique to each institution, such as the gifted and talented summer school at Central Research University. However, institutional WP activity had many similar strands.

## **4. Us and Them: Our University or Higher Education?**

The case universities thus used similar methods for widening participation. Overall, university staff discussed two main objectives for their engagement in these activities: influencing recruitment for their *own institution* and increasing participation for the *HE sector* as a whole.

For those looking to increase admission to their own institution from the target groups, widening participation activities presented the opportunity to spread awareness of their university to a desired consumer segment. This was demonstrated where activities were overtly stated to have a recruitment aim, or where success was defined as interventions resulting in increased application rates to the case institution.

“[Aimhigher] gave us a really good opportunity to get [into a catchment area] and work with opinion leaders, the teachers and the Aimhigher people... [were saying] “[Eastern New University is] really good”. *Associate Dean, Business Studies, Eastern New University*

“going back to the example with the school, a prolonged relationship where [a significant proportion of the students] came to us and a lot more actually applied [to us] as one of their five choices, I would class that as being more successful

than just a one-off thing” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, for other widening participation workers, the prospect of selling the institution was not a stated goal. Widening participation activities were thus, principally, for increasing access to higher education as a whole rather than to benefit the university specifically by raising recruitment of students from target groups. However, it was hoped that by offering WP interventions, target students would be exposed to the institution and think more favourably of it when making HE choices.

“I don’t have any problems... [if Northern Town University] is not the place for them... part of that process to me would be the push to help local students understand that actually going to a local university might actually be a mistake for them” *Widening Participation Manager, Northern Town University*

“I don’t think we’re concerned about using WP as a particularly necessary tool for our own benefit, but by doing it and engaging with it we will benefit to some extent”. *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

For some of the target groups, the prospect of entering higher education was a distant one, with universities undertaking activities not intended to increase recruitment for either the university specifically or the sector as a whole, at least in the short-term. This applied to projects with niche groups, such as Central Research University’s outreach programmes for sex-workers in the area.

“we’re talking about people who may need basic skills... as part of the process of giving them life choices, and eventually HE may be part of it” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

For attainment raising elements of WP packages, particularly programme and delivery elements of the marketing mix, the purpose was more clearly directed at increasing recruitment for the case university rather than the sector as a whole. This is shown by the strong expectation of progression from sub-degree (e.g. foundation year) to degree courses. Sub-degree qualifications could help institutions enrol students who might

otherwise have found a place at an alternative provider, demonstrating an institutional motive.

“[the foundation year students] would go to other institutions accepting a lower tariff [score] but ... regardless of the lower offer, they’re probably not ready for a three year degree... the foundation year gets them used to working in the way that they need to” *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

Where price elements of the marketing mix were discussed as widening participation tools, they were seen as being aids for increasing recruitment for the case university rather than for the sector as a whole. One of the ways universities used bursaries to increase recruitment was by making the design of the scheme easy to communicate, so that the affordability of the institution could be more readily understood.

“a lot of the feedback that we got [from students] was ‘keep the messages simple’... So one of things that we wanted was a clear message that every student who paid the £3,000 fee would get something” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Main Campus, Eastern New University*

Thus, although some widening participation activity, particularly promotional elements of the marketing mix, were aimed at increasing access to HE as a whole, many elements of WP initiatives, particularly regarding programme, price and delivery elements of the marketing mix, were intended to increase recruitment for the case institutions specifically.

## **5. Equity of Access**

Thus, the evidence suggests that all the case universities undertook widening participation activities, and had similar goals and approaches regardless of market position. This similarity, which partly resulted from government intervention and partly from the influence of the widening participation community, is consistent with equity of access. Particularly effective programmes such as residential and long-term initiatives were provided by each case university, ensuring that non-traditional students across the country were exposed to programmes which could encourage their entry to higher education.

However, the local focus of each university's WP initiatives could be regarded as an impediment to equity of access. Encouraging students from widening participation backgrounds to progress to local HEIs would constrain their choice set more than for traditional students, who considered institutions from a broader geographical area (Pugsley 2004). Although there is no evidence that students who study at a local institution achieve poorer outcomes than those who move away from home, the existence of a choice constraint which is associated with individuals' backgrounds is not consistent with equity of access (Le Grand 1991). This is because a choice based on institution location is likely to prevent students from considering the full range of options in order to select a course which best meets their interests and needs. Thus, the presence of a choice constraint may prevent equity of access because admissions outcomes are based on applicants' choices, which have been constrained as a result of students' backgrounds, rather than their potential to succeed on the course.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that widening participation initiatives were not always used to promote institutional recruitment, but were intended to encourage students to consider HE in general. The programmes were designed to raise aspiration and attainment, facilitating access to HE rather than binding students to a particular university. This is consistent with equity of access because students were being encouraged to make informed decisions, and given the necessary tools to broaden their choice set. In other words, WP activities were aimed to remove choice constraints set for students, for example in terms of affordability, enabling students from WP target groups with the potential to succeed in HE to successfully apply alongside their more advantaged peers.

However, there were some differences between target groups and initiatives which had implications for equity of access.

First, although each institution used Aimhigher funding to target students identified as important to the government, there was a clear difference between the old and new universities' focus on students classified as gifted and talented. Both Central Research University and Northern Town University used WP initiatives or bursaries to target these students, while the new universities did not. This suggests that the old universities used WP initiatives to 'dreg-siphon' students who would enter HE regardless of these activities, poaching students from other institutions (Coates and

Adnett 2003). In contrast, Eastern New University in particular used WP initiatives to further its primary recruitment strategy of creating demand for higher education<sup>133</sup>, encouraging students into university who otherwise would consider the job market.

This could impede equity of access if less confident students are directed towards particular institutions. However, this does not take into account the need to ensure that students of equal potential are able to study the same degree programmes at the same universities. If the gifted and talented group of non-traditional students have the potential to successfully complete courses at old universities while other WP students do not, it is consistent with equity of access for the gifted and talented cohort to be encouraged to consider more prestigious institutions. There is some evidence to support this interpretation, as students with higher levels of post-compulsory academic attainment achieve better degree results than their peers from similar backgrounds who have lower A Level results (Hoare and Johnston 2011). However, this strategy will not increase overall levels of access to higher education which has been a policy goal for previous governments (Labour 2001).

Second, although each case institution used similar methods to widen access to non-traditional students there were some disparity in the availability of programmes. This was particularly the case for sub-degree courses. As discussed in Chapter 7, sub-degree courses can facilitate equity of access by providing an ‘insurance’ progression route to students who have the potential to succeed at degree level but who need additional study in order to realise this potential.

Each case institution offered sub-degree programmes, but they were not provided at Central Research University to the same extent as the other case institutions and were used extensively at the less popular Northern Town University and Eastern New University in particular. This approach results from the access mission of the two latter institutions, and their aim of providing educational opportunities for the local community. However, the difference may also demonstrate the perceived association of sub-degree courses with lower standards. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter there was pressure at Southern Rural University to remove HE Diplomas which may reflect the growing popularity and prestige of this institution.

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<sup>133</sup> This is discussed in Chapter 7.

Therefore, the provision of an insurance policy which could facilitate equity of access was not distributed equally across the HE sector, which may result from different levels of institutional reputation and course popularity. This could exclude students who need an insurance policy from more prestigious and popular HEIs, impeding equity of access to particular universities.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that the government did influence university widening participation goals and initiatives. Although WP programmes did vary between the providers, particularly where activities were funded from streams unconnected with Aimhigher, these were generally marginal activities including limited scholarships and small-scale programmes aimed at niche target groups. The universities, despite the different mainstream recruitment aims discussed in the previous chapter, showed a strong degree of similarity in both their aims and approach to widening participation.

This suggests that government objectives did have the effect of minimising variation across the sector by setting central goals to be pursued by all universities. Staff members discussed the importance of considering government aims and objectives when developing targets because they felt it was important to ensure that the goals of the funder were met. Therefore, government influence reflected the flow of resources to universities; where alternative funding sources were used to finance activities, government influence was weakened.

However, the similarity also reflects the porous nature of intelligence for widening participation, with information and ideas shared across the sector. This was facilitated not only by the structure of Aimhigher, which worked with regional clusters of institutions, but by the development of a widening participation community.

The willingness to share information across universities, which could be regarded as competitors, may reflect the altruistic nature of widening participation initiatives and the staff delivering these programmes. For each of the case universities, the higher education sector as a whole was an intended beneficiary of WP activities, although there was evidence that the institution also hoped to benefit directly. This was particularly clear in the discussion of the aspiration elements of WP programmes delivered via promotional elements of the marketing mix, including campus visits and



outreach activities. Here, it was hoped that increased self-confidence and ambition would encourage pupils to enter university, with success being felt even if the applicant chose an alternative provider. Thus, WP programmes were designed to remove choice constraints for non-traditional students, allowing them to apply to enter HE alongside their similar but more advantaged peers in a manner consistent with equity of access.

However, there were self-interested motives to WP activities also evident in staff discourse. Although this was observed at each case institution, it could be argued that 'our' university was viewed as the primary beneficiary more strongly at Eastern New University compared to other case institutions. This difference in focus results from this university's place in the market. A greater proportion of the student population at this institution were from widening participation groups as defined by Aimhigher than at other universities. Thus, for the Eastern New University, widening participation could be seen as synonymous with general recruitment, while for the other institutions, widening participation was separate to general recruitment.

Where the home institution was the intended beneficiary, there was some evidence of variation in WP recruitment priorities which were linked with institutional reputation and popularity, given the strong association between WP aims and current student recruitment.

Both Eastern New University and Northern Town University concentrated on the local area in their WP packages, whilst at the same time focusing resources to a lesser extent on those from lower-income backgrounds than the more popular universities. This is particularly clear in an examination of student bursary packages, with the more popular institutions, Southern Rural University and Central Research University giving higher bursaries to the lowest income bracket than the less popular institutions. However, WP activities also reflected institutions' own aspirations regarding which students they would wish to select. This is shown in the concentration on gifted and talented students by Central Research University and the focus on the local area by Eastern New University. As the previous chapter showed, Central Research University had a strong emphasis on creaming high-quality applicants according to academic attainment and extra-curricular activity participation, while Eastern New University had a strong 'demand creation' focus on recruiting students from the local

area. Thus, widening participation activities reflect institutionally determined recruitment priorities, as well as those laid down by the government.

This difference in focus may impede equity of access by encouraging the least confident students to enter new universities, while applicants who would consider entering HE without intervention were 'dreg siphoned' by the old universities (Coates and Adnett 2003). However, it could be argued that this is consistent with equity of access, as confidence and attainment are associated with the extent to which potential students can succeed in HE (Hoare and Johnston 2011; Davies and Elias 2003).

Thus, widening participation objectives related to both government priorities and institutional recruitment patterns. Where these differed, this led to variation in widening participation aims and objectives between the universities, with evidence of this being seen most strongly in areas of the marketing mix aimed to increase recruitment for the institution specifically rather than the sector more generally.

However, there is a strong degree of similarity in WP aims and activities across institutions of different types, suggesting that reputation and popularity have a lesser degree of influence over WP activities than general recruitment programmes. Overall WP initiatives aim to remove choice constraints which non-traditional HE participants may face, allowing students of equal potential to enter the same institutions, facilitating equity of access. However, the local focus of programmes may introduce an additional choice constraint for non-traditional students by encouraging them to consider their local HEI as a natural progression route, rather than considering a broad range of options including more prestigious institutions offering different courses which might better fit their needs and reflect their potential to succeed.

## Chapter 9 Government Incentives and University Selection Behaviour

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will examine what motivated university staff to develop the student selection policies and practices discussed in the previous chapters to address the research question:

- 3b. To what extent are university admissions and recruitment policies and practices affected by government rewards and sanctions which are designed to change selection behaviour and do these incentives appeal to university self-interest or altruism?

Individuals working together in institutions feed into university ethos, meaning that individual behaviour can influence university policy and practice. To examine individual motivation and university ethos, this chapter will analyse data from interviews with admissions and recruitment staff at the four case study institutions.

First, the role of financial incentives used to reward and sanction universities will be examined before identifying whether there is any evidence that altruism also has an influence. The chapter will then address whether there is evidence that apparently altruistic actions arise from self-interested motives in accordance with rational choice theory of utility maximisation.

After considering different types of motivation, this chapter will discuss why some government incentives appear to be more and less effective in directing university staff behaviour, drawing on self-determination theory to understand the observed processes. It will conclude that government incentives can influence university behaviour, but only when institutions' agree with the nature of the task they are being asked to perform.

### 2. What Motivates Staff? Altruism, Self-interest, Ethos and Identity

In the previous chapters, the 'surface' motivation underpinning the selection of particular students via admissions and recruitment policies and practices was discussed. This section examines the 'deep' motivations underpinning these surface

rationales: whether staff members are motivated by a self-interested desire to benefit themselves and their institution, or whether they have altruistic reasons for their actions. Each individual could be influenced by a variety of the different motives which are described.

### ***2.1 Government Incentives: HEFCE, OFFA and SPA***

There was evidence that self-interest for individuals and the institution motivated staff at each case university. There was a desire to increase available financial resources via student recruitment, and to make the selection process easier for staff members working in admissions and recruitment. As a result, financial rewards and sanctions could encourage institutions to modify admissions and recruitment policies as desired by the government. The government could also use university self-interest to achieve its objectives without financial incentives, as individual staff members were motivated by a desire to improve or sustain their university's reputation in the eyes of the government and associated agencies although the means for doing this varied between different HEIs.

#### ***2.1.1 Maximising Resources: The HEFCE grant***

As discussed in the previous chapter, the government could influence university recruitment by funding widening participation activities. Universities in receipt of this money felt duty-bound to focus on the groups prioritised by the government as they provided the money which financed these activities. However, government rewards and sanctions could also influence university recruitment more generally.

The need to maximise available financial resources via mainstream home student recruitment was discussed by staff at Eastern New University, Northern Town University and Southern Rural University. Although the exact nature of the penalties varies from year to year, there are financial disincentives associated with under-recruitment. For example, in 2008/09 universities could lose some of their initial grant allocation from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), if they did not deliver expected growth in relation to their mainstream additional funded places (HEFCE 2008/20). Furthermore, HEFCE could penalise institutions whose student numbers fell outside the 5 per cent 'tolerance band' of the proposed student number used to allocate resources, unless institutions corrected the disparity in the

following year by taking more or fewer students to balance the numbers (HEFCE 2004/23).

Thus, universities had a strong incentive to ensure that their HEFCE contract was fulfilled. For the non-Russell Group universities, where competition for places amongst the applicant pool was less intense, the goal was to recruit as many students as possible, and where feasible branch into new markets. These markets could be traditional HE participants who were not conventional consumers for a particular institution or course, or could be non-traditional HE participants. Thus, the need to fill places could lead universities to work to widen participation.

“we’re quite heavily reliant on HEFCE funding... So the bottom line for us, really, is to hit those recruitment targets.” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

“I’m doing this outreach work... in order to be able to recruit in the future for us all to be stable in our jobs. There is a problem with numbers”, *Admissions Tutor, Social Sciences Course, Northern Town University*

At a departmental level, finance as a recruitment motive was particularly evident for less popular courses. For example, at Southern Rural University the need to recruit additional students to less popular courses was shown in the use of a bursary attached to its science courses which was not available to students choosing to study a non-STEM course at the institution<sup>134</sup>.

There was some evidence that the reliance on HEFCE for funding resulted in institutions also developing policies to recruit non-standard students. This was particularly evident at Northern Town University, where a number of staff members described the need to increase enrolment from part-time students given the government’s decision not to expand full-time student numbers, announced in early 2008.

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<sup>134</sup> This is discussed in Chapter 7.

“the plans that we have... are all based on growth... We can’t grow our full-time numbers, we have to look elsewhere”. *Associate Dean, Maths/Computing and Communications, Northern Town University*

The absence of discussion about the need to meet student numbers at the highly over-subscribed Central Research University would suggest that rewards for on-target recruitment were more influential at institutions which were more reliant on HEFCE’s teaching block grant and which were at risk of not meeting target numbers. The absence of this discourse at Central Research University may also relate to its market position: as a Russell Group university, this institution was in a position to attract funding to support its research activities from state and private sources, making it less reliant on HEFCE’s teaching grant<sup>135</sup>.

Government incentives could also regulate university behaviour by appealing to their self-interested motivation to minimise financial loss. It could be argued that the desire to shield their institution from funding cuts was evident in staff members’ motivation to prevent student drop-out at each case institution, including Central Research University. Institutions were penalised by HEFCE if they could not retain an acceptable number of students, meaning that students who failed to progress or left for a non-academic reason during the year could cost their institution financially (HEFCE 2004/23). Institutions were allocated additional funds to prevent drop-out via the Widening Participation Fund.

To prevent drop-out, staff members described the need to ensure students were not deceived about their chosen course and were consequently happy when they arrived at the institution. For admissions, the need to prevent drop-out resulted in procedures being put in place to ensure that only students who would be able to succeed academically were admitted to the institution.

“[bespoke communications are] enabling the student to... drill down a little bit further and find out if it’s really what [they] want to do. We are hopeful that will stop the drop-out rates because it makes [the communications] more important.”  
*Recruitment Manager, Eastern New University*

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<sup>135</sup> See chapter 1 for further information.

“if you have students that are not motivated you might find that they just don’t pass the first year and they have to drop out and that affects our drop-out rate... We want to try and avoid that.” *Admissions Tutor, Social Science Course, Northern Town University*

However, although self-interest prompted universities to modify their admissions processes and practices to accord with government objectives, self-interest also prompted the development of selection priorities at each case university beyond the focus of government policy. Although not a focus of this research, university staff spontaneously discussed their desire to recruit overseas non-EU students in order to bring in additional fee revenue. Tuition fees for these students were set by universities rather than regulated by the UK government (NUS 2010), meaning that universities could access additional income stream by attracting this segment of the market. Consequently, considerable efforts were made to attract more international students to the institution, both by increasing applications from this group and facilitating the entry of those who applied. Staff across the case universities, regardless of reputation and popularity, acknowledged the importance of this group of students for institutional revenue.

“recruitment abroad and international students obviously is very important to us... and to every university because of financial implications” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Medical Related Course, Northern Town University*

“there’s obviously always an interest in augmenting the overseas intake, purely because of the revenue” *Associate Dean, Creative Arts and Science, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“overseas students pay more to come and study so financially they’re worthwhile to recruit” *Admissions Tutor, Biological Sciences, Central Research University*

Universities also focused recruitment efforts on particular groups to minimise expenditure. In terms of recruitment, this resulted in institutions concentrating their efforts on current consumer groups and those located in the nearby area to make recruitment activities easier and less costly to deliver.

“what you can do by concentrating on [a local] area is you can really intensively work those schools... if you put on an [event] you’re not going to get anybody [who lives far away]... so [it is] more... practical” *Recruitment Officer, Central Research University*

### 2.1.2 Institutional Reputation: The Office for Fair Access

University behaviour could also theoretically be incentivised via the Office for Fair Access. In order to charge the then maximum tuition fee of £3,000 per annum, universities were required to demonstrate via access agreements that they were working sufficiently effectively to widen participation at their institutions. If an access agreement was not approved, the offending university could be faced with the sanction of a reduction in fee income.

However, although OFFA was discussed by university staff at each institution, there was no evidence that its ability to withdraw permission to charge maximum fees actually modified institutional behaviour. On the contrary, university staff demonstrated that they did not believe that the permission to charge the full fee would ever be withdrawn, even where they wanted to ensure that the institution’s position had been justified to OFFA:

“we do feel quite strongly that we have to justify our position to OFFA and that we really do not want OFFA’s criticism... and I think it’s based on a fear that we could again be forced to drop our tuition fees. I don’t actually see that happening... I don’t see that being a real threat”. *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

“I didn’t think we felt that [OFFA] wouldn’t [ratify the access agreement], but we wanted to make sure that, to them [a lack of bursary take-up] didn’t... come as a bolt out of the blue” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Central Research University*

University staff at Northern Town University, Southern Rural University and Eastern New University also felt that OFFA could not influence their behaviour because the criteria used to evaluate institutions’ success in widening participation did not apply to them. Staff members at all of these institutions felt they recruited reasonably well in relation to HESA benchmarks for pupils from non-traditional HE participating



backgrounds. Therefore, the perceived need to widen access was not as pressing for these institutions as for Central Research University. OFFA was therefore seen as irrelevant by particular institutions according to their market position, with under-subscribed universities recruiting well from less traditional groups of prospective students feeling particularly immune from OFFA's rebuke.

"[OFFA] has no effect on us simply because we already meet all their goals... we're not... turning away a student with four A levels because they come from a comprehensive school like some universities" *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

"we believe that it's an unnecessary piece of... interference. It has made no difference whatsoever to anything we do... The Office for Fair Access was created to get a piece of legislation through parliament... It's designed to... regulate behaviour in fifteen universities<sup>136</sup>" *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

"other than being mindful of the need to comply with [OFFA], I don't think it does [have influence]... we don't tend to turn down very high flying students... We're grateful to get them!" *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

However, even though universities did not believe OFFA would fail to ratify their access agreements, there was evidence that OFFA and the composition of access agreements did have a certain influence over university behaviour. As discussed in the previous chapter, access agreements mirrored the language and priorities of government documents and there is evidence that universities did feel a need to satisfy OFFA, even without the threat of financial loss.

"OFFA take their role seriously in terms of what they do and what they are trying to make this sector achieve... we felt that we would get some useful knowledge from them where we could about... best practice... [and] also just make sure that we'd kept them informed about where we were as an institution". *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Central Research University*

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<sup>136</sup> The '15 universities' is used figuratively but refers to the more selective members of the Russell Group and some 1994 Group universities which recruit poorly against HESA WP benchmarks.

OFFA could therefore influence institutional behaviour by tapping into university aspirations to be seen to be doing the right thing - increasing access to higher education was agreed to be a desirable goal. Satisfying the regulatory body was thus a matter of maintaining or even enhancing institutional reputation.

“OFFA use us quite often... when they’re doing reviews... it’s been really good having close links with OFFA but it kind of works the other way, that they come to us and use our examples”. *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

“[OFFA] is there to... judge how well or otherwise we are performing in the widening participation arena. We actually feel that we’re doing quite well and it would be awful if we were criticised” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

That universities’ selection priorities were influenced by a desire to increase their reputation was also seen in relation to general student recruitment at each case institution. As well as wishing to appear to be doing the right thing as far as OFFA was concerned, universities also discussed the desire to promote their reputation as lively, academic institutions. This prompted universities to seek particular students who would contribute in a positive way in terms of promoting the university and bringing academic calibre to campus.

“we need to make sure that we are balancing serving our local community with being a higher education institution with national prominence... reputation is what that is all about. So you can’t be seen to be a totally local university or you are deemed as inferior” *Marketing Manager, Northern Town University*

“I think it’s self-evident we want high quality students” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

This was mentioned as a self-interested motive underpinning selection priorities by each case university. However, the discourse was most prominent in Southern Rural University, where a relaxed atmosphere was seen as a key component of the

university's ethos, and Central Research University where lively, engaged students were seen as key to raising the institution's national and international profile.

“we'd like to think ourselves as a happy and friendly university... you can generally tell... the type of students that are going to fit into... this type of working environment” *Recruitment Officer, Southern Rural University*

“it's up to us to identify... markets, where we'll be able to generate interest... whilst maintaining a suitably diverse student population, and one that will help us to grow as an institution towards the global reputation that [this university] deservedly is working towards” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

Thus, university selection priorities were influenced by a need to maximise financial resources and also to raise reputational standing. This meant that OFFA, even though deemed to have little power to sanction institutions, could influence institutional behaviour. Complying with the principles of fair access was seen as important for promoting university reputation.

### *2.1.3 Fairness: The Schwartz Report*

The desire to be seen to be doing the right thing was also evident in university efforts to increase transparency in admissions. Following the publication of the Schwartz report in 2004, universities were presented with five principles which were deemed to constitute best practice in admissions: ensuring processes were transparent; assessment mechanisms were valid and reliable; that processes minimised the barriers between applicants and their chosen course; that selected students could successfully complete the course; and that admissions staff and processes were professional (Schwartz et al 2004). Universities' progress in their implementation of the Schwartz report was reviewed by independent organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA), with this report published during the data collection period (McCaig et al 2008a).

University staff at each case institution, except Eastern New University, specified that the Schwartz report and subsequent review had influenced their admissions processes. Justification for a standardised admissions process, and in particular central oversight

of admissions decisions, was made with reference to the aims of the review. Central oversight could be achieved either via a central admissions office making all selection decisions or via a checking mechanism so that the selection decisions made at departmental level were vetted by the centre. University staff also discussed the role that the SPA review had played in their attempts to make their admissions processes more transparent to applicants:

“there’s also the issues that have been coming out... Supporting Professionalism in Admissions... equality across courses and across the university can be enforced and policed a bit better if one office is working on it” *Central Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Central Research University*

“our admissions policy is a bit sketchy... We are looking at the work being done by SPA and UCAS... working to be clear about what we’re doing and to be clear about policies in some areas, which are not covered by our admissions policy at the moment” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*<sup>137</sup>

This would suggest that, as well as incentivising universities via the provision or withholding of funds, university behaviour could be regulated as a result of their self-interested desire to promote their reputation and to be seen to be doing the right thing.

#### *2.1.4 Avoiding Discomfort and Job Satisfaction*

However, when discussing open and standardised admissions processes, staff also described the need to avoid the discomfort of criticism for their work from consumers. This resulted in the use of admissions practices which would protect staff and institutions from having to deal with student complaints, such as increased transparency and ‘double checking’ exercises, where decisions were signed off by two different people.

“I felt [the process] really lacked transparency because if somebody came back with some feedback ‘you lack breadth’, ‘what do you mean?’. So... we actually defined what breadth meant” *Admissions Tutor, Business Studies Courses, Central Research University*

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<sup>137</sup> UCAS works with SPA to provide training in fair admissions to staff (UCAS 2011k)

“you can guarantee that someone will phone up and demand to speak to the course leader and want to know why they’ve been rejected... it just makes it a lot easier if the course leader knows about it to start with” *Admissions Officer, Variety of Courses, Southern Rural University*

A need to mitigate criticism from consumers also regulated university marketing efforts. In particular, recruitment officers at each case institution spoke of the need to give students accurate information about programmes in order to prevent student anger and criticism:

“there's no point in lying to a student about your facilities, about your courses, about your accommodation, because... you are going to get found out... if you tell them falsehoods” *Recruitment Officer, Central Research University*

Furthermore, university selection priorities were influenced by staff members wanting to maximise their professional enjoyment resulting from the student intake. Here, actions to promote the enrolment of particular students brought professional benefits to staff working at the institutions.

“one of the reasons why having these students from the accession countries was a very popular move here.... [was that] staff liked it, because suddenly they have students who are from different nationalities” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

However, the clearest expression of the personal desire to admit students who would be enjoyable to teach actually having an influence over selection priorities was expressed by academic staff at the more prestigious and popular Central Research University. This inclination to enable selection priorities to promote job satisfaction resulted in the implementation of admissions criteria designed to recruit high calibre, well-prepared and motivated students who would want to engage with their studies.

“I am looking for candidates who are foremost hard working and conscientious... they’re nicer to teach, they will turn up... they will contribute to seminars... enthusiastic students are just better all-round” *Admissions Tutor, Language and Linguistics Courses, Central Research University*

“[the students are] here to take part in a... joint scholarly enterprise. And it’s more interesting for us if they’re up to it and up for it” *Department Head, Social Sciences, Central Research University*

The wish to recruit high calibre students was discussed at the other case institutions, but the self-interested motives underlying these desires were to raise the institution’s reputation or to ensure that students could succeed on the course rather than to give those teaching them a more enjoyable experience. This may partially relate to the nature of Central Research University, a Russell Group institution with a very low drop-out rate<sup>138</sup>. As an institution with a secure and strong brand which was unlikely to see selected students leave before completing their degrees, departmental staff with responsibility for admissions had the space to reflect on what students they would wish to recruit in order to increase their own wellbeing, rather than for their department’s financial health. However, it may also reflect the fact that academics played a greater role in the admissions process at Central Research University than at some of the other case institutions. Eastern New University and Southern Rural University in particular had very centralised admissions processes.

## ***2.2 Altruism: Doing Right Because It’s Right***

Although there was evidence that university selection goals were formulated with regard to self-interested objectives, there was also evidence that altruistic motivation – the desire to do the right thing for its own sake – influenced university selection policies and practices. University staff wished to promote student wellbeing and to fulfil their civic duty to society. This evidence of altruism was found in staff working for each of the case institutions, regardless of their market position.

### ***2.2.1 Student Wellbeing***

One of the key elements of altruistic motivation was to promote student wellbeing in terms of happiness (Dolan and White 2007) and minimise student suffering. This influenced selection because it prompted a desire to recruit students who would fit in with the course and institution and enjoy being at the university. This resulted in

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<sup>138</sup> In 2008, Central Research University had a drop-out rate of below 5%, Southern Rural University had a drop-out rate of 5-10%, Northern Town University and Eastern New University had a drop-out rate of 10-15%. This compares with a drop-out rate of 8.3% across all English Universities (BBC News 2008)

efforts to make the campus and learning experience more enjoyable for students, particularly in relation to recruiting a balanced intake of students who would enrich the learning environment.

“I think our top priority is getting the right students on the right courses so that they have a fulfilling...three or so years with us” *Recruitment Officer, Southern Rural University*

“if you go to a university that is very and white middle class and you don’t meet anybody from any other background... it sort of negates part of the point... from a student perspective” *Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

Admissions were affected because selectors wanted to minimise student suffering by ensuring that they could successfully achieve their academic and professional goals. Here, departmental and student wellbeing could be aligned: students who could not complete their studies suffered personally and universities suffered because of the financial penalties and disruption associated with drop out. However, the focus in these cases was clearly on minimising student suffering:

“the last thing you want is people coming in and struggling. It’s going to be no fun for them when they arrive if they’re not capable of studying at that level” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Social Science Courses, Northern Town University*

“if they’re ambitious about their degrees then they will do as well as possible... I don’t personally care about how many 2:1s... the department gets... I care just about how [students] do at the end of it” *Admissions Tutor, Languages and Linguistics Courses, Central Research University*

Associated with this, was a goal to ensure every student could achieve his or her potential, and this had implications for widening participation. University staff members were keen to ensure that any student who could potentially succeed on the course was admitted to the institution in a manner which was consistent with equity of access. For staff at each institution, this resulted in a moral justification for widening participation initiatives - both in terms of admissions and recruitment - which would

facilitate the entry of students who might not otherwise attend university, or who would go to a less prestigious institution.

“I quite like the fact that we do a good job with students who perhaps wouldn’t have got a place elsewhere” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

“one of the things that universities should do is provide opportunity... we have an obligation to make that opportunity as widely available as possible... there are intellectual abilities... we could enhance in sectors of society that we are currently not seeing applications from” *Admissions Tutor, Business Studies Courses, Central Research University*

Across the case institutions, particularly in Eastern New University, Southern Rural University and Northern Town University, the commitment to widen participation arose from personal experience, increasing empathy and the altruistic motivation to help others from similar circumstances:

“from a personal point of view, if you’re not sure whether you’ll get the grades or if you’re not sure whether you’ll cope... all those factors can make you doubt whether you are suited to go to university” *Marketing Manager, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“I’d have loved to have gone to university but my community, my parents, my grandparents [said]... ‘University’s not for you, I’m not wasting my money doing that’... I wonder what I could have achieved if I had been allowed to go to university at eighteen” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*<sup>139</sup>

Because some selectors viewed widening participation as a moral imperative this could lead to the contextualisation of attainment in admissions. However, although evidence of this was found in particular at Central Research University, there was also widespread reluctance to give differential offers to students across the case

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<sup>139</sup> This respondent had successfully completed undergraduate and advanced postgraduate qualifications as a mature student.



universities<sup>140</sup>. This reluctance was justified for altruistic rather than self-interested motives. Making lower offers to students from non-traditional HE participating backgrounds was seen as detrimental to student wellbeing, because it would set students up to fail, would patronise students and would be unjust.

“I think that we’re doing people a disservice if we get them here and they’re not capable of degree level study” *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

“ethically [it is] not a very good thing to do... because it's not respecting people's background is it?... It's patronisation” *Widening Participation Manager, Central Research University*

Thus, many selectors were reluctant use contextual data to lower conditional offers to facilitate the entry of less advantaged students. Some interviewees spontaneously equated the contextualisation of attainment with the more derogatory ‘social engineering’ demonstrating their distaste for varying offers according to contextual data. Not varying offers was justified in terms of student wellbeing: it was therefore altruism rather than self-interested motives which appeared to prevent universities from using *admissions* to widen participation. This however did not undermine the use of widening participation activities: as the previous chapter demonstrated, *recruitment* mechanisms to promote the recruitment of non-traditional students were important for each case institution.

### 2.2.2 Civic Duty: The Community, Professions and the Globe

Furthermore, staff members at the case universities spoke of their desire to be part of the wider community, and this altruistic motive influenced university selection priorities. On the one hand, universities were keen to provide higher education opportunities for students living in the local area and to reflect the diversity of the local population in their student bodies. This resulted in admissions and recruitment policies and practices which promoted the development of local institutions to provide education in the area, and encouraged the recruitment of locally-based students.

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<sup>140</sup> A full discussion of the use of discretionary offers is available in Chapter 5.

“I think we do have a responsibility really locally... to try and educate people within the area” *Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

“I’d like to get a mix of students coming in... I think it recognises what the social make up of our society is... It is about widening participation and having a commitment to that” *Admissions Tutor, Creative Arts Courses, Central Research University*

In addition to seeing themselves as part of the local community, particular courses and departments providing education linked to particular professions such as engineering, medicine and social work also showed an altruistic desire to benefit the profession by selecting particular students. This could lead to a wish to select successful students who would be a credit to the profession, or could be linked to widening participation where the profession was seen as benefitting from recruiting a more balanced and representative group of qualified applicants.

“the entire teaching team are [practitioners<sup>141</sup>] as well as lecturers and have a deep seated commitment to the quality of the profession... our main motivation is that [students are] good enough in academic terms so that they can fulfil the requirements of the profession” *Admissions Tutor, Accredited Social Science Course, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“medicine does... have a shortage of certain types of applicants... we’re trying to... identify and support those students with ability... they could make a fantastic doctor if they get given the chance but because of their educational background, social background... they might not necessarily hit all the targets” *Departmental Admissions Officer, Non-Accredited Medical Related Course, Northern Town University*

The recruitment of international students was not a focus of this research, which concentrated on recruitment of UK-based students. However staff members with responsibility for student recruitment at Eastern New University spontaneously

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<sup>141</sup> This accredited course trained students to pursue careers as service providers in a medical/social care area.

justified their recruitment of international students with altruistic motives, a feeling which may be more widespread across universities of different types.

“people have said ‘I’ve suddenly found that I get on well with people from this country or that continent’ and they’re quite surprised... it’s so important to break down barriers like that” *Recruitment Director, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

Therefore, there is evidence that university selection decisions were motivated by the altruistic goals to contribute to the community, to assist linked professions, and to promote harmonious international relations. The impact this had on student recruitment was twofold: on the one hand altruism prompted university staff to seek to widen access for non-traditional participants; on the other hand, it prompted the recruitment of more conventionally desirable students who would bring additional revenue or be academically and professionally successful.

### ***2.3 Utility from Altruism: What’s Right is Best***

Although self-interested and altruistic motivations have been considered as distinct, there was some evidence that these factors were interlinked for some respondents. There were two principal examples of this: where there was recognition of mutual benefit, where advantage to one party was simultaneously positive for another, and as a result of finding pleasure from benefitting others.

#### ***2.3.1 Mutual Benefit***

The clearest form of linked altruistic and self-interested motives was where benefits to oneself, the department or university were seen as being mutually beneficial to the institution’s students. Benefits to students in the form of improving their subjective wellbeing during their years of study were seen equally to aid institutions and staff by preventing drop-out, increasing teacher satisfaction and facilitating recruitment. These separate motives were discussed extensively, but the links between the two were made explicit by a small number of staff across each of the case studies:

“you don’t want to try and encourage a student to come here if it doesn’t fit... because you will just lose them and they might never go back [into higher education]” *Marketing Manager, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“I think it it's such a key step getting the right young people into the institution. It affects their experience and it certainly affects ours as academic staff.. teaching a square peg in a round hole is not a comfortable experience for anybody”.  
*Admissions Tutor, Business Studies Courses, Central Research University*

“students come to us all the time that have different difficulties with things and from our point of view and theirs we want to make sure that their time here at university is as easy as possible” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Central Research University*

There was also some evidence that a university's wider community role could form a key part of promoting the reputation of the higher education sector. Bringing benefits to the wider community was seen as being important to developing a positive reputation or brand.

“the university has a role to play in improving society... that's the universities in the UK brand... each university will interpret that slightly differently, so we would tag onto that overall branding” *Marketing Manager, Southern Rural University*

Thus, this motive promoted the facilitation of the recruitment of students from widening participation backgrounds and those from traditional backgrounds who would fit with the course and be enjoyable to teach.

### 2.3.2 *Utility from Altruism*

For some staff working to widen participation or improve access to institutions, helping others to achieve their potential and improving the student experience increased utility from job satisfaction. This motive is distinct from mutual benefits, because the self-interested benefit for the institution and its staff was derived solely from the act of promoting student wellbeing:

“there is just the sheer job satisfaction and pleasure of seeing somebody come in who doesn't believe they can do stuff and then you... see them graduate with a 2:1” *Associate Dean, Business Studies, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“it’s a very selfish thing to do to work with young people... you get a lot of instant rewards. I mean this sounds so trite it’s ridiculous, but you can actually make a difference” *Widening Participation Manager, Northern Town University*

Therefore, there was evidence that self-interested rationale and altruistic motives were linked for some university selectors. However, the extent of this evidence was limited: for most staff, altruistic and self-interested motives were compartmentalised in their discussion of student recruitment and admissions. This may be a function of the research interviewing process. Cornwall (1984) has shown that interviewees tailor their responses in interviews to try and give expected and pleasing information: separating motives in discourse may have been to usefully increase clarity.

### **3. Identity and Extrinsic Incentives: Ethos and Internalisation**

Therefore, an examination of motivation amongst university staff shows that financial incentives, both in the form of rewards (such as the Widening Participation Fund) and sanctions (denying permission to charge the maximum tuition fees) should enable the government to influence university recruitment and admissions. In 2008/09 the government’s system of incentives focused on making non-traditional students more attractive to universities. Institutions needed to attract these students and to support them once they entered higher education to charge maximum rates of tuition fees, with funding also available to institutions who recruited students from low participation neighbourhoods.

The evidence presented above suggests that universities were motivated by a desire to maximise financial resources and to minimise costs. However, the evidence that government incentives actually influenced institutional behaviour was less strong. Although the aim to widen participation was clearly shown at each case institution and outreach activities were undertaken at each university, there was little evidence that this translated into concrete initiatives to increase not only applications but enrolment from this group of students. On the contrary, although some admissions staff gave differential offers to facilitate the entry of students from less privileged backgrounds, there was a general distaste and unwillingness associated with this activity, particularly from central university offices.

However, although the Schwartz report principle to remove barriers to access had not translated into a modification of admissions policies or practices, the principles of transparency and consistency had been readily adopted by universities. Of the four case institutions, Northern Town University and Central Research University were in the process of centralising their admissions processes, with consistency seen as being a key benefit of this. Some universities and departments were codifying admissions policies to increase transparency; for example during this research Southern Rural University re-wrote its admissions policy to increase the details available to applicants.

Thus, the principles of transparency and consistency were readily adopted as goals by institutions, and this percolated down from higher managers within institutions to staff at lower levels of authority. Where managers spoke of the Schwartz report, admissions officers and departmental staff spoke of their desire to treat everyone in the same way and to have transparency in admissions, even where they did not mention Schwartz themselves. As discussed above, the desire for consistency and transparency was widespread throughout the case institutions, regardless of their market position. This was evident at all case institutions, and is illustrated by an example from Northern Town University:

“since the... Schwartz report and fair admissions... [the head of admissions] is... on the ball with all that kind of stuff... she’s very keen on fair admissions”  
*Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

“I think [interviews] favour a certain social group... who can be coached... if you’re interviewing home students, why are you not interviewing international students... so the interviews will go” *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

“is an interview a fair thing to have for one course but not for another... I want there to be parity for any student coming to the [faculty]” *Associate Dean, Medical Related and Biological Science Faculty, Northern Town University*

This example of a wider trend shows an interplay between government incentives, university management objectives and other employees’ behaviour which fits with the principles of self-determination theory. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), external

directives can become part of a person's identity via the process of internalisation. An initially extrinsic motivator thus becomes a self-policed behaviour; the person is motivated to conform not because of the external incentive but because it has become an internal regulation. Deci et al (1994) argue that the form this internalisation takes is mediated by the social context: subjects can either incorporate the function fully, allowing it to become part of their character (integration) or the subject can decide to conform via an outward show of obedience without fully identifying with the function (introjection).

In the previous chapter, evidence suggested that staff made an explicit link between their actions and the responsibility to use state funds, from Aimhigher for example, in line with government objectives. This might suggest that the government can use incentives to regulate university behaviour by a process of introjection. However, on closer examination, university staff were more willing to act where government objectives concurred with their own perspectives, providing evidence of a more thorough internalisation where the setting for integration was already in place. In other words, rather than internalising an extrinsic motivator leading to a modification in identity, conformity was facilitated where the person's beliefs resonated with the objectives of the external incentive. Here, discourse at each case university suggested that staff were happy to comply with HEFCE, OFFA and SPA because the directives 'made sense' or fitted with institutional and individual aims and ethos.

"I don't think [the Widening Participation Fund] has changed our recruitment goals. It might have been a bit of a bonus... but because we have an access mission we were doing that anyway... I don't think we would turn round and reject students from a more challenging background... because it just would be completely against our ethos" *Marketing Manager, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

"through HEFCE... you obviously have the widening participation branch and you have the pressure coming from there... [which] universities are very committed to as a whole. I mean, [this university] genuinely is... it doesn't see it as [something] we've got to do to satisfy HEFCE" *Recruitment Officer, Central Research University*

“we know [OFFA] exists and we accept its principles... we don’t feel intimidated by that sort of body, [widening access is] just something that we try to do... we’re meeting most of those sort of objectives through our core policies in any case, because they are very much the historic policies of this institution” *Admissions Manager, Southern Rural University*

“we’re not just doing it because SPA say so... when we agree that [what SPA says] is best practice we were doing that” *Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

This would suggest that universities were in fact indicating that any conformity with government requirements was coincidental. The key driver of university selection practices were the institutions’ intrinsic goals and ethos. Staff at each university discussed the desire to widen participation as part of the institutional ethos. Although the terminology varied between institutions, the message was the same: widening participation was part of the university’s core mission or principal objective, something that was done without pressure. This ethos developed because of the people working within the institution: social and educational experiences of staff and students resulted in the creation of a particular institutional culture. Once in place, the institutional culture continued to attract staff and students which fitted with the university and who in turn reinforced the university’s ethos.

“like so many people at this university, I was a first generation [HE participant]... soon after I came here... we had degree ceremonies and... there was a rather large Afro-Caribbean... young man at the university entrance grabbing hold of his sisters and wider members of the family... and saying, “Look, I’m the first one of this family to get a degree,” and he was so proud. And we all know that students like that are difficult to attract into universities and I thought, this is a university I can be in tune with” *Fees and Bursaries Manager*<sup>142</sup>, *Eastern New University, Main Campus*

“[our mission is] probably a mixture of the sort of courses and the types of academics that we had here... ever since I’ve been involved with the university in

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<sup>142</sup> This respondent had been on secondment from another institution at the time of this incident, but later joined Eastern New University.



20 years I've always been aware that there's been this huge buy-in to people having chances through education and it comes right from the top" *Widening Participation Manager, Southern Rural University*

There is evidence that where university ethos, the cluster of beliefs and perspectives that make up an institutional culture, did not resonate with the government's aims, there was resistance to comply, even if there was apparent introjection. This could be seen at Northern Town University in a subversion, though not non-compliance, of government systems to monitor institutions:

"I think our Access Agreement is very famous in OFFA circles for actually saying nothing... it was obviously passed and it's fine but... it was very non-committal" *Fees and Bursaries Officer, Northern Town University*

"have you seen our access agreement? It says nothing, absolutely nothing. It says we will comply with the legislation and it deliberately says we will spend no more money on outreach activities and our milestones are... easy to measure" *Senior Manager, Northern Town University*

Within institutions, the means via which central university offices could influence individual departments demonstrated that compliance would only occur where the setting for integration was in place. This was seen in a clash of wills between the centre and departments. In order to gain compliance, the centre needed to persuade the departments of the benefits of the desired behaviour, bringing departmental perspectives in line with those of the central institution. For example, at the time of the research both Northern Town University and Central Research University were using consultation exercises and pilots to convince academic departments of the benefits of a centralised admissions process as they sought to increase central responsibility for admissions.

This shows that internalisation can be facilitated by persuasion, where the centre or principal convinces a unit or agent of the benefits of the behaviour in order to prevent bureaucratic drift (Eisenhardt 1989)<sup>143</sup>. Indeed, as discussed, evidence suggested that

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<sup>143</sup> Principal-agent theory is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

where possible, if agent objectives did not concur with those of the centre, there was continued non-compliance.

According to Deci et al (1994) internalisation, where the agent has the power to choose whether or not to internalise the behaviour, brings greater autonomy and is more likely to result in genuine integration rather than introjection which, as demonstrated, can lead to surface compliance masking subversion.

“a lot of the WP stuff.. I can see why they’re doing it.. For example, looked after children... I remember looking at [the progression rates for] looked after children and have been absolutely horrified... [but] we’re not just doing it because of that, we’re doing it because it’s right” *Admissions Manager, Northern Town University*

“[We] piloted [centralised admissions] very carefully in a couple of departments... gradually over time... trust and confidence [has been] established. That’s a key factor for the academic community... some departments... were dead set against it, and [are] never likely to come into a centralised admissions” *Recruitment Manager, Central Research University*

Limited evidence suggested that integration and full compliance were facilitated where the action or behaviour was easy to undertake, for example where costs were low, showing the importance of self-interest as well as identity in the process of internalisation.

“I’m beginning a dialogue about... the potential for us to offer something for care leavers... OFFA has said that they think that that’s a direction they’d like to see educational institutions moving into... We probably have less than 20 [looked after children] in the institution and if it’s so easy for us to gain approval from OFFA at very little cost outlay... [it] seems to be a win, win situation” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Southern Rural University*

Therefore, integration (as opposed to introjection, grudging or willing) was facilitated if there was accordance between institutional ethos and government objectives. The same process was also seen within institutions with central goals being either

internalised or rejected by departments where institutional and departmental ethos did or did not fit.

The clearest demonstration of a failure to internalise principal directives was seen at Eastern New University, which had recently merged with a different institution. Following the merger, the primary campus, which had itself been a cohesive institution prior to the merger, strengthened its own ethos over that of the secondary campus, which had previously been a satellite campus of a different university.

“the [university prior to merger]... was always an access university. When we merged we went through a lot of discussions with our new friends, new partners and we all signed up to that and the governors signed up to it, the executive, everybody has signed up” *Fees and Bursaries Manager, Eastern New University, Main Campus*

However, there were signs that there was an ethos mismatch between the primary and secondary campuses, particularly with regard to student admissions. As an access university, management at the main campus were keen for students to be accepted rather than rejected wherever possible. This did not accord with the perspective of administrative selectors working at the secondary campus, who wanted to be more selective. There was a feeling that the imposition of the main campus’ ethos and practices had led to a loss of autonomy and wellbeing for staff who had recently worked for a different institution:

“we had a higher standard than our other site [the main campus] and we felt that we got it right... each year we set the standards, and then you are told the standards are wrong, you’ve got to lower them, and then you get students coming in on the lower standards [who] can’t cope with the course” *Administrative Selector, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

“I think it could be a lot more pleasant sometimes if we were actually given the autonomy to make the decisions properly... I’d love to know if [the students who] dropped out were the weaker students at application” *Administrative Selector, Variety of Courses, Eastern New University, Secondary Campus*

This would suggest that central objectives and principal directives will only be truly internalised if there is accordance between centre and agent. Appealing to agents' self-interest can bring about internalisation, and in particular introjection rather than integration. This is particularly so where it facilitates an activity which the agent would have wished to undertake without pressure. However, true compliance with no deviation was best facilitated where aims and objectives of the different parties fitted together.

Deci and Ryan (1985) and Deci et al (1994) argue that bringing about compliance via introjection produces lower agent autonomy than integration. The evidence presented here suggests that, where compliance is due to introjection and agents do not *wish* to undertake the activity, the external pressure can lead to a feeling of powerlessness and loss of wellbeing. This was the case at the secondary campus of Eastern New University, where admissions officers showed a marked unease and unhappiness at having to obey central commands.

In order to increase agent compliance, the central management of Eastern New University had increased monitoring of the secondary campus' admissions office, and had overturned selection decisions made by officers. However, agents with more power, either because monitoring was absent or weak, could subvert the centre's directives by only partially or half-heartedly obeying them. This was the case for Northern Town University, where OFFA's weakness allowed this institution to subvert the requirement for an access agreement by submitting a non-committal document.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The evidence suggests that government rewards and sanctions designed to influence university selection and recruitment policies and practices did change staff behaviour. University staff members had the self-interested wish to maximise income and to be seen to be doing the right thing, enabling rewards and sanctions to be effective. However, institutional ethos was influenced by a variety of motivations, and this has implications for the extent to which governments could control HEIs.

There was evidence that government incentives influenced institutional behaviour. Universities from different positions in the marketplace showed a desire to maximise

income and minimise loss. This desire regulated behaviour beyond the scope of government objectives, leading to a focus on local, non-traditional students at the same time as trying to fill student numbers, maximise fee income via international recruitment and recruit the ‘best’ students who would succeed academically and assist the university in raising its reputation.

It was hypothesised that the strength of these incentives would vary between universities according to institutional reputation and course popularity:

**Hypothesis 1:** Selectors for popular courses at old universities will use applicants’ background information to contextualise attainment and facilitate the entry of candidates from less privileged backgrounds.

**Hypothesis 5:** Old universities supplying popular courses will take a *laissez faire* approach to student recruitment, relying on their strong brand to attract consumer interest.

Thus, the popular Central Research University, which of the four case universities had the lowest intake of students from non-traditional backgrounds, had more incentive to increase recruitment of less-advantaged students. It had more to gain financially than those institutions which were already meeting or were close to meeting their access targets and the ability to take risks because of overall levels of institutional popularity. General recruitment would be expected to be less important as the university already attracted high numbers of high-achieving students due to its strong brand.

**Hypothesis 2:** Selectors for less popular courses at old universities will be risk averse and select students who are similar to previous intakes.

**Hypothesis 6:** Old universities supplying less popular courses will try and increase demand from desirable consumer groups using strong segmentation.

Northern Town University was thus hypothesised as being likely to take a risk-averse strategy of trying to maximise recruitment from desirable students to avoid penalties for under-recruitment while maintaining its market position. These students would be prioritised in recruitment programmes and in the admissions process. This was because of the competing motivations present for this less-popular old university which needed to fill all course places to avoid penalties for under-recruitment while

attracting high-achieving students who would allow the university to maintain or enhance its reputation as a prestigious and selective HEI.

**Hypothesis 3:** Selectors for popular selecting courses at new universities will cream high-achieving students and give preferential offers to encourage their enrolment.

**Hypothesis 7:** New universities supplying more popular courses will use *multiple segmentation* to increase overall demand, and allow course selectors to cherry-pick applicants.

Conversely, it was hypothesised that Southern Rural University, as a popular new institution, would have a greater incentive to recruit high-achieving students, using its secure applicant base to recruit a more ‘desirable’ cohort to improve its market position. Because of its historical development, this institution would wish to maintain interest from students from non-traditional backgrounds, but would use its popularity to try and increase selectivity of intake to cream students who would be enjoyable to teach.

**Hypothesis 4:** Less popular recruiting courses at new universities will open doors and facilitate the entry of applicants who are unable to enter other institutions in order to fill places.

**Hypothesis 8:** Universities supplying less popular courses will work to create demand among consumer groups which do not traditionally participate in HE in order to fill places.

Eastern New University, which already achieved its widening participation targets, was hypothesised as having incentives to further increase demand from non-traditional students in order to avoid penalties associated with under-recruitment. Although this would also increase revenue from the postcode premium, the key aim would be to fill places by encouraging students to enter the institution who otherwise might enter the labour market.

The analysis of motivations among university staff members shows some evidence which supports these hypotheses. Central Research University was slightly more wary of upsetting the OFFA than the other institutions. For example, this university contacted OFFA when it experienced problems with rates of bursary take-up in order

to neutralise criticism. This may be because this institution had more incentive to ensure that OFFA was satisfied; unlike the other universities, recruitment from non-traditional HE participating students was perceived as being a challenge. Similarly, Eastern New University and Northern Town University showed an awareness of their need to fulfil their HEFCE contract in terms of student recruitment, demonstrating that the under-recruitment penalty was more influential for directing their behaviour than it was for the more popular institutions.

However, despite the different market positions in terms of reputation and popularity, there was a great deal of similarity between the motives underlying universities' selection priorities and practices. Staff members at each case institution showed the self-interested desire to maximise resources and staff wellbeing, balanced with the altruistic desire to promote student wellbeing and contribute positively to society. All universities, regardless of market position, showed a commitment to widening participation which was sustained by both self-interest and altruism.

Despite the difference in university market positions, there were thus some similarities in institutional ethos, particularly with regard to the recruitment of non-traditional students. This brought about some parallels in behaviour. Staff at each institution discussed the community role of the university and the need to widen access. However, staff across the case institutions described the desire to widen participation as being linked to institutional ethos and reputation rather than being prompted by financial incentives. It could be argued that this was due to the nature of the incentives in place. There was the possibility of subverting a directive where the regulating body was weak, with institutions feeling little pressure to comply with OFFA. HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund was a relatively small pot of money compared to the teaching grant as a whole (Coates and Adnett 2003), amounting to 7.9 per cent of HEFCE's total teaching block grant in 2008/09<sup>144</sup> (HEFCE 2008/40). This might explain why institutions discussed the fund as facilitating their objectives rather than altering them.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that widening participation resulted from something other than financial incentives. The mechanism which brought about compliance with government objectives was universities' desire to be seen to be doing the right thing.

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<sup>144</sup> This is discussed more fully in Chapter 1.

Although OFFA was seen as being a weak organisation, institutions still demonstrated the desire to please this body and to avoid criticism. This was because to do otherwise would affect their reputation as instruments for societal improvement and fairness. In other words, it was universities' support for widening participation and fair access - part of their core mission or ethos - and their desire to be seen to be fulfilling their role successfully which brought about compliance. This evidence can be validly interpreted with reference to self-determination theory: universities were prepared to internalise behaviour where easy integration was possible because government aims accorded with their own objectives. At an institutional level, a similar process could be seen in the convergence or otherwise of aims between the centre and agents such as academic departments or secondary campuses.

The reliance on university ethos to bring about compliance rather than introjection due to financial pressure had implications for the efficacy of government incentives. Although prepared to pursue government aims, universities were only willing to do so in a manner which fitted with their own objectives. Therefore, although universities would centralise admissions and codify admissions policies to bring about consistency and transparency in line with the principles of the Schwartz report, there was an unwillingness to break down barriers to access in a manner which was seen as being distasteful. Generally, universities were reluctant to make discretionary conditional offers to students from less privileged educational backgrounds in order to secure approval or increased financial resource, demonstrating that compliance will be limited to activities within an institution's comfort zone if the integration of the ideal is necessary before compliance will occur.



## Chapter 10 Conclusions and Policy Implications

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will analyse the evidence presented previously to show how this research contributes to our understanding of universities' admissions and recruitment behaviour. First, contributions made to the advancement of theories developed in Chapter 2 will be discussed, followed by a re-examination of the key concepts underpinning this research. The implications of the findings for higher education policy will then be considered.

Finally, the chapter will conclude that there are significant challenges facing English universities. Equity of access is unlikely to be a feasible goal without government support and additional resources.

### 2. Research Findings and the Implications for Theory

This section will present the key findings which address the research question:

*How do Reputation and Popularity Influence Student Admissions and Recruitment in Universities in England?*

First admissions then recruitment will be considered. The implications that these results have for theories of university selection behaviour will also be discussed.

#### 2.1 Admissions

This section examines the key findings in relation to university admissions behaviour in England.

##### 2.1.1 Contextual Data

According to rational choice theory, universities should prioritise the admission of potential students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs). Universities selecting students from LPNs can access income from HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund (WPF) to maximise economic resources (HEFCE 2008/20; Rolfe 2003). Therefore, it was hypothesised that old, popular institutions, which overall

have had less success recruiting students from LPNs compared to other universities, have a particular incentive to use contextual data (see Chapter 2).

The evidence suggests that contextual data do influence some admissions outcomes (see Chapters 4 and 6). However, candidates' school backgrounds may be more influential than postcode information, a measure of LPN. Selectors across the HE sector were shown to take account of candidates' school backgrounds when determining conditional offer levels (see Models 2 and 3, Chapter 6). School background informed student selection for some courses, particularly at Central Research University, but postcodes did not (see Chapters 4 and 5).

The suggestion that postcodes do not influence admissions as much as school background is based on a small sample of institutions<sup>145</sup>. However, other evidence confirms that applicants' postcodes inform admissions at only a minority of institutions, while candidates' school backgrounds are used more widely across the population of HEIs (Pennell et al 2005).

It is argued that the postcode premium may be insufficiently strong to influence behaviour because the WPF is relatively small (Coates and Adnett 2003; Pugh et al 2005). This research supports this proposition. While there was evidence that staff members aimed to maximise institutional income, the WPF was not described as an economic incentive (see Chapter 9)<sup>146</sup>.

It was suggested that applicants' socio-economic status (SES) could inform admissions decisions (Rudd 1987a; Fulton and Ellwood 1989). However, on the basis of the quantitative evidence, it could be argued that SES does not play a significant role in selection. Candidate SES was not associated with the receipt of 'helpful' conditional offers and similar candidates from both routine and higher professional backgrounds were equally likely to receive higher offers than standard (see Models 2 and 3, Chapter 6).

One possible reason that candidates' school backgrounds informed admissions decisions while SES did not may relate to the Schwartz report. While this

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<sup>145</sup> UCAS did not supply information about candidates' postcodes. This research could therefore not test the proposition that LPN does not play an important role in student admissions.

<sup>146</sup> The implications are discussed in section 4.2.

acknowledges the relationship between pupil SES and academic performance, it explicitly encourages selectors to use school background to identify potential:

*“other things being equal, students from state schools and colleges tend to perform better at undergraduate level than students from independent schools and colleges.”*

(Schwartz et al 2004: 23)

Therefore, research which pre-dates the Schwartz report may not be applicable to the current context. This helps explain why the findings do not support the theoretical admissions typology, which was partly dependent on pre-Schwartz research (see Chapter 2). It also supports findings which suggest that official guidelines may influence institutional behaviour (see Chapter 9).

### *2.1.2 Old and New Universities*

Previous research examining university admissions has concentrated on the old university sector (for example Rudd 1987a; Fulton and Ellwood 1989; Brown and Bimrose 1994). Although some research compares admissions at old and new universities (Greenbank 2006), there was a lack of evidence about admissions practice at post-1992 institutions (see Chapter 2).

The typology of admissions behaviour which predicts differences in selection practices between old and new institutions was partially based on theoretical assumptions (see Table 2.1). For example, it was predicted that pressures to widen participation would be less influential among new universities, which generally enrol more candidates from less-advantaged backgrounds than pre-1992 institutions (Pugh et al 2005; Harrison 2011). Therefore, it was hypothesised that selectors for popular courses at new universities would cream high-achievers without reference to candidates' contextual data (see Chapter 2).

However, this research found unexpected similarities between old and new universities. Both types of institution made 'helpful' conditional offers to non-selective state school pupils to facilitate their entry ahead of equally-qualified independent school pupils (see Model 2, Chapter 6). This suggests that there is no variation in the use of contextual data for determining *conditional offer levels* among

old and new universities, although there may be variation during earlier selection stages (see Chapter 4).

Furthermore, it was hypothesised that selectors for less-popular, recruiting courses at old universities would prioritise the admission of their traditional, high-achieving clientele who would 'fit' with institutional habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Conversely, recruiting courses at new universities were expected to target non-traditional students achieving at lower levels to fill places (Coates and Adnett 2003; Pugsley 2004)<sup>147</sup>.

Contrary to expectation however, selectors for recruiting courses at both old and new universities were willing to facilitate the entry of lower-achieving and non-traditional candidates (see Chapters 4 and 5). This could involve the use of 'flexible selection' where entry requirements were waived for particular candidates. The quantitative evidence demonstrated that old and new institutions were equally likely to make conditional offers which were lower than standard to applicants with lower predicted grades (see Model 3, Chapter 6).

Thus, the evidence suggests that old and new institutions facing similar recruitment challenges may prioritise filling places over the selection of desirable students. This may indicate that the economic imperative to maximise recruitment is strong enough to overcome universities' desire to admit students who 'fit' with the institution. Therefore, variation in admissions behaviour would only be expected between more popular courses which have increased scope to consider which students will maximise their and the institution's utility.

This may explain why the 'fit' between candidates and institution was discussed at Southern Rural University, which overall had a higher number of applications per place (see Chapters 4 and 7). However, this desire was discussed in terms of the need to maximise student retention and minimise the loss of reputation and income, rather than the need to satisfy institutional habitus. This could indicate that respondents were influenced by a social desirability bias which has been shown to affect the reliability of qualitative data (Cornwall 1984). Interviewees may have felt it would be more

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<sup>147</sup> See Chapter 2

acceptable to discuss candidate preferences in terms of economic rationale rather than taste.

However, the lack of evidence to suggest that habitus influences student admissions may potentially indicate that Bourdieu's theory cannot be applied to *university* behaviour as easily as it has been to *pupil* choice. Although research suggests that habitus influences *candidates'* choices, this has been attributed to pupils' concerns about failure to integrate with alien environments (Reay et al 2005). For example, non-traditional learners attending 'middle class' institutions feel 'daunted' by the transition (Crozier et al 2008). It could be argued that this finding demonstrates that students' behaviour is influenced by their perceived inability to control their environment, a consideration which this research suggests is unlikely to apply to all institutions (see Chapters 7 and 9). Therefore, habitus may have less influence over university decision-making than for students because universities are in a comparatively powerful position.

This suggests that part of the theoretical framework underpinning the typology of admissions behaviour was inappropriate for understanding university decision-making, explaining why some hypotheses were not met.

The possible explanations discussed in this section are partly based on case study evidence, which may not be generalisable to all HEIs. Therefore, alternative explanations for the similar behaviour among recruiting courses at old and new institutions should be considered. In particular, both the less-popular Northern Town University and Eastern New University discussed their strong commitment to widening participation. As non-traditional HE participants are less likely to be high-achievers at post-compulsory level (West and Pennell 2003), flexible criteria may enable universities to widen access, which in turn may be associated with institutional identity or brand (see Section 3.1). This potential relationship between university identity and admissions behaviour requires further investigation.

### *2.1.3 Popularity and Creaming*

It is argued that oversubscribed educational institutions have an incentive to cream high-achievers who will improve the performance of the institution, facilitating recruitment and access to income (West et al 2004; Le Grand 2006; Winston 1997).

Selecting high-achievers may also increase academics' utility as these students are more enjoyable to teach (Jensen et al 2006)<sup>148</sup>. It was therefore hypothesised that selectors for popular courses would cream academic achievers.

Course popularity was associated with creaming in some cases. Southern Rural University's 'prime courses' had more demanding entry criteria partly to manage the number of successful applicants. Some selectors at Central Research University designed criteria to select students who would be enjoyable to teach (see Chapter 4).

Although raised entry criteria were used to cream applicants, there was also evidence that selectors believed potential students used entry criteria as indicators of course quality (see Chapter 4). Entry criteria were thus used to *encourage* applications from desirable candidates as well as to select high-achievers. Thus, as previous research suggests, admissions processes may influence recruitment by encouraging candidates to choose particular courses (McManus et al 1999; Whitehead et al 2006). This effect needs to be considered when evaluating the impact of admissions policies and practices on equity of access.

It is also argued that course popularity could promote the importance of candidates' academic attainment - an indicator of quality - over other factors in the admissions process because selectors have too many applications to assess each one thoroughly (Brown and Binrose 1994). Therefore, information contained in the school reference and personal statement should play a smaller role in selection decisions as course popularity increases.

However, this research suggests that popular courses at both old and new case study universities used 'strong selection' mechanisms<sup>149</sup>, including a detailed assessment of candidates' applications against complex criteria. For example, personal statements were used to evaluate candidates' commitment to their chosen course, as well as their extra-curricular activities (see Chapter 4).

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<sup>148</sup> See Chapter 2. As discussed, this behaviour was expected among popular courses at new universities but this section will concentrate on the use of creaming more broadly.

<sup>149</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, selectors could offer places to each student meeting minimum entry criteria (weak selection) or use of complex criteria to rank candidates with only highly ranked applicants receiving places (strong selection).

One explanation for the unexpected use of complex criteria among some popular courses is that they could increase selectivity where raising academic entry requirements was not feasible. This suggests that courses with extremely high academic entry standards should use complex criteria. This may affect research-intensive institutions in particular due to the association between university reputation, popularity and entry requirements (Rolfé 2003). This may explain why strong selection was found most commonly at Central Research University, excluding accredited courses and degree programmes in creative and performing arts subjects which are discussed below.

#### *2.1.4 The Locus of Decision-Making*

As discussed in Chapter 2, previous research has focused on either departmental admissions practice (Fulton and Ellwood 1989; Brown and Bimrose 1994) or central admissions policy (Greenbank 2006). However, this research suggests that admissions managers, administrative officers and departmental staff all influenced admissions processes and course selection goals (see Chapter 4).

One reason the findings did not support the research hypotheses may be because it was assumed that all selectors would exercise discretion (see Chapter 2). However, among interviewed selectors, some admissions officers (AOs) in particular showed little inclination to exercise discretion while the departmental admissions tutors (ATs) were generally more willing to take candidates' contextual data into account (see Chapters 4 and 5). This may suggest that ATs are more confident about making academic judgements. For example, AOs referred 'borderline applicants' who did not clearly qualify for admission or rejection to tutors for additional assessment (see Chapter 4).

Therefore, the use of discretion in student admissions is likely to have changed since much of the literature used to develop the hypotheses was published. For example, there is evidence that central AOs have become increasingly important for HE admissions (Adnett et al 2011) which may have reduced the use of discretion. Furthermore, the perceived desirability of selector discretion may have decreased as a result of the Schwartz report's focus on the need for consistency in admissions (see Chapter 9).

This suggests that researchers should consider whether universities admissions systems are centralised or departmental when examining student selection. However, this suggestion is partly based on case study data and may not be generalisable to the population of universities.

Previous studies, including this research, have also assumed that one selector is responsible for admissions to each course. However, the locus of influence may be less focused than assumed. Accrediting organisations may shape admissions criteria and practices for professional courses (see Chapter 4). For creative and performing arts courses, several different individuals may interview applicants (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the extent to which admissions decisions are in the control of one individual may partly depend on course subject.

For particular courses therefore, selecting one individual to represent each programme may mask evidence of diversity. This research has demonstrated the potential for variation between selectors for the same course, but has not provided evidence of this phenomenon. In future, it would be worth including a sample of different selectors to represent a course where appropriate to ensure potential variation emerges.

#### *2.1.5 Conclusion*

This research suggests that popularity is associated with entry requirements. Courses which struggle to fill places may have lower entry criteria than more popular courses, and criteria may be applied flexibly to facilitate the entry of candidates performing at lower levels. Therefore, selectors for courses with particular recruitment difficulties may use discretion in order to ensure that places are filled.

However, ‘strong selection’ where candidates are ranked using complex criteria is likely to be found among very popular courses with high academic entry requirements and those which have a creative or professional element. For these courses, candidates’ attributes, including their contextual information in some cases, are examined thoroughly. As creative and professional courses are provided by both old and new universities, this may explain why candidates’ school background was associated with admissions outcomes at both types of institution (see Chapter 6).



For moderately popular courses with sufficient interest to fill places, raising entry criteria can increase selectivity. For these ‘weak selection’ courses, selectors take a simplified response to the personal statement and may therefore be less likely to consider contextual data. This reduces potential discretion for courses which are neither very popular or unpopular.

Thus, the use of discretion may vary between courses depending on course popularity. Selectors for highly-oversubscribed courses and courses which struggle to fill places are more likely to exercise discretion than staff members selecting for courses with moderate levels of popularity. Furthermore, discretion is also influenced by the locus of decision-making, with academic tutors more likely to exercise discretion than administrative officers.

Thus, it may be possible to develop a new typology of admissions behaviour which separates courses according to popularity and the locus of decision-making, as these factors determine whether or not course selectors exercise discretion. However, it is possible that ‘university mission’ may also influence admissions (see section 2.1.2). Mission is likely to be linked to institutional identity and brand (see section 3.1). This research suggests that ‘reputation’ is not perfectly characterised by a university’s status as a pre or post-1992 institution, indicating that although different types of HEI may have similar admissions goals, ‘reputation’ may still play a role in institutional selection behaviour.

## ***2.2 Recruitment***

This section will discuss the key findings in relation to student recruitment among English universities. The propositions developed here are based qualitative case studies, which cannot be generalised to the population of universities without further empirical work (Bryman 2008).

### *2.2.1 Globalization and Constant Improvement*

It was expected that institutional reputation and course popularity would influence institutional recruitment behaviour (see Chapter 2), with universities using marketing mixes to target particular students (Davies and Scribbins 1985). Recruitment practices were predicted to reflect current patterns of consumer interest. For example, universities with less-popular courses which were unable to cream students via

admissions were predicted to target a narrow segment of consumers to facilitate selection, while popular institutions would try to increase their appeal more broadly (Smith 1956; Kotler and Fox 1995). Conversely, old universities with popular courses were predicted to take a *laissez-faire* approach to student recruitment due to existing levels of consumer demand (Nicholls et al 1995; Ali-Choudhury et al 2009).

Thus, courses' market positions were taken as fixed, with recruitment mechanisms predicted to fit existing levels of popularity and institutional reputation. However, this research has shown that each case university used the marketing mix to *improve* their market position, or at least to preserve their position against downward flowing currents. For example, Eastern New University attempted to create demand as expected, but also aimed to cream academic achievers (see Chapter 7).

The suggestion that universities wish to improve their marketing position cannot be generalised, but is in line with previous research (Browne 2011). Therefore, the typology of recruitment behaviour (see Chapter 2) needs adaptation to more accurately predict university behaviour. In particular, all institutions would be expected to expend some effort on student recruitment rather than taking a *laissez-faire* approach<sup>150</sup>. This need for effort is likely to increase following stronger emphasis on consumer choice in recent HE proposals (DBIS 2011<sup>151</sup>).

Furthermore, this research suggests that (for at least some courses) universities with different market positions tried to both retain custom from traditional clientele and target desirable consumers (see Chapter 7). For example, Southern Rural University aimed to attract existing local customer groups while removing elements of the marketing mix (sub-degree courses) which appealed to lower-achieving students. Therefore, the exact nature of targeted groups may vary as institutions can only make gradual adjustments in their positioning rather than precipitate rapid change (Price et al 2003; Croot and Chalkley 1999; Maringe 1999).

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<sup>150</sup> Hypothesis 6 predicts *laissez-faire* behaviour for popular courses at old universities.

<sup>151</sup> At the time of writing, Parliament had not debated the 'Putting Students at the Heart of the System' White Paper published in 2011 (DBIS 2011). Reports suggest that the Bill could be amended, but that this might not delay all proposed changes including unrestricted recruitment of high-achieving students (BBC 2012; Guardian 2012).

### *2.2.2 Reputation and Widening Participation*

The hypotheses developed from theoretical literature assumed that demand creation strategies would only be used by institutions which had weak market positions and needed to fill places (Coates 1998). However, this research suggests that widening participation (WP) strategies could increase institutions' renown as 'access universities' which excelled at encouraging HE participation (see Chapter 9). At the time of the research, this was consistent with the aims of government policy (Pugh et al 2005), meaning additional reputational benefit could be derived from WP activities. This may explain why Northern Town University, an institution predicted to target a narrow segment of the market excluding non-traditional students, included all potential consumers in recruitment activities (see Chapter 7).

Therefore, although it is argued that academic achievers are particularly desirable (Winston 1997) this research shows that institutional reputation could also be enhanced by recruiting non-traditional students, who are more likely to have lower achievement at school (West and Pennell 2003). Therefore, institutions may target unexpected customers, using non-traditional student recruitment to convey an impression that they are committed to WP (see Chapter 7).

This suggests that HE is not like other goods, which may explain why some marketing literature does not fully transfer to the HE context. Universities have a wide variety of different functions, including the advancement of academic enquiry, facilitating social mobility and promoting economic development (Watson 2002; Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Dearing et al 1997; Nygaard et al 2008). Fulfilling these functions does not always benefit institutional income directly but does increase institutional utility by enhancing 'reputation'.

The WP focus at both old and new case universities also suggests that 'reputation' is not perfectly associated with the date at which universities received their charters. For example, the pre-1992 Northern Town University and post-1992 Eastern New University showed similar desires to position themselves as community universities (see Chapters 7 and 8). This suggests that there is variation in institutional reputation between universities classified in a similar way for this research, and that conversely there are similarities between institutions of different status. Thus, the research

hypotheses may not have been proven because there was insufficient variation in 'reputation' between the case institutions.

Furthermore, this research shows that both old and new universities can use WP initiatives to influence institutional reputation or brand. As previously discussed, staff members at each case study university professed commitment to WP (see Chapter 8). This may reflect a selection bias, with staff members working in WP and offering to participate in this research likely to have a commitment to student access. However, this may also reflect that working to widen participation could increase utility for some individuals as a result of a 'warm glow' effect (see Chapter 9).

The desirability of non-traditional students could also result from the case universities' wish to recruit balanced intakes to improve the diversity of opinion in the classroom and the quality of the educational experience (see Chapter 7). This finding complements the argument that HE quality is influenced by student calibre (Winston 1997) but suggests that student calibre cannot solely be measured via academic attainment. Students may be highly desirable to a university if they are from a group which is under-represented on campus.

Thus, it could be argued that universities try and create demand using WP strategies to improve their market position as well as fill places. Although the generalisability of this suggestion needs to be tested, it may therefore be expected that universities will target a number of different consumer segments, including high-achievers and non-traditional students. However, the purpose and the extent to which WP students are targeted will depend on whether they are the university's core customers, or whether they are difficult to attract (see Chapter 7).

However, the reputational benefit for universities recruiting non-traditional students may decrease in future. Since this research was completed, Aimhigher has been discontinued suggesting a de-prioritisation of WP in government policy (HEFCE 2010). Therefore, the research results may not be applicable to the current policy context.

### *2.2.3 The Precarious Nature of Student Recruitment*

The typology of recruitment behaviour suggests that universities will adopt different recruitment strategies depending on institutional reputation and course popularity (see Chapter 2). However, this research shows that dissimilar institutions such as Northern Town University and Southern Rural University may exhibit similar recruitment behaviours (see Chapter 7).

It could be argued that this is because much of the marketing literature conceptualises purchasing decisions as discrete acts. However, in HE students may initially choose a course but change their minds before enrolment (see Chapter 4), or drop out after making their purchase (Davies and Elias 2003). Thus, student attrition - which can result in reduced institutional income - makes education dissimilar to other goods.

Therefore, institutions may not behave as expected. For example, Southern Rural University did not target specific socio-demographic groups partly to ensure that students who would 'fit' with the institution and thus not drop out were included in recruitment programmes (see Chapter 7). This suggests that institutions can use recruitment strategies to prevent student attrition rather than cream desirable consumers. However, this finding is based on case study data and may not be generalisable.

As student retention is important for institutions, determining course popularity in terms of the number of applications per place may be insufficient<sup>152</sup>. Because the initial classification of popularity was used to inform case selection (see Chapter 3) this finding has implications for this research. One of the reasons the research hypotheses were partly disproven may result from the lack of variation in the selected case studies according to course popularity.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates that the desire to minimise attrition can result in an avoidance of 'hard sell' tactics which could prevent candidates from making informed decisions (see Chapter 7). Thus, while institutions may aim to attract particular consumer segments, recruitment programmes and promotional elements of the marketing mix are likely to focus on information provision rather than 'selling'.

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<sup>152</sup> See section 3.2.

For research purposes, it may therefore be difficult to identify which students institutions are targeting from an analysis of marketing materials alone, suggesting that future research should consider the whole marketing mix.

#### *2.2.4 Access and Localism*

This research suggests that universities which aimed to increase access to HE focused recruitment activities on local areas surrounding their sites (see Chapters 7 and 8). The association between access and localism was partly due to the design of Aimhigher and partly to logistical concerns, as recruiters believed that students would not travel great distances to participate in WP activities (see Chapter 8).

Focusing on national as opposed to local or regional markets was also associated with the strength of a university's brand or reputation and its selectivity (see Chapter 7). For example, the less popular Eastern New University directed mainstream recruitment activities towards local schools while Central Research University targeted high-achievers from across the country (see Chapter 7). The association between selectivity and the localism of recruitment has been found in previous research (Rolfe 2003; Pugsley 2004), suggesting that this finding may be generalisable. Therefore, the areas targeted by institutions' recruitment strategies may reflect overall efforts to position themselves as either selective or access universities.

#### *2.2.5 Conclusion*

This section has shown that HE differs from conventional goods. Like other good providers, universities aim to maximise income by attracting custom and by creaming students who will improve the quality of their offering, facilitating further recruitment (Winston 1997). However, student recruitment is also used to *improve* universities' market positions. Therefore, a theory of HE recruitment needs to take into account that institutions are likely to try and *develop* their brands. All institutions will therefore be expected to enhance student recruitment (Ali-Choudhury et al 2009).

Recruitment is also affected by the on-going relationship between buyer and provider. Universities may adapt recruitment programmes to encourage students to make long-lasting decisions rather than increase custom in the short-term. This means that standard marketing theory on which the hypotheses tested by this research were built (see Chapter 2) is unlikely to predict HE recruitment behaviour.

Finally, this research suggests that desirable consumer segments may be fulfil a variety of roles, for example by increasing perceived course quality or by demonstrating institutional commitment to WP. It is therefore expected that different types of university will both try to cream academic achievers and create demand among non-traditional students. It is proposed that these strategies will focus on different geographic areas, with localism associated with widening access.

Therefore, although institutional ‘reputation’ and course popularity are associated with institutional recruitment, there are some similarities between strategies chosen by very different universities. However, as discussed more fully below, this may change following alteration to government policy (DBIS 2011).

### ***2.3 Towards a New Theory of Admissions and Recruitment***

The evidence discussed above suggests that university admissions and recruitment behaviour can be explained with reference to rational choice theory. University staff members are influenced by a desire to maximise their utility and the utility of their institution. Thus, institutions need to fill places in order to avoid penalties for under-recruitment (Coates and Adnett 2003) while individuals may be concerned with job security and wellbeing derived from altruistic behaviour (Andreoni 1990).

For some universities, under-recruitment is perceived to be a real possibility which overrides other considerations. For example, there are additional costs associated with targeting candidates who live at a distance from the institution. Therefore, recruiters for less-popular universities aim to attract local students who are not traditional HE participants. For recruiting courses and universities, the utility derived from maximising income is thus given greater weight than the professional fulfilment of staff gained from student participation in the classroom (see Chapter 9). Utility gained from affective factors for staff members may thus play a more important role when universities benefit from stable student recruitment.

In other words, universities have to satisfy a criterion of economic stability via student selection before considering the utility which can be gained from targeting particular consumers or candidates. This supports Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation which states that individuals satisfy physiological needs and safety requirements before seeking personal fulfilment. According to this theory, the selection of *desirable*

customer groups via admissions and recruitment programmes is a luxury. The true 'ideal student' will therefore be targeted only where course places are easily filled and there is no concern about student attrition<sup>153</sup>.

Thus, higher levels of popularity facilitate the use of admissions and recruitment practices which target academic achievers. Recruitment programmes to increase selectivity may be used even where overall levels of popularity are low in order to improve institutions' market positions. However, as previously discussed, these universities need to maintain demand from core consumers to ensure that repositioning efforts do not precipitate an overall loss of custom.

Utility for individuals and institutions<sup>154</sup> may also be derived from fulfilling a university mission, satisfying societal expectations and fulfilling government requirements (see Chapter 9). At the time of the research, institutions could enhance their reputations by increasing access for students from less-advantaged backgrounds. This helps explain why each case university engaged in some WP activities.

According to the theory that universities seek to maximise economic utility before considering affective factors, it could be argued that only institutions which have stable patterns of student recruitment should seek to widen participation. However, because WP activities help universities fill course places (see Chapter 7) there are economic and affective reasons for increasing access. Thus, all institutions would be expected to try and widen participation as long as the policy context allows utility to be derived from this approach.

Therefore, this research suggests that rational choice theory which places the importance of an institution's economic prosperity above the professional and personal fulfilment of staff helps explain variation in university admissions and recruitment behaviour. Additional research is needed to test this theory, as it is partly

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<sup>153</sup> The fact that the ideal student could be associated with a reduction in student attrition (see Chapter 7), and that utility could be derived from the 'warm glow' associated with widening access (see Chapter 9) may reflect cognitive dissonance reduction. 'Necessary consumers' may become 'desired consumers' to staff members in order to make the outcome of constrained choices palatable (Festinger 1962).

<sup>154</sup> In the creation of an institutional ethos, the preferences of staff members and the institution fall into alignment (see Chapter 9).



dependent on case study data which may not be generalisable (Yin 1996) and relies on a theory of human motivation which is not uncontested<sup>155</sup>.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that difficulties with the initial characterisation of institutional reputation and course popularity may explain why the research hypotheses did not accurately predict university behaviour. The failure to effectively operationalise these core concepts may have decreased sample heterogeneity. This research can therefore be used to formulate improved means for operationalising the key concepts. These are discussed more fully below.

### **3. Key Concepts**

This section will discuss the implications of the research for how institutional reputation, course popularity and equity of access are operationalised.

#### ***3.1 Institutional Reputation***

For this research, institutional reputation was determined via an approximation of university status, whether the institution gained its charter before or after 1992 (see Chapter 3). Although this facilitated an objective categorisation of universities into different groups, the evidence suggests that university reputation covers a wider range of components.

The findings suggest that university 'brand' is an important part of reputation. It is argued that organisations' brands are used as signals of quality and credibility, necessary because consumers know less about a good's true value than its provider (Erdem and Swait 2001). Thus, the value of an organisation over and above its physical assets - known as brand equity or value - is dependent on consumers' perceptions of the organisation (Lassar et al 1995). For universities, this suggests that consumers' perceptions about graduate career opportunities, how challenging or supportive the education provided is and the experience of living and working near the university may influence institutional brand.

Consumer purchasing behaviour may be related to brand equity (Agarwal and Rao 1996). For example, brand equity can help encourage consumers to purchase a

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<sup>155</sup> For example, it is argued that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting a hierarchy of needs or the classification of needs according to Maslow's scheme (Wahba and Bridwell 1976).

provider's goods over those supplied by a competitor (Wood 2000). There is evidence that university status is associated with student choice of institution, as students with vocational qualifications are found disproportionately at former polytechnics (see Chapter 1). However, as previously discussed this research shows that university status is not synonymous with institutional mission, which can be used to create an identity and brand (Ali-Choudhury et al 2009).

Thus, it could be argued that a university's mission forms part of its brand. As previously discussed, universities could use success in broadening access to compete successfully with other providers (see section 2.2.2). In addition, this research suggests that universities can use their ethos as a selective or friendly institution to attract particular applicants and stabilise recruitment. For example, Central Research University used admissions criteria to select students who would contribute to university's reputation as an active and selective institution (see Chapter 4). This supports research which suggests that brands can have differential appeal between consumer segments (Park and Srinivasan 1994).

Providers have been shown to use marketing mixes to formulate favourable brand images (Keller 1993; Collins and Stevens 2002; Wood 2000). The development of a secure brand image or identity was seen at Eastern New University which re-designed several identifiers to improve stakeholder perception. Southern Rural University also strengthened its brand as a friendly university which was seen to have developed from its rural location and compact campus (see Chapter 7).

This demonstrates that institutional reputation is related to consumer perceptions. Furthermore, perceptions about an institution - and by extension particular courses - could be altered, supporting arguments which suggest that university reputation is malleable (Maringe 2006).

Therefore, university reputation cannot be operationalised according to 'objective' attributes such as 'status'. Brand value may be influenced by the marketing mix such as promotional materials and location which can be objectively classified (Wood 2000). However, brand value is also related to consumer perceptions, which may vary between different groups (Erdem and Swait 2001; Park and Srinivasan 1994). For research purposes, reputation could therefore be operationalised initially in relation to

the marketing mix<sup>156</sup>, but allowed to vary from the initial characterisation. Reputation may be best measured through an analysis of consumer perceptions<sup>157</sup> (Agarwal and Rao 1996).

### 3.2 Course Popularity

More and less popular universities were identified on the basis of the number of applications per place for this research (see Chapter 3). However, as previously discussed, the evidence suggests that the number of applicants per place is not sufficient to determine course popularity due to the influence of student attrition.

This has implications for university behaviour because institutions which receive a high number of applications per place may not have secure recruitment patterns. For example, Southern Rural University received large numbers of applications per place but many initial applicants did not select courses as firm or insurance choices (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, some applicants asked to be released from their commitments after receiving better A Level results than expected (see Chapter 5)<sup>158</sup>.

The fact that potential students could reject institutions during the admissions process and drop out after enrolment may influence institutional selection behaviour. For example, attrition rates were associated with conditional offer use (see Chapter 6). Northern Town University's student bursaries were used to encourage student *retention* as well as recruitment, a behaviour observed in other contexts (St John 2000). This is perhaps unsurprising given the association between student retention and institutions' positions in league tables and the penalties which flow from student attrition (The Times 2011; HEFCE 2010/24). This explains why 'strategic enrolment management', used to *attract* students and *maintain* a positive student-institution relationship, is used to secure institutional health and growth (Taylor et al 2008; Bruning 2002; Bischoff 2007).

This suggests that student attrition should be considered alongside applications per place to determine course popularity. Information about post-enrolment attrition and applications per place are available at institutional level. However, information about

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<sup>156</sup> For example university prospectuses and websites may help to establish how universities portray their identities to consumers (Pugsley 2004; Gordon and Berhow 2009).

<sup>157</sup> Methods to measure consumer perceptions include surveys (Agarwal and Rao 1996).

<sup>158</sup>

attrition during the admissions process is not publically available. Therefore, researchers can use information about post-enrolment attrition and application rates to develop a measure of course popularity, but may need to adjust classifications once information about attrition rates during the admissions process becomes available.

### ***3.3 Equity of Access***

This section reviews the definition of ‘equity of access’ which was used for this research, before considering the advantages and disadvantages of alternative ways of operationalising this concept. A definition of equity of access, which underpins the policy implications discussed in the following section, is then proposed.

#### *3.3.1 The Flexible Approach*

Equity of access was described in terms of the probability of enrolling on a course for two individuals who had the same *potential to succeed* in HE<sup>159</sup>. However, this research did not successfully define how students’ ‘potential to succeed’ should be considered. Potential to succeed was discussed in terms of students’ ability to complete their course, their level of attainment and career-related postgraduate outcomes.

The diversity of definitions of ‘potential to succeed’ reflects that students have a variety of goals for HE participation (Connor et al 1999a; Brooks 2005). This implies that equity of access should be defined differently depending on which student is being evaluated, to recognise that success may vary between different candidates. This *flexible approach* to equity of access complements the principle of treating potential students as individuals (Schwartz et al 2004), and may be appropriate for selectors. For example, accredited courses were more likely to consider candidates’ recruitment to linked professions as indicators of student success (see Chapter 5).

However, allowing ‘potential’ to vary between students makes it difficult to operationalise equity of access for admissions and recruitment purposes. As this places a significant burden on staff members, the flexible approach may hinder universities wishing to adapt admissions and recruitment to ensure a just allocation of places (Le Grand 1991, see Chapter 9).

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<sup>159</sup> See Chapter 2.

Therefore, a practical definition of equity of access needs to be developed. This should acknowledge that equity of access may vary between courses and institutions, but needs to be easy to apply in order to encourage its use.

### 3.3.2 *Developing a Practical Definition*

One possible adjustment to make equity of access more practically would be to measure ‘potential to succeed’ as students’ *ability to complete the course*. This promotes admissions policies which are *fair* as well as equitable because it is unjust and contrary to students’ wellbeing to admit candidates who are likely to fail (Schwartz et al 2004, see Chapter 9). However, this measure may be irrelevant for ‘strong selection’ courses where candidates who could not complete the programme are unlikely to be considered.

Alternatively, it could be argued that equity of access is achieved when students who equally *deserve* a place on a course have the same chance of being admitted. According to a functionalist interpretation, desert in education could be described in terms of students’ “cognitive ability and their motivation and determination to succeed” (Saunders 2002: 559)<sup>160</sup>. This clarifies that student outcomes, in terms of degree classification achieved for example, are less important than what they can bring to the course (their inputs) in terms of ability and motivation.

The *inputs approach* recognises that students’ latent potential is important for equity of access (Schwartz et al 2004). However, it has the significant disadvantage of hindering the evaluation and adaptation of admissions and recruitment policies. It is difficult to measure whether students have the potential to succeed without considering their HE-related outcomes. If attainment is seen as a reasonable proxy for ability and motivation, then outcomes are vital for measuring students’ inputs (Saunders 2002).

Therefore, a more appropriate way of defining ‘potential to succeed’ may be for each selector to consider a *variety of measures* which relate to success for their courses. These could include examination results and career-related outcomes, in terms of success in entering a related profession or attaining a graduate role for example. For

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<sup>160</sup> Educational attainment is linked to adults’ achievement of higher or lower social status, allowing individuals to be channelled to appropriate social positions.

each course, where analyses of different measures convey a consistent message, this could show that admissions policies need adaptation to achieve equity of access. For example, *if* former state school pupils are more likely to achieve a range of positive outcomes than equally-qualified independent schools pupils, then course academic entry criteria *should* vary according to candidates' school backgrounds.

### 3.3.3 Equality and Equity of Access

However, considering a range of student outcomes ignores the fact that universities can shape their applicant pools. As this research shows, institutions' marketing mixes are designed to affect prospective students' choices. For example, the case universities developed a variety of bursaries and scholarships (see Chapter 8) which may influence students from less-affluent backgrounds to a greater extent than their more affluent peers (Callender and Jackson 2005).

According to Le Grand (1991) constraints upon student choice which affect some groups more than others are considered inequitable (see Chapter 2). For this reason, it has been argued that inequality of access can be measured via participation rates which show whether there is unequal representation between different groups and may indicate barriers to access (Lynch and O'Riordan 1994). However, this assumes that all individuals have the same desire to participate in HE, which is unlikely to be a valid assumption (Husén 1976).

Warnock's (1975) discussion of equity of access is also useful for considering how choice affects the allocation of HE places. Warnock (1975) argues that equality of access is achieved when each individual receives enough information to make an informed decision about further study, and then has an equal opportunity to continue. Thus, aspiration-raising programmes such as the former Aimhigher are necessary to ensure equality of access, as these reduce choice constraints which result from a lack of information. Furthermore, barriers to participation which affect some students more than others should be removed in order to allow equality of opportunity for progression. These include financial and geographical barriers (West et al 2009; Callender and Jackson 2008), which this research suggests are addressed differently between institutions (see Chapter 7)<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> Although based on case study data, this finding is supported by other research, increasing confidence in its generalisability (see Rolfe 2003; Callender 2009a).

Analysed together, these arguments contend that there should not be barriers to HE participation - or to specific institutions and courses - which affect some groups more than others. However, differences in access are only unequal or inequitable when they arise from *constrained choices* (HMSO 2010a; Le Grand 1991; Warnock 1975). Therefore inequality of access cannot be analysed solely through a consideration of application rates among different student groups as these relate to both unconstrained and constrained choices (Husén 1976).

Therefore application patterns between different groups of student groups will not demonstrate whether recruitment practices facilitate equity of access. However, this information can identify if there is cause for concern. Where a consumer group is under-represented among applicants to a particular course, this may reflect that the marketing mix needs adaptation (see Chapter 7). However, further analysis of student choices are necessary to identify and remove choice constraints, such as lack of financial capital.

#### *3.3.4 Fair and Equitable Processes*

The discussion above has focused on equity of access in terms of student outcomes. However, it could also be argued that equitable access can only be achieved if the process by which places are allocated is consistent with the principle of justice (Sunstein 2006). It is also argued that admissions processes need to be seen as fair, transparent and consistent to ensure that admissions outcomes are acceptable to stakeholders (Schwartz et al 2004).

This research suggests that the goals of fair processes (in terms of consistency) and equitable access may be incompatible. Treating every candidate using standardised criteria prevents the use of human judgement needed to recognise the importance of individual characteristics on potential performance (Frasier et al 1995). The indication that consistency may be an important goal for some staff members suggests that equity of access could be difficult to achieve (see Chapter 9).

However, there was a widespread acceptance of the need for transparency among research interviewees (see Chapter 9). Transparency in admissions can be seen to be a requirement for equitable access because it may influence candidates' decision-making (Schwartz et al 2004). As previously discussed, candidates need to make

unconstrained choices about courses of study for equitable access to be achieved. Transparency in admissions via the publication of entry criteria and details about assessment processes removes potential choice constraints by levelling the availability of information between applicants. This should reduce the impact of choice constraints caused by lack of information, for example about what constitutes a successful application, which may affect students from less-advantaged backgrounds in particular (McDonough 1997; Rouncefield and Scott 2008).

Publishing details about admissions processes also promotes fair admissions by reducing the asymmetry of information between candidates and universities. If criteria and processes used to allocate places are known to applicants, this gives them the power to ascertain whether institutions' decisions are just or 'defensible'. Defensible processes can be defined in a number of ways<sup>162</sup>, but there is some agreement that this is a valid criterion for measures of performance assessment (Schuwirth et al 2002). It could therefore be argued that university admissions procedures which evaluate candidates' potential performance assessment also need to be defensible.

In other words, fairness (as opposed to equity) is promoted because applicants can test whether admissions decisions are justifiable. This reduces the probability of selectors making indefensible admissions decisions, which are made on impulse rather than following a considered evaluation for example. Transparency is therefore an important component of 'defensibility' as it allows applicants to assess whether application outcomes and associated feedback can be justified according to published information. The potential for external review is also likely to increase perceptions that admissions processes are fair among stakeholders (Schwartz et al 2004).

Thus, a potential means for reconciling procedural fairness and equity of access could be to conceptualise fairness in terms of the degree to which decisions are 'defensible' as opposed to consistent. For example, admissions requirements may be inconsistent because they vary between different candidates according to post-compulsory qualifications profile or school background, and yet may be fair as long as the outcomes of this process can be justified to applicants.

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<sup>162</sup> For example, processes can be legally defensible if they are permitted in law but may be morally indefensible if they contradict core societal principles (Honoré 2002).



### *3.3.5 Conclusion: Fair and Equitable Access*

In summary, it could be argued that equity of access has been achieved when there is a *just allocation of places* in HE. Access to HE courses should be equal for all potential students who have the desire for further study and the ability and motivation necessary to achieve a similar range of outcomes.

Furthermore, student choices of institutions and courses should not be constrained by barriers. Although application rates from different groups may indicate that there is cause for concern, it is not sufficient to demonstrate inequity of access. Additional research among under-represented student groups may reveal whether differences in application patterns relate to constrained or unconstrained choices.

Achieving equity of access will not necessarily promote fair admissions. For access to be 'fair' selectors need to ensure that all accepted students can complete their chosen course and that admissions processes are transparent and defensible.

Thus, equity of access is achieved where potential students' choices are not constrained and admissions reflect candidates' ability to achieve a range of HE outcomes rather than background characteristics. Fair access is achieved where student wellbeing and the principle of 'defensibility' are not compromised. In order for equity of access to be a realistic goal therefore, it is necessary for university staff members to work proactively to promote it. Acceptance of this across the HE sector may be difficult to achieve. However, means via which university staff could pursue equity of access are discussed below.

## **4. Policy Implications**

This section will discuss the implications of this research for HE policy. Throughout, equitable access is defined as in Section 3.3.4 and is taken to be desirable. This may not fully accord with current government policy, but it could be argued that equity of access is essential if the government's goal of social mobility is to be realised (Milburn 2009; DBIS 2011).

### ***4.1 Admissions and Recruitment Policy Evaluation***

It is argued that students' ability to achieve a range of HE outcomes should inform the allocation of university places. This research suggests that some selectors do consider

this when allocating places, but that there are different perceptions about how to identify students' ability to succeed (see Chapters 4 and 5).

As previously discussed, variation in admissions policies between courses does not necessarily hinder equitable access. Some students may have the ability to complete one course but not others. The need for academic pre-requisites which candidates have to present to be admitted to the course are therefore likely to vary between different contexts (see Chapter 4).

However, there is evidence that some selectors give more importance to post-compulsory secondary attainment than to students' potential ability to succeed in HE. There was reluctance among some selectors to consider applicants' contextual data (see Chapter 4). This is problematic for equity of access because school-level attainment considered separately from educational background is unlikely to indicate students' ability to achieve some positive outcomes once in HE (Schwartz et al 2004; Hoare and Johnson 2011).

In order to promote equitable access therefore, selectors should evaluate course admissions policies and make amendments to their processes if necessary. For example, after several years of data collection, selectors may be able to demonstrate that students presenting BTEC qualifications achieve similar outcomes to students presenting A Levels. This could prompt changes to admissions policy to ensure equal access to the course for these students.

Similarly, the case universities experienced difficulties attracting applications from particular student groups (see Chapter 7). As previously discussed, this does not prove that there were barriers to participation which affected some student groups more than others. However, it does suggest cause for concern. In order to evaluate recruitment policies and identify potential barriers to participation, universities need data about the population of candidates as well as their own applicants. Access barriers may affect all institutions, indicating a sector-wide problem, or may be specific to particular courses and universities which could indicate that recruitment policies hinder equity of access.

Thus, to evaluate admissions and recruitment policies universities need access to high-quality data about candidates' social and educational backgrounds, and their attainment at school and HE level. They also need skills to analyse these data appropriately. However, previous evaluations which have attempted to track students from further education into HE have reported difficulties in obtaining this information (Passy et al 2009). The agencies which have responsibilities for applicants' and students' data (UCAS and HESA) could play a useful role in ensuring that data collection and processing methods are adequate to allow analysis.

However, it may be increasingly difficult for universities to devote resources to analytical activities given recent funding cuts (HEFCE 2010/08; HEFCE 2011/07). Therefore, it will be important to convince institutions that policy evaluations and the investment in staff training are necessary to encourage this work. The statistical departments of UCAS and HESA could help provide analyses to ease the burden on institutions.

Alternatively, these analyses and adjustments could be encouraged by imposing financial penalties on institutions which fail to deliver thorough evaluations of admissions and recruitment policies. The Office for Fair Access (Ofa) could potentially monitor institutions' activities and administer sanctions where appropriate.

#### ***4.2 Effective Postcode Premium***

This research suggests that HEFCE's WPF does not currently act as a postcode premium. This is likely to be because of the small size of the fund (Rolfe 2003; Pugh et al 2005) and because the WPF is not perceived to be a recruitment-related incentive (see Chapter 9). This may reflect that the fund has not been promoted as a premium (Dolan et al 2010).

However, evidence suggests that financial rewards can influence university behaviour (see Chapter 9). Therefore, increasing the size of the WPF and promoting it as a 'student premium' may encourage universities to make additional efforts to enrol students from LPNs. The premium could be broadened to cover students from low-income families if desired.

The need for a meaningful student premium may be greater in the current policy context than at the time of the research. There may be decreased access to HE for non-traditional HE participants following the abolition of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) as this could adversely affect levels of post-compulsory participation among students from low-income families (DfE 2012a; Chowdry et al 2007). Although the EMA has been replaced with the 16-19 bursary, this award has discretionary elements (Directgov 2012) and there is evidence that there is variation in the way it is awarded between different schools and colleges (Barnardos 2012).

In addition, HE participation among non-traditional students is likely to be adversely affected by increased tuition fees (HMSO 2010b; Callender and Jackson 2005), and the abolition of Aimhigher (HEFCE 2010) which aimed to raise aspiration and attainment among targeted groups (see Chapter 8). Furthermore, if the White Paper's proposals are introduced these are likely to promote the recruitment of high-achievers and de-prioritise the use of contextual data to select-in candidates performing at lower levels (DBIS 2011).

A similar incentive has been introduced into the school market in England via the pupil premium (DfE 2012b), so there may be political appetite for encouraging social mobility in this way for HE. However, there is a potentially conflicting policy goal to reduce the flow of government finance to HE (Hansard 2010, col. 546). The government may therefore have to consider the trade-off of increasing equity of access and promoting social mobility against the need for fiscal restraint.

#### ***4.3 Post-Qualification Admissions (PQA)***

It has been recommended that universities move the admissions process to a later point in the academic year. This allows candidates to be evaluated in terms of post-compulsory attainment rather than predicted grades supplied by teachers (Schwartz 2004; Snell et al 2008).

This research suggests that PQA may facilitate equity of access. Removing the clearing process will ensure that all potential students' applications are considered alongside one another, eliminating the possibility that admissions outcomes will be influenced by the timing of candidates' applications (see Chapter 5). PQA will also ensure that candidates are considered in relation to their performance rather than

teachers' predictions which may be inaccurate or potentially biased (Snell et al 2008; Hayward et al 2005)<sup>163</sup>.

However, PQA would also end the use of conditional offers which may play a key role in the allocation of places in a way which takes account of candidates' contextual data (see Chapter 6). It could be argued that PQA should not affect the use of contextual data. Selectors who currently adjust conditional offer levels to take account of contextual data could instead consider contextual data when allocating offers once PQA is introduced. Some selectors already take account of contextual data during clearing, suggesting that this is a potential outcome (see Chapter 5).

However, it is unclear whether changing the way contextual data can be used will influence university behaviour. This may mean there is an even greater need for the evaluation of admissions policies (see section 4.1) to ensure that policies are changed if there is evidence that they hinder equitable access.

#### ***4.4 Binary Divide***

This research shows that universities feel pressure to improve. At the time of this research, the evidence suggested that improvement could be associated with efforts to widen participation as well as attempts to increase selectivity of intake (see Section 2.2).

However, the importance of selectivity as opposed to access is likely to increase if universities are allowed unrestricted recruitment of high-achievers as these students will help universities maximise tuition fee revenue (DBIS 2011). Combined with the abolition of Aimhigher this may reduce WP efforts, particularly given recent cuts to university funding (HEFCE 2011/07).

Although this finding may not be true of all institutions, this research suggests that some dissimilar universities aim to recruit a diverse body of students (see Chapter 7). However, although staff members acknowledged the benefits of balanced intakes, each case institution experienced difficulties in appealing to all potential consumer

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<sup>163</sup> See also Chapter 4.

groups. In particular, they had different levels of success in recruiting non-traditional HE participants (see Chapter 3).

In future, different types of institution may become increasingly associated with catering for specific student groups. In addition to unrestricted recruitment of high-achievers, the White Paper gives universities which cannot attract these candidates the opportunity to recruit additional students by lowering fees (DBIS 2011)<sup>164</sup>. Tuition fees are thus likely to become associated with entry requirements, as they are in the US (Davies and Guppy 1997). Universities which attract less-privileged students (who achieve at lower levels and are more reluctant to incur debt on average) may thus lower fees (West and Pennell 2004; Callender and Jackson 2003). Conversely, selective institutions may raise entry requirements. This may prevent access to selective HEIs for non-traditional participants, particularly given the abolition of the EMA and Aimhigher which may have promoted educational attainment among less-affluent students (Chowdry et al 2007, see Chapter 8).

This may prevent universities from recruiting balanced intakes. If diverse student populations are associated with educational excellence, as argued by some staff members<sup>165</sup>, then this may also reduce HE quality. As institutional selectivity, measured by university status, is associated with enhanced earnings premia (Chevalier and Conlon 2003) this may also restrict social mobility.

There may therefore be a trade-off between the government's aims to create a diverse, responsive HE market and to increase HE quality and promote social mobility. This potential conflict may need to be addressed in HE policy. One option could be for the government to work with university staff members to increase understanding about their desire to recruit balanced intakes. Discussing the benefits of balanced intakes may help encourage universities to target diverse market segments, although moral persuasion alone may be insufficient to ensure this given the pressures discussed previously.

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<sup>164</sup> This has altered institutional behaviour, with some universities reducing tuition fee levels for 2012/13 in response (OFFA 2012).

<sup>165</sup> See Chapter 7.

#### ***4.5 Progression Routes***

Each case institution offered sub-degree courses which allowed students to enter HE and progress to degree level, despite not achieving course entry criteria for degree programmes (see Chapter 7). The current government supports the provision of alternative routes into HE, with the encouragement of new providers linked to an increase in progression routes (DBIS 2011: 46).

However, the White Paper does not include specific proposals to encourage existing institutions to introduce or protect sub-degree courses. This research shows that sub-degree programmes were not equally available across different types of institution, and that progression routes could be threatened by pressures to increase selectivity (see Chapter 7). This finding cannot be generalised, but indicates that selectivity may hinder the use of sub-degree programmes at some institutions.

Differences in the extent to which institutions offer sub-degree programmes may become increasingly stark in future. If universities have unrestricted recruitment of high-achievers as previously discussed, it will benefit selective institutions to remove sub-degree programmes to make space for high-attaining students. Conversely, institutions with lower fees may use sub-degree programmes to attract lower-achievers for whom there is less competition.

It could be argued that uneven provision of progression routes will hinder equity of access. Students who have achieved at lower levels or have not taken particular qualifications may be prevented from accessing selective universities for reasons other than their ability to achieve good outcomes in HE. Students' choices will thus be constrained, hindering equitable access and social mobility (Le Grand 1991, Chevalier and Conlon 2003).

To promote social mobility, the government could therefore consider how sub-degree course provision could be encouraged among existing universities. For example, the government could use moral persuasion or financial incentives to leverage increased co-operation from universities.

#### ***4.6 Access and Localism***

As discussed previously, WP initiatives have local foci which may encourage non-traditional students to choose local institutions. This may provide an important source of students for universities and may be preferable for some non-traditional students for whom attending a local institution can make HE participation feasible emotionally and financially (Pugsley 2004; McDonough 1997).

However, this local focus could hinder equity of access by encouraging non-traditional students to consider a restricted set of universities in comparison to more affluent students (see Chapter 8). Furthermore, there is evidence that students who remain at home while studying achieve different outcomes from those who move away, both while studying and after graduation. (Holdsworth 2006, Purcell et al 2005).

To achieve a just allocation of places, it would be beneficial to encourage non-traditional HE participants to consider institutions in different areas. One way this could be achieved would be to create and fund a national WP programme which encouraged co-operation between institutions. For example, groups of students from across the country could be transported to campus-based activities in different regions<sup>166</sup>. Several universities based in different areas could jointly deliver school-based events.

However, one of the reasons for organising WP activities locally was to increase their impact while reducing costs, with the Aimhigher programme tasked with promoting efficiency (Passy et al 2009). As Aimhigher has been discontinued, this would suggest that there are insufficient resources for a national WP programme.

However, universities may be willing to act where government guidance is considered legitimate. The government could therefore try to persuade universities to contribute to a national WP programme. If facilitating access continues to improve institutions' brands, then HEIs may be willing to contribute to the programme despite the lack of additional resources. However, institutions are unlikely to find this acceptable given

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<sup>166</sup> This has similarities with a Gifted and Talented initiative co-provided by Central Research University (see Chapter 8).



pressures to increase selectivity (DBIS 2011), and the recent reduction in university resources (HEFCE 2010/08; HEFCE 2011/07).

Therefore, the government could encourage private donations into HE to fund the programme. This policy has been trialled, with the previous government introducing a funding scheme to match philanthropic donations to HEIs (HEFCE 2012). However, involving private sponsors may increase restrictions in how funding is allocated, which could have implications for equity of access. Furthermore, it is unlikely that matched funding would be considered appropriate in the current context, given the government's aim of reducing the UK's deficit (HMT 2011).

## **5. Conclusion**

Universities are likely to face increased pressure to improve market positions and maximise income in these times of fiscal restraint. Combined with government policies which may restrict access to post-compulsory secondary education and HE for less-affluent students, this is likely to slow the pace of widening participation. However, if equity of access is to be achieved, it is important that non-traditional HE participants are able to make unconstrained choices about whether or not to enter HE and where to study.

This research suggests that there is some appetite to increase equity of access within the HE sector. Nonetheless, the promotion of equity and social mobility is unlikely to be possible unless institutions receive increased resources and guidance. The government however has a potentially contradictory aim of reducing the flow of state funding to universities, which may mean that equity of access to HE is not a realistic outcome.

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## **Appendix 1: Interviewee Selection and Schedules**

### **Introduction**

This appendix includes descriptions of how interviewees were selected at each institution. The schedules used for interviews with academic admissions tutors, administrative admissions officers, recruitment staff, fees/bursaries managers and those with responsibility for widening participation are also included. The original schedules left spaces for respondents' answers to be noted which have been compressed here.

A copy of each schedule was taken to every interview in case the respondent had responsibilities which straddled two or more of the areas of interest. For example, admissions tutors frequently had recruitment responsibilities in addition to undertaking admissions duties.

Although the schedules were designed to facilitate the elicitation of comparable data, they did not form a rigid format which dictated the progress of the interview. Interviewees were able to direct the progress of the interview, with the schedules used flexibly to facilitate this.

Notes were made on the schedules during the progress of the interviews. These were not used for the purposes of analysis, but were used to make notes so that follow up questions could be asked where necessary, or previous discuss could be referred to.

Initial 'recruitment' and 'admissions' schedule were tested in pilot interviews with four different members of staff based at three institutions. These were all Russell Group Universities. These pilot interviews, carried out between August and September 2008, demonstrated the important role played by administrative admissions officers. The 'admissions' schedule was consequently adapted for these two different types of respondent. Additional questions and prompts were also added to the schedules.

The fees/bursaries schedule and widening participation schedule were adapted from the recruitment schedule. These were not piloted separately.

## Recruiting Participants

Table X1.1: Methods for Recruiting Participants

Institution	Admissions	Recruitment
Southern Rural University	Interviewees selected partly by the contact person (central admissions officers) and partly by the researcher (additional interview with course leader for an interviewing course and a university manager)	Interviewees selected by the researcher, using a snowball technique. The original respondent was recommended by the contact person, with subsequent interviewees recruited by the researcher in a snowball sample.
Eastern New University	The researcher used the university staff directory and contact person to identify suitable interviewees, who were then approached directly.	The researcher used the university staff directory and contact person to identify suitable interviewees, who were then approached directly.
Northern Town University	The contact person recruited interviewees from three different university faculties (with varying admissions practices). Both recruiting and selecting courses were included in the sample.	The contact person recruited interviewees on behalf of the researcher. These included both recruitment managers and those responsible for delivering recruitment programmes.
Central Research University	The contact person supplied a list of potential admissions tutors for the researcher to contact. The researcher selected a sample from this to include recruiting and selecting courses. Central admissions staff were recruited by the contact person following interviews with admissions tutors which demonstrated the strong role they played in the admissions process.	The contact person, who had strategic responsibility for admissions and recruitment, selected interviewees with responsibility managing and delivering recruitment programmes in line with the requirements of the researcher. An interviewee with responsibility for student fees and bursaries, who was recommended by the contact person, was recruited by the researcher.

## Administrative Specialist Selector Interview Schedule

May need to drop questions if not relating to areas of responsibility of interviewee.

Job Title:

How long in current post?

Have you worked in university admissions in any other role?

Have you worked in admissions at any other institutions?

What tasks does your role involve?

How did you come to take this position?

Could you give an overview of how the admissions process works at the university?

*Probe (application forms, interviews, role departmental tutors, administrative staff).*

Who has responsibility for selecting applicants (if not covered by response to previous question)?

*Probe (departmental admissions tutors, course directors, centrally-based administrative staff)*

Do you know if your institution/department has used any other method for selecting applicants in the past?

**Yes/No**

*Probe fully.*

*Examples If yes:* What role did academic admissions tutors play in this process?

What happens/happened if an admissions tutor and administrative specialist have different opinions about whether a particular candidate should be admitted?

*If yes: Why did your institution decide to change its selection process? Have you found that any advantages or disadvantages to using the current system? (Probe: transparency, control of admissions by those who teach applicants)*

Do you know if your institution/department is contemplating using any other method for selecting applicants in the future?

**Yes/No**

*Probe fully.*

*Examples If yes: What role did academic admissions tutors play in this process?*

What happens/happened if an admissions tutor and administrative specialist have different opinions about whether a particular candidate should be admitted?

Is there any variation in how this process works for different departments?

What are you/ATs looking for in applicants? *(Probe: predicted grades, work experience, enthusiasm for subject, well-written personal statement, good school reference, extenuating circumstances, non-traditional HE participating background, attends under-performing school).*

In your view, do admissions tutors consider any of these attributes as essential ones which applicants *must* have in order to qualify for admission?

**Yes/No**

*If yes: Which attributes are essential? (Probe predicted grades, work experience, enthusiasm for subject, well-written personal statement, good school reference)*

In your view, why do admissions tutors look for applicants with these attributes? *(Probe: quality of the programme, difficulty of work, enjoyable to teach, benefit most from the programme, good for HEI, institution-conducted research).*

How do you find out if a candidate matches these requirements from the application form? (*Probe: personal statement, school reference, predicted grades, AS results, GCSE grades, academic performance of school attended, type of school attended*).

*If applicable.* How similar is the process you have just described to that used at other departments?

*Probe fully including* How do programmes vary in what they are looking for?

Does your university have minimum admissions criteria which apply to all the university's applicants?

**Yes/No**

If yes: How important are the minimum admissions criteria?

**Yes/No**

Prompt(Are these criteria ever put aside? E.g. if *applicant from under-performing school, applicant from non-traditional HE participating background, extenuating circumstances, motivated applicant from personal statement, good school reference*).

Who decides what the standard offer for the courses in your department should be?

What factors are taken into account when setting the standard offer? (*Probe: popularity of course, how students respond to standard offer, university hierarchy, difficulty of work*).

What are the circumstances where candidates might be given conditional offers which are different from the standard offer?

**Yes/No**

*Probe fully. Prompt motivated applicant, good school reference, high predicted grades, disadvantaged applicants, compact scheme, encourage applicant to work for A Levels*).

If none: Why are all applicants given the standard offer?

What are the circumstances where candidates might be guaranteed to receive conditional offers?

*Prompt: compact scheme, applicant from linked or partner school, attendance in courses at institution, applicant has very high predicted grades, applicant different from majority of candidates)*

What happens for applicants who fail to achieve their offer conditions after the A Level results are published? (*Prompt: offer not confirmed, offered another course, offered same course – get details if this is the case*).

If says always reject probe whether this is always the case.

Does your institution enter the clearing process after A Level results are published.

**Yes/No**

If no: Why not? (*Probe: quality of applicants, university's popularity, position in the hierarchy*).

We have talked a lot about your department/institution's selection goals. What do you think your institution's/department's selection goals should be?

*Probe fully – why?*

What would you like to see change to improve your institutions' admissions system?

[if time and if respondent worked in admissions for another department/uni then ask how process varied there]



## Academic Course/Departmental Selector Interview Schedule

May need to drop questions if not relating to areas of responsibility of interviewee.

Job Title:

How long in current post?

Have you worked in university admissions in any other role?

Have you worked in admissions at any other institutions?

What tasks does your role involve?

- probe on which and how many courses – several/all departmental

How did you come to take this position?

Could you give an overview of how the admissions process works for your course/department? *Probe (application forms, interviews, compact scheme or similar, admissions tests role departmental tutors, administrative staff).*

Who has responsibility for selecting applicants (if not covered by response to previous question)?

*Probe (departmental admissions tutors, course directors, centrally-based administrative staff)*

Do you know if your institution has used any other method for selecting applicants in the past? *Probe (assessed centrally by administrative staff? Departmental tutors?)*

**Yes/No**

*If administrative:* What role did administrative staff play in this process? What happens/happened if a course tutor and administrative specialist have different opinions about whether a particular candidate should be admitted?

*If departmental:* What role did departmental staff play in this process? What happens/happened if a course director and departmental tutor have different opinions about whether a particular candidate should be admitted?

*If yes:* Why did your institution decide to change its selection process? Have you found that any advantages or disadvantages to using the current system? (*Probe: transparency, control of admissions by those who teach applicants*)

How far does the process you have just described resemble the admissions procedures used for other courses/by other departments?

What are you looking for in applicants? (*Prompt: predicted grades, work experience, enthusiasm for subject, well-written personal statement, good school reference, extenuating circumstances, coming from a non-traditional HE participating background, going to an under-performing school, postcode*).

**Probe fully – why?**

What attributes do you consider it most important for applicants to possess in order to be offered a place?

**Probe fully**

(*Prompt*  
*predicted grades,*  
*work experience,*  
*enthusiasm for subject,*  
*well-written personal statement,*  
*good school reference,*  
*particular A Levels*).

**Probe fully – why?**

Why do you look for applicants with these attributes? (*Probe: quality of the programme, difficulty of work, enjoyable to teach, benefit most from the programme, good for the HEI*).

How do you find out if a candidate matches these requirements from the application form? (*Probe: personal statement, school reference, predicted grades, AS results, GCSE grades, school's academic performance, attendance at institutional activities or courses*).

How far do you think your priorities are shared by other selectors/admissions tutors at your institution?

NB – may not know.

**Probe fully including**

How do you think courses vary in what they are looking for?

And how far do you think your selection priorities are shared by your university's management?

*Probe fully – why?*

Have your programmes been changed recently?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way have your programmes changed?

(*Prompt: course content, method of delivery, programme title*)).

If yes: What were the reasons for making these changes? (*Prompt: in order to attract more or different students?*)

Does your university have minimum admissions criteria which apply to all the university's applicants?

**Yes/No – ideally have this info in advance and question about it.**

If yes: How important are the minimum admissions criteria?

If yes: Are these criteria ever put aside? [if not given in previous response] (*Prompt: disadvantage, extenuating circumstances, compact scheme, motivated applicant, good school reference*).

Who decides what the standard offer for the courses in your department should be? What factors are taken into account when setting the standard offer? (*Probe: popularity of course, how students respond to standard offer, university hierarchy, difficulty of work*).

What are the circumstances when candidates might be given conditional offers which are different from the standard offer? **Probe fully**  
*Prompt: motivated applicant, good school reference, high predicted grades, disadvantaged applicants, compact scheme, encourage applicant to work for A Levels*).

If no circumstances: Why are all applicants given the standard offer?

What are the circumstances when candidates might be guaranteed to receive conditional offers?

*Prompt: compact scheme, applicant from linked or partner school, attendance in courses at institution, applicant has very high predicted grades, applicant different from majority of candidates*)

What happens for applicants who fail to achieve their offer conditions after the A Level results are published? (*Prompt: offer not confirmed, offered another course, offered same course –get details in this case*).

*Probe fully esp if say always reject.*

Does your course/department enter the clearing process after A Level results are published.

**Yes/No**

If no: Why not? (*Probe: quality of applicants, university's popularity, position in the hierarchy*).

What would you like to see change to improve the admissions system for your course/department?

[If time and if interviewee at institution for a short time and has worked at another institution ask how this process varied there]

## Recruitor Interview Schedule

How long in current post?

Have you worked in university admissions in any other role?

Have you worked in admissions at any other institutions?

What tasks does your role involve?

How did you come to take this position?

What are the priorities for student recruitment to your institution? (*Prompt: state school, low-SES, BME, low participation neighbourhoods, increase total number of applications, academically qualified applicants*).

*If no specific 'background groups' of students mentioned: **Probe:** You said that your institutions aims to attract all students/bright students etc. Does the university dedicate any resources to attract any specific groups of students?*

*Prompt: other people have mentioned... students covered by HEFCE's Widening Participation agenda (low participation areas, disabled students) High achieving students, Students from particular geographical areas).*

If specific groups of students mentioned **probe:** Why does your institution wish to attract these students? (*Prompt: quality of the programme, institutional hierarchy, word-of-mouth recruitment, benefit institution, to 'do the right thing', access funding?*)

Does the university have any specific recruitment targets?

**Yes/No**

What are these targets?

Could you talk me through how these recruitment goals were developed at your institution? (*Prompt: vice chancellors' office, central governing staff, recruitment staff, departmental staff, college staff.*)

Could you please talk me through how university tries to attract students? (*Prompts: open days, student visits to campus, summer schools, school visits, student tutors, mentoring, advertisements, programmes for GCSE students, facilities, programme contents and courses*).

How effective do you think these strategies are?

Are there any particular groups of students which are specifically targeted by recruitment programmes?

**Yes/No**

If yes: What are these groups. (*Prompts: specific areas of the country, less well-performing schools, specific ethnic groups, state school pupils, FE college pupils, low-SES, GCSE pupils*).

If answer yes and not covered by previous response: Could you please talk me through what these targeted programmes are?

How effective do you think these programmes are?

What is it about these programmes which you think makes them effective?

What is it about these programmes which you think makes them ineffective?

How do you evaluate whether a programme is effective? (*Prompt: market research, targets, applications monitored, staff impressions*).

We have talked a lot about your institutions' recruitment goals. What are your own goals for your job? How far do they resemble the institutional goals?

Is there anything that prevents your institution from recruiting the students it is trying to attract?

**Yes/No**

If yes: What are these factors? (*Prompt: institutional hierarchy, popularity, image of university, location of university, university course offerings, university facilities, length of terms, method of assessment, method of programme delivery, collegiate structure – for college unis only*).

Some universities have used facilities as part of their student recruitment strategy. How have your institution's facilities been changed in order to influence recruitment? (*Prompt: accommodation, library, sports facilities, social facilities, religious facilities, crèche, career services*).

Some universities have used courses as part of their student recruitment strategy. How have your institution's academic programmes been changed in order to influence recruitment? (*Prompt: programme title, course content, work experience, method of delivery, fees, bursaries*)

The university is a popular/less oversubscribed institution. Does this influence the way the university promotes itself?

**Yes/No**

If yes and not covered in previous response: What do you do because you are oversubscribed/ less over-subscribed? (*Prompt: more resources, more recruitment programmes, target established market segments, target new market segments, try to improve attractiveness of products, inform applicants about competition, relax about attracting students*)

How do you think the position of your institution in the hierarchy of universities influences its recruitment goals?

(*Prompt: university image, difficulty of programmes, selection priorities, school preparation, opportunities for part-time work*).

What else influences your university's recruitment goals?

(*Prompt: moral pressure, funding, desire to keep up with competitors*).



If something mentioned: In what way does X influence your institution's recruitment goals?

If no or HEFCE not mentioned: In what way does HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund influence your institution's recruitment goals?

*(Prompt:: not much - limited funding from HEFCE, get funds from other sources, meeting HEFCE targets easily, pooling of resources; somewhat – funding, moral pressure)*

If no or OFFA not mentioned: In what way does OFFA influence your institution's recruitment goals?

*(Prompt: not much - Limited power, not afraid of sanctions, OFFA goals easy to attain; some – moral pressure, fear of loss of revenue, OFFA goals difficult to attain)*

What would make it easier for your institution to reach its recruitment goals?

*If respondent earlier said that own goals varied with institution's.* What would make it easier for you to reach your recruitment goals?

## **Fees/Bursaries Interview Schedule**

How long in current post?

What tasks does your role involve?

*In relation to fees and bursaries*

And how did you come to take this position?

Could you tell me how decisions regarding undergraduate home fee levels are arrived at?

*If not covered in previous question:*

What committees or individuals are involved in the decision-making?

*[Prompt: committees; student representatives; individuals; contact with external bodies e.g. OFFA, HEFCE; academics; administrators; marketing staff]*

Is this process the same for decisions regarding bursaries available to home undergraduate students?

**Yes/No**

If yes no further question.

If no or differs to a degree: Could you please tell me about the decision-making process for home undergraduate bursaries?

*[Prompt: committees; student representatives; individuals; contact with external bodies e.g. OFFA, HEFCE; academics, administrators; marketing staff ]*

I know that you charge £3,100 tuition fees per annum for undergraduate courses.

Could you tell me what prompted the decision to charge this fee level?

*[Prompt: competitors; quality; image conveyed in terms of quality – reputation; to attract students – if so different sub-groups?; to gain maximum revenue; meet internal recruitment targets]*

Do any courses charge a different annual tuition fee?

**Yes/No**

If yes – which courses differ and in what way?

- could you tell me why these courses have different tuition fee levels?

Are you considering changing the annual tuition fees charged to home undergraduates?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way?

*[Prompt: change in line with legislation; lower levels; discounts]*

If no: Why is this?

*[Prompt: current regime meets requirements; constrained by competitors prices]*

Could you tell me about the university's current bursary regime?

*[Prompt: fee remission; direct grant; mean's tested; universal; other criteria e.g. academic, address of applicant; subject choice; service fee remission – accommodation]*

Could you tell me what prompted the introduction and design of these bursaries?

*[Prompt: competitors; quality; image conveyed in terms of quality – reputation; to attract more students; to attract specific groups of students – **Probe fully**; financial – resource management; OFFA; HEFCE's WPF; fairness – doing the right thing; meet internal recruitment targets]*

Have the universities bursaries been changed since 2006?

**Yes/No**

If yes: How have they changed?

What prompted these changes?

If no: Why have the bursaries on offer stayed the same?

Are you considering changing the bursaries available to home undergraduates?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way?

*[Prompt: change allocation e.g. in way means tested etc.; change amount available; change which students qualify for bursaries]*

If no: Why is this?

*[Prompt: current regime meets requirements; constrained by competitors prices]*

Does the university have any bursary schemes which are delivered in partnership with external organisations?

*[Prompt: government or public services (e.g. NHS bursaries, OBs); private firms]*

If not already covered: Does the university wish to attract any particular groups of students with the bursaries on offer?

**All/Targets**

*[If yes – probe in what way?]*

If yes: Why are these students desirable to your institution?

*[Prompt: quality of the programme, institutional hierarchy, word-of-mouth recruitment, benefit institution – good to teach, benefit society, to access funding, satisfy OFFA requirements]*

[If feel applicable repeat last two questions for fees].

*If not already covered:* The university is a popular/less oversubscribed institution. Do you think this influences the fees or bursaries the university offers?

*If not already covered:* Do you think the university's fees or bursaries are influenced by its position in the hierarchy of HEIs?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case?

If yes: In what way?

*[Prompt: university image, competitors; programme quality; selection priorities]*

*If not already covered:* Do you think that any external agencies or bodies influence your university's fees or bursaries?

**Yes/No**

If yes in what way does X influence your institution's recruitment goals.

*If not already covered and if no or HEFCE not mentioned:* Was HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund considered by the university when developing the fees bursaries regime?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case? *[Prompt: limited funding from HEFCE, get funds from other sources, meeting HEFCE targets easily]*

If yes: In what way?

*[Prompt: moral pressure, funding]*

If no or OFFA not mentioned: Does OFFA have any influence on your institution's fees and bursaries?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case?

*[Limited power, not afraid of sanction, OFFA goals easy to attain]*

If yes: In what way?

*[Prompt: moral pressure, fear of power to sanction].*

Do you evaluate whether the fees or bursary regimes are having the desired effect?

*[Prompt: targets, market research, student feedback, anecdotal feedback from open days, school liaison activities etc.]*

Do you think the fee regime is effective in terms of meeting the needs you mentioned earlier?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way?

*[Probe fully – why?]*

If no: Why do you think that is the case?

Do you think the bursary regime is effective in terms of meeting the needs you mentioned earlier?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way?

*[Probe fully – why?]*

If no: Why do you think that is the case?

We have talked a lot about the university's goals regarding fees and bursaries. Could you tell me a bit about your own goals?

Is there anything you would like to change about the university's fees regime?

Is there anything you would like to change about the university's bursaries?

Is there anything that would like to change or that would make your job easier?

## Widening Participation Interview Schedule

How long in current post?

Have you worked in student recruitment in any other role?

Have you worked in student recruitment at any other institutions?

What tasks does your role involve?

What are the university's current recruitment goals in relation to Widening Participation?

What students does your university wish to attract?

**Prompt: All/particular groups.**

*If answer all students or if not covered: Does the university use dedicate resources to attract specific groups of students? (Probe: students covered by HEFCE's Widening Participation agenda, High achieving students, Students from particular geographical areas).*

*If yes: Why are these students desirable to your institution? (Probe: quality of the programme, institutional hierarchy, word-of-mouth recruitment, benefit institution, benefit society, to access funding?)*

Does the university have any specific WP recruitment targets?

**Yes/No**

What are these targets?

Could you please talk me through how university tries to attract WP students? (*Probes: open days, student visits to campus, summer schools, school visits, student tutors, mentoring, advertisements*).

Are there any particular groups of students which you deliver targeted recruitment programmes to?

**Yes/No**

If yes: What are these groups. (*Probes: specific areas of the country, less well-performing schools, ethnic groups*).

If answer yes and not covered by previous response: Could you please talk me through what these targeted programmes are?

What recruitment mechanisms do you consider to be important for the institution?

Do you think these programmes are effective?

**Yes/No**

If yes: What is it about these programmes which you think makes them effective?

If no: What is it about these programmes which you think makes them ineffective?

How do you evaluate whether a programme is effective? (*Probe: targets, market research*).

Is there anything that prevents your institution from recruiting the students it is trying to attract?

**Yes/No**

If yes: What are these factors? (*Probe: institutional hierarch, popularity, image of university, location of university, university course offerings, university facilities*).

To your knowledge, has your institution's facilities or course offerings been changed in order to influence recruitment?

**Yes/No**

If yes: In what way? (*Probe: accommodation, other facilities, course content, method of delivery, fees, bursaries*).



The university is a popular/less oversubscribed institution. How much does this influence its WP activities?

Do you think the university's WP goals or activities are influenced by its position in the hierarchy of HEIs?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case?

If yes: In what way? (*Probe: university image, difficulty of programmes, selection priorities, school preparation*).

Do you think that any external agencies or bodies influence your university's WP goals? **Yes/No**

If yes in what way does X influence your institution's recruitment goals.

If no or HEFCE not mentioned: Is HEFCE's Widening Participation Fund considered by the university when developing WP goals?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case? (*Probe: limited funding from HEFCE, get funds from other sources, meeting HEFCE targets easily*)

If yes: In what way? (*Probe: moral pressure, funding*)

If no or OFFA not mentioned: Does OFFA have any influence on your institution's WP goals?

**Yes/No**

If no: Why do you think this is the case? (*Limited power, not afraid of sanction, OFFA goals easy to attain*)

If yes: In what way? (*moral pressure, fear of power to sanction*).

## **Interview Guidance Notes**

The following text was delivered orally to all respondents before the start of the interview. All interviewees were given the researcher's contact details. Some sent follow-up emails to clarify statements they had made in the interview, usually where a quantitative mistake had been made, e.g. number of schools visited.

### *Informed Consent Text*

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for a PhD research project looking at admissions and recruitment in higher education. Your co-operation will be of great use.

The material you give in this interview will be used to help understand how HEIs in England select home-domiciled undergraduate students. A summary of the findings of this research will be available within 12 months of this interview and will be sent to you if you wish. If you wish, you will also be notified when items arising from this work are published in the form of the thesis or papers published in academic journals.

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The PhD is being supervised by Professor Anne West and Dr Mike Shiner at the Social Policy Department of the London School of Economics.

The information you give in this interview will be used for the project and extracts may be quoted. Where extracts are quoted, they will be completely anonymised so that you will not be identifiable to readers. This means your name will not be used at any point and any pieces of information which may enable others to identify you if reported, such as job title for example, will either be changed or omitted.

The information you give in this interview will be kept confidential. It will not be shared with any third parties except with your permission in the anonymised form detailed previously.

It is the policy of the Economic and Social Research Council for qualitative data from interviews such as this to be shared wherever possible in an anonymised form with other researchers through qualitative data banks. This is to ensure that research

undertaken is transparent and open to criticism as well as to assist future projects looking at similar topics.

Would you be happy for your information to be shared in this way? You can withdraw this permission at any point up until the data is deposited by contacting the researcher.

It is very important that you feel comfortable with the interview process and you have the right to stop the interview at any point if for any reason you wish to. Equally, if you would prefer not to answer any particular question or questions you have the right not to do so.

You have control over the information you give in this interview and if at any point after the interview you feel you would like to withdraw your permission to use all or part of it then you have the right to do so up until this research is published. If this is the case please contact me.

## Appendix 2: The UCAS Data

### Introduction

This appendix gives a descriptive overview of the UCAS dataset supplied for this research. Further information about the sample and the analyses undertaken are given in Chapters 3 and 6.

The data were supplied by the statistical services directorate of UCAS. Univariate statistics are given for the *sample* of 16,000 UK applicants applying to UK institutions, stratified by social class.

### The Data: Descriptive Statistics

This section gives univariate statistics concerning the HEIs (254 institutions), courses (16,061 courses), candidates (16,000) and applications (91,294). One candidate applied through clearing to one unknown course (and was unsuccessful), resulting in missing information. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole point; some totals may not sum due to rounding. All means are rounded to one decimal place.

#### *Institutions*

Table 2X.1: Institution Type

Institution Type	Frequency n (%)
FE College	66 (26)
HE College	68 (27)
Post-1992 University	62 (24)
Pre-1992 University	37 (15)
Russell Group University	20 (8)
Missing	1 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>254 (100)</b>

Table 2X.2: Institution Location (Country)

Institution Location (Country)	Frequency n (%)
England	209 (82)
Wales	19 (8)
Scotland	20 (8)
Northern Ireland	4 (2)
Missing	2 (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>254 (100)</b>

Table 2X.3: Institution Location (NUTS Level 1 Region)

<b>Institution Location (NUTS 1)</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
North East	9 (4)
North West	22 (9)
Yorkshire and Humber	23 (9)
East Midlands	16 (6)
West Midlands	23 (9)
East of England	16 (6)
London	47 (19)
South East	29 (11)
South West	24 (9)
Wales	19 (8)
Scotland	20 (8)
Northern Ireland	4 (2)
Missing	2 (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>254 (100)</b>

*Courses*

Table 2X.4: Course Subject

<b>Course Subject</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
Medicine and Dentistry	61 (<1)
Subjects Allied to Medicine	704 (4)
Biological Science	1,132 (7)
Agriculture and Veterinary Science	199 (1)
Chemical and Physical Science	977 (6)
Maths and Computer Science	1,082 (7)
Engineering	1,037 (7)
Technologies	92 (1)
Architecture	229 (1)
Social Sciences	1,117 (7)
Law	368 (2)
Business Studies	1,292 (9)
Communications	370 (2)
Linguistics	454 (3)
European Languages	462 (3)
Other Modern Languages	106 (1)
Humanities	572 (4)
Creative Arts	1,254 (8)
Education	323 (2)
Combined Studies	4,045 (25)
General Studies	79 (1)
Unknown/Missing	5 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,061 (100)</b>

Table 2X.5: Subject Level

Subject Level	Frequency n (%)
Degree	15,436 (96)
Sub-Degree	624 (4)
Missing	1 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,061 (100)</b>

Table 2X.6: Course Popularity

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Total Applications	1	3,908	120.1
Total Acceptances	1	569	21.4
Applications per Place	1	357	7.4
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (after offers made)	0	100	60.4
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (after results published)	0	100	17.1

Table 2X.7: Course Selectivity

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Average A Level Points All Applicants	40	600	251.4
Average A Level Points Accepted Applicants	40	720	254.1
Weighted Mean Course Conditional Offer	0	420	248.1

### *Candidates*

Table X2.8: Parental Occupation (SES)

Socio-Economic Status	Frequency n (%)
Higher Managerial and Professional	2000 (12.5)
Lower Managerial and Professional	2000 (12.5)
Intermediate Occupations	2000 (12.5)
Lower Supervisory and Technical	2000 (12.5)
Semi-Routine Occupations	2000 (12.5)
Routine Occupations	2000 (12.5)
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	2000 (12.5)
Unknown SES	2000 (12.5)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

Table X2.9: Candidate Gender

Gender	Frequency n (%)
Male	6,845 (43)
Female	9,155 (58)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

Table X2.10: Candidate Ethnicity

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
White	12,928 (81)
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	609 (4)
Chinese	217 (1)
Indian	950 (6)
Black African	249 (2)
Black Caribbean	107 (1)
Mixed Race	276 (2)
Other Ethnicity	402 (3)
Unknown Ethnicity	162 (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

Table X2.11: Candidate School Type

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
Further Education College	902 (6)
Grammar School	1,806 (11)
Independent School	2,327 (15)
Sixth Form Centre/College	2,410 (15)
State School	8,133 (51)
Other Institution	441 (3)
Unknown School Type	81 (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

Table 2X.12: Candidate Region of Domicile (NUTS Level 1 Region)

<b>Candidate Region of Domicile</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
North East	662 (4)
North West	1,920 (12)
Yorkshire and Humber	1,285 (8)
East Midlands	1,056 (7)
West Midlands	1,392 (9)
East of England	1,564 (10)
London	2,512 (16)
South East	2,513 (16)
South West	1,342 (8)
Wales	817 (5)
Scotland	45 (<1)
Northern Ireland	767 (5)
Missing/Extra-Region	125 (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

Table 2X.13: Candidate Predicted A Levels Points 2006

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Total Points A Levels Excluding General Studies and Critical Thinking	0	720	295.2
Total Points A Levels in General Studies and Critical Thinking	0	240	12.5

Table X2.14: Candidate A Levels in 2006

Number of A Levels	Frequency n (%)
Excluding General Studies and Critical Thinking	
0	5 (<1)
1	807 (5)
2	2,218 (14)
3	11,398 (71)
4	1,518 (10)
5	52 (<1)
6	2 (<1)
In General Studies and Critical Thinking	
0	13,955 (87)
1	2,037 (13)
2	8 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>

*Applications*

Table X2.15: HEI Initial Response

HEI Response	Frequency n (%)
Unconditional	209 (<1)
Conditional	67,294 (74)
Course cancelled	245 (<1)
Candidate Withdrew	2,763 (3)
Rejected	19,638 (22)
Clearing Accept	1,138 (1)
None Recorded/Missing	7 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>91,294 (100)</b>

Table X2.16: Applicant's Initial Response

Applicant Response	Frequency n (%)
Decline	39,438 (43)
Firm Choice	15,005 (16)
Insurance Choice	13,063 (14)
No Choice Available (e.g. Applicant Rejected)	23,784 (26)
Missing	4 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>91,294 (100)</b>

Table X2.17: Time of Application

Time of Application	Frequency n (%)
During Normal Admissions Round	89,967 (99)
During UCAS Extra or Clearing	1,327 (2)
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,000 (100)</b>



Table X2.18: Final Outcome of Choice

<b>Final Outcome</b>	<b>Frequency n (%)</b>
Accepted	22,721 (25)
Accepted at Clearing	1,128 (1)
Course Change	503 (1)
Rejected	3,697 (4)
Candidate Withdrawn	1 (<1)
No Choice Available (e.g. because candidate was rejected or withdrew at an earlier stage)	63,243 (69)
Missing (Clearing Reject)	1 (<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>91,294 (100)</b>

Table 2X.19: Applicants' Relative Tariff Score

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Difference between applicants predicted points and mean A Level points score of all applicants	-343.4	420.0	12.3

## **Appendix 3: Case Institution Selection Processes**

### **Introduction**

This appendix describes the selection procedures used by the four case study universities. The role which each selector plays is given for each stage of the admissions process. This detail supports the analyses given in Chapters 4 and 5, which examine the role that market factors play in institutional admissions behaviour at the initial and further selection stages respectively. A summary of the admissions processes for each university is given in Table X3.1 at the end of this appendix.

### **Southern Rural University**

The selection for most courses is undertaken by a central admissions team. They are given criteria to look for in applicants, which are decided upon by the registrar in conjunction with the admissions manager and the course leaders. These criteria mainly comprise a certain number of UCAS points applicants are to present (the standard offer) and may also include particular subjects and grades. These additional subject and grade criteria are mainly used for 'prime courses'. These more over-subscribed courses are popular in line with national trends, and also require applicants to have a certain level of knowledge in order to successfully complete the first year.

In addition to looking at predicted UCAS points, admissions officers read the school reference and personal statement but only on a cursory level: the school reference is deemed acceptable as long as it does not give overt cause for concern relating to the applicant's behaviour or motivation. The personal statement need only show an interest in the course. Interest can be conveyed through reasons for wanting to study the subject or through undertaking relevant extra-curricular or classroom activities. The personal statement does not have to be well-written to be acceptable, with spelling and grammar errors unimportant for selection decisions.

There are some courses where selection is undertaken at a departmental level. These are for the performing arts courses, where applicants are selected after an audition. The applicants are invited to interview by the central admissions officers, who sift applications for all candidates to exclude those who are not eligible. This exercise mirrors the process for the rest of the courses. However, more attention is paid

towards the views of the departmental course leaders; for example, if it is known that course leaders prefer applicants presenting a particular qualification such as an art foundation degree, then the admissions officers act on this and prioritise such applicants.

Once these applicants are invited to interview they are accessed by academic staff members. They may also be asked to undertake further tasks including presenting a portfolio for the arts courses or undertaking an audition-type exercise for the performing arts courses. They are also given a more traditional interview. For the one course where this was investigated further, the interview panel consists of two academics staff members who had different interests and could therefore look at the candidate from different angles. The course leaders and other interviewers decide who to offer places to and this information is conveyed to the central admissions team.

Applicants who are unsuccessful are on the whole offered alternative course options. These alternatives are either the less popular courses which are thus easier to get on to or for courses which are a lower status and have lower offers, such as a foundation degree (FDEg) or HE Diploma (HEDip). If no mutually suitable course can be found, the applicant is rejected.

Several of the courses enter clearing but it is not that many across Southern Rural University. At clearing, applicants are assessed by central admissions staff on the basis of points alone for the majority of the courses, and the standard offer is lowered by around 20 UCAS points (the equivalent to a difference in one A Level grade). If applicants are interested in one of the interviewing or 'selective' courses, they are assessed by the central admissions staff and then, if deemed suitable, are invited to see the course leader who assesses them further.

Applicants who fail to achieve their offer conditions are ranked according to their points score and if there are places left those with the highest points are given the places. Mitigating circumstances such as illness or parental death are also considered and this may mean an applicant is prioritised on aspects other than grades. Applicants may gain a place if they are close to the original standard offer, a drop of 20-40 UCAS points. If a place cannot be found, they are offered a similar course which has

places if their UCAS form indicates an interest in that area, or a lower status course such as a foundation degree.

Applicants are all given the standard offer: they are not given higher or lower offers than this unless they are atypical in some way for example they are a mature student, have mitigating circumstances or they have already taken some qualifications. Applicants will be made an offer if they are within a shot of obtaining the standard offer; they do not have to present predicted grades which exactly meet or better it.

Admissions officers for all courses liaise with the course leaders where there is uncertainty about the suitability of an application, for example the predicted grades are low or there are marked oddities in the personal statement. It will then fall to the course leader to decide whether or not the applicant is made an offer.

There are university-wide minimum admissions requirements. These stipulate that applicants must present at least two A Levels or equivalent and need to have successfully obtained qualifications in at least five different subjects across GCSE and A Level or equivalent qualifications. However, applicants not meeting these requirements can still be offered a place in exceptional circumstances, for example mitigating circumstances which affected GCSE performance. For this, the offer needs to be approved by the registrar or the admissions manager on the registrar's behalf.

## **Eastern New University**

Selection for the bulk of this institution's courses is undertaken by a central administrative team. Most of the courses are administered by a team based at the Main Campus. However, there are courses which are provided at a Secondary Campus, located in a different area of the region, and admissions for this campus are undertaken by their own administrative team.

### *Main Campus*

For the Main Campus, admissions officers assess candidates on the basis of what applications they are taking – whether they are taking two A Levels or equivalent. At this stage, qualifications which are not listed on the UCAS tariff such as NVQ Level 3 qualifications are deemed acceptable, with selectors having developed their own framework to compare a broader range of qualifications with one another than the

UCAS tariff itself permits. If candidates present sufficient qualifications, they will be given the Eastern New University standard offer of 200 points with at least 160 points coming from two A Levels or equivalent. Thus, candidates need to achieve two C grades at A Level and achieve another qualification equivalent to a C grade at AS level to qualify for admission.

The admissions officers do not look at candidates' predicted grades; all applicants are made an offer whether they fall short of the standard requirements or exceed them. If applicants do not meet their offer conditions, this is looked at after the results are announced.

The personal statement is read for interest in the course and the school reference is read to see that there are no concerning passages but they do not play a role in determining whether or not a candidate receives an offer.

Some courses request additional qualifications to those stipulated by the university-wide standard offer (which are also the university's minimum admissions requirements). If additional requirements are mandated by an external accrediting body or if internally it is deemed necessary for candidates to start the course with a given level of knowledge in order to succeed in the first year, this additional requirement is made part of the course standard offer and is given to all successful applicants.

There are some courses which interview students. These either have to because of accrediting body requirements (such as Social Work and Nursing) or need to because they are 'talent' courses such as the creative and performing arts and admissions officers would not be able to tell whether or not a candidate was suitable without them. Central admissions officers invite candidates to interview and they are then assessed by academic members of staff.

The professional courses such as Nursing have elaborate selection procedures at this stage, which also involve practitioners and service users in interviews. These fit with the requirements of the accrediting bodies and are seen as best practice to ensure the selection of good future practitioners. Applicants are interviewed in a process which

prioritises process fairness, for example all applicants can be asked the same questions or given the same exercise, with this being marked by the same academic selector.

Once the interviews are completed and the departments have decided which applicants they wish to accept, the offer is given to successful students by the Main Campus admissions office.

Applicants which are not made an offer for their chosen course are either offered an alternative degree course in which the personal statement expresses an interest or offered a place on a foundation or extended degree. Very few applicants are rejected completely.

After the results are published, all applicants who receive 120 UCAS points or more (equivalent to two D grades at A Level) are confirmed in their offers. This is the new standard offer given at clearing. Clearing is undertaken by trained temporary staff who are current university students or the children of university staff. They are trained to give verbal offers for any courses with places to any applicant who has two Ds or more at A Level. If applicants have an E in one subject they are referred to either an admissions officer or an academic who will then make a decision about whether or not to make an offer of a place.

### *Secondary Campus*

At the Secondary Campus the admissions process is also undertaken by administrative staff. Although the assessment procedures are the same as for the Main Campus, there are some differences. At the Secondary Campus, officers look more closely at predicted points, the personal statement and reference, particularly for the more oversubscribed teaching courses. The personal statement is read for interest in the subject indicated through what is said by the candidate and their discussion of extra-curricular and other school activities. For the teaching courses, officers look for evidence of work experience which is a mandatory requirement. If the predicted points come close to the standard offer (40 points or two A Level grades away from it) then applicants are made an offer of a place on their chosen course.

Of the courses which interview, the teaching courses do so because they are required to by the accrediting body. Candidates are interviewed by practitioners as well as

academic staff members. Measures are taken to prioritise process fairness: all applicants perform the same tasks and are asked the same questions. Unlike the interviewers on the Main Campus, here the offer process is overseen by the course admissions tutors. Differential conditional offers can be given according to the applicant's performance at interview, with more desirable candidates given lower offers and acceptable but less impressive applicants given higher offers than standard. Applicants are also given a personalised letter if they are impressive informing them that their lower offer is in recognition of their excellent performance at interview.

Main Campus staff members make the majority of the decisions for clearing applicants who apply for courses at the Secondary Campus. Where the Secondary Campus is involved, student ambassadors take initial details from prospective students, who are then contacted by admissions officers who process their applications. The same clearing offer (two D grades at A Level) is operational for the Main and Secondary Campus.

### **Northern Town University**

The admissions process at this university is undertaken at departmental level: the role of the central admissions team is to make routine checks to ensure that paperwork is complete and that the applications have been processed by the departments.

At departmental level, it has been left up to departments to decide what selection process to use and there is therefore a considerable amount of variation across the university. Some candidates are assessed by academic staff only and some by administrative staff only, based within the departments. Academic admissions tutors sometimes share their selection role with departmental administrative officers who, for example, give advice on non-standard qualifications. All of the criteria are decided upon by the admissions tutors and academic heads of department, sometimes in conjunction with senior administrative staff.

Some courses interview, either because they have to in order to satisfy the requirements of an external accrediting body or because it is deemed desirable by admissions tutors. Candidates are rarely asked the same questions as their rivals. For most courses, the interview is seen more as a recruitment mechanism than as a selection tool. The aim is to talk to the applicants and make them interested in the

course rather than access them in relation to one another. The majority of the interviewed applicants are made an offer unless there is cause for concern.

Whether the applications for non-interviewed courses are assessed by admissions tutors or admissions officers, they look at applicants predicted grades, the personal statement for interest in the course and the school reference. For highly over-subscribed the courses higher grades are required and increased attention is paid to the personal statement compared to more recruiting courses.

Both admissions tutors and admissions officers at this HEI tend to give applicants the standard offer rather than a tailored offer. There is an acknowledgement that school factors may influence attainment but this does not influence the selection process. The course standard offer is determined at departmental level.

The university's minimum admissions criteria do not play a role in departmental selection decisions. It is presumed that departments' own selection criteria exceed any central requirements and that therefore there is no need to worry about the criteria of the centre.

Candidates who are rejected from their chosen course are not rejected outright but are offered a number of alternative degree courses. Where applicants' qualifications are not good enough for a degree then they are offered a Foundation Year place. The Foundation Years can be used as a springboard to get onto one of the university's degrees – a pass in this year guarantees the applicant a place on linked courses.

Departmental staff members undertake clearing activities but although academics are on hand, it is principally undertaken by administrative staff. Here, decisions are based on grades presented. Academic admissions tutors for most courses prefer to take their 'own' applicants who have failed to meet the offer conditions. Student volunteers help take details from applicants at clearing, but do not make selection decisions.

At the time of the research, university management hoped to centralise the selection process and increase the role of the central admissions office. It was hoped this would bring efficiency savings in terms of money and time, free admissions tutors to undertake more recruitment activities such as school visits and increase fairness in



admissions in line with the Schwartz report. A consultation was due to start in the 2009/10 academic year to see how departments would take to this.

One of the goals was to increase process fairness and to this end it was hoped by the university management that non-essential interviews would be discontinued. Some admissions tutors had already discontinued interviews at the time of the research (although this was not related to the preference of university management). Other admissions tutors described the interview in a positive way and were keen to retain them.

### **Central Research University**

This university has a mixed admissions process: some of the departments undertake their own admissions activities with academic staff doing the selecting; others entrust the selection process to administrative officers based in the centre; some departments use the central team to make decisions about 'obvious' candidates who clearly do or do not meet the course requirements and examine the remaining 'middle' candidates themselves. In all cases, selection criteria are determined by departmental academic staff, including heads of department.

Where interviews take place they are undertaken by a number of departmental staff members, although the admissions tutor has final say over which applicants are made offers. Where there are no interviews, the admissions tutors make the decisions. They can consult the central admissions office where they feel a need for advice, for example to get a better understanding of non-standard qualifications and to check their instincts or assessments of odd application forms.

Both administrative and academic selectors look at predicted grades, the subjects being taken with preferences expressed for traditional subjects or subjects which are relevant to the degree, the personal statement and the school reference. The school reference is read but does not play a large role in determining selection decisions. However the reference is deemed as useful where it gives information about the applicant's school, its circumstances, how many applicants go to HE and what the approach to the AS level is (whether applicants take four or three AS levels in their first year of Sixth Form). Depending on the view of the admissions tutor, this may play a role in the offer the applicant is given.

The personal statement is looked at with care and applicants are expected to present a well-written personal statement which demonstrates wider reading, an interest in the subject and relevant extra-curricular activities. In most cases, particularly for more popular courses, the personal statement does play a role in whether the applicant is or is not given an offer.

Where selection is undertaken entirely by the central admissions team, a set of criteria developed in conjunction with the academic admissions tutor and department are applied. Therefore the criteria vary according to departmental priorities. For example some departments score applicants' GCSE grades whereas GCSEs are not part of the criteria or play less of a role in the selection process for other courses. The criteria however are always include the academic criteria of predicted grades and subjects and other personal criteria such as interest in the course and extra-curricular activities, which are accessed via the personal statement and reference.

Central Research University is the only university which assesses applicants on the basis of their ability to contribute to the university community in a way which may impact upon their probability of selection. The more popular courses include this criterion and candidates are assessed via the personal statement.

The university has an additional, optional form which provides candidates with a formal mechanism for communicating mitigating circumstances to selectors, including school factors and other background information such as whether the applicant is first generation HE. This form can be accessed via Central Research University's website.

All of the admissions tutors undertake some recruitment activities in that they organise the post-offer open days but undertake fewer activities than their counterparts in Northern Town University as they do not undertake recruitment activities beyond that to the same degree or if they do it is not a compulsory part of their role.

The university avoids the clearing process: if there are any spaces left they are given to candidates who miss their offer conditions where the quality of their application

(the whole form) their nearness to the standard offer and whether there are any mitigating circumstances involved are used to rank candidates with the highest ranked given the offers.

Rejected candidates are not offered alternative courses. The exception to this is after the A Level results have been published (stage 4) where very highly qualified candidates who have failed to meet a stringent offer which requires applicants to obtain qualifications of a higher standard than A Levels are offered an alternative course if their personal statement indicates they might be interested in a different but related degree programme, assuming spaces are available.

The minimum admissions criteria are known by the central staff but not by the admissions tutors, again showing the role the centre plays where applications are handled by others than themselves.

Table X3.1: Admissions – The Four Cases

<b>Southern Rural University</b>	<b>Eastern New University</b>	<b>Northern Town University</b>	<b>Central Research University</b>
<p><u>Standard applications:</u> Centralised, administrative.</p>	<p><u>Standard applications:</u> Centralised, administrative.</p>	<p><u>Standard applications:</u> Departmental staff, either administrative or academic depending on course.</p>	<p><u>Standard applications:</u> Varies by course. Some departmental admissions tutor; some central admissions officers, some a mixture of departmental admissions tutors and central admissions officers.</p>
<p><u>Borderline applications:</u> Combination centre and academic admissions tutors.</p>	<p><u>Borderline applications:</u> Centre can seek advice from named academic staff.</p>	<p><u>Borderline applications:</u> Academic staff can seek advice from central or departmental administrative staff. Administrative staff can seek advice from admissions tutors.</p>	<p><u>Borderline applications:</u> Varies by course. Administrative staff can seek advice from admissions tutors and vice versa.</p>
<p><u>Interviewing Courses:</u> Initial selection central officers. Auditions/ standard offers by admissions tutors and departmental colleagues.</p>	<p><u>Interviewing Courses:</u> Initial selection either by central officers or academic staff. Interviews by academic staff. Standard offers by central officers (Main Campus) or admissions tutors (Secondary Campus)</p>	<p><u>Interviewing courses:</u> Varies by department. Interview selection either undertaken by academic and administrative departmental staff. Interview undertaken by academic staff including the admissions tutors.</p>	<p><u>Interviewing courses:</u> Initial selection and interviews undertaken by departmental admissions tutor and colleagues.</p>
<p><u>Clearing:</u> Centralised, administrative. Admissions tutors for interviewing courses.</p>	<p><u>Clearing:</u> Centralised, administrative. Interviewing courses do not enter clearing.</p>	<p><u>Clearing:</u> Central and departmental administrative staff with some admissions tutors.</p>	<p><u>Clearing:</u> University avoids clearing, preferring to fill places with standard applicants.</p>

## Appendix 4: Model Results with Confidence Intervals

### Introduction

This appendix provides full versions of Model 2 and Model 3, which are discussed in Chapter 6. As results were obtained using Bayesian estimation techniques, 95 per cent confidence intervals for model parameters can be used to show the size of bandwidths around the model effects, and increase confidence in the results. Here, parameter estimates and standard errors reported in Chapter 6, are accompanied with lower and upper estimates for 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Confidence intervals for parameter estimates allow us to see the “Bayesian credible interval” (Browne 2009: 39). In other words, the  $\beta$  coefficients and random effects have a ‘best estimate’, but we can be 95 per cent confident that the ‘true’ value of the coefficient lies between the upper and lower bound of the confidence interval. These are given in the Tables X4.1 (help) and X4.2 (hindrance) below.

Finally, this chapter presents the results of an alternative, multinomial model for offer variation (whether a helpful or hindrance offer was allocated as opposed to the reference category ‘standard offer’) which omits the applicant level. These results generally confirm the results of Models 2 and 3, although there are some slight differences.

Throughout this appendix, stars are used to indicate statistical significance. Effects which are significant at the 1 per cent level are marked with two stars (\*\*) and effects which are significant at the 5 per cent level are marked with one star (\*). Estimates for statistical significance are only available for  $\beta$  coefficients.

Table X4.1: Helpful Offer of Admission (full model) Random Effects

Reference Category: No difference	Parameter	SE	CI 2.5%	CI 97.5%
Residuals at level 2 (student) $u_{0ijl}$	0.130	0.156	0.004	0.511
Residuals at level 3 (course) $v_{0ijl}$	3.820	0.298	3.283	4.452
Residuals at level 4 (institution) $f_{0ijl}$	0.472	0.139	0.251	0.789

Table X4.2: Helpful Offer of Admission (full model) Fixed Effects

Reference Category: No difference	$\beta$	SE	CI 2.5%	CI 97.5%
Constant	-2.300	0.209	-2.688	-1.898
SES (ref. Higher Managerial/Professional)				
Lower Managerial/Professional	-0.091	0.101	-0.292	0.104
Intermediate	-0.184	0.100	-0.381	0.013
Lower Supervisory and Technical	0.038	0.101	-0.159	0.235
Semi-Routine	-0.074	0.102	-0.273	0.124
Routine	0.202*	0.102	0.001	0.402
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	0.133	0.102	-0.068	0.330
Unknown	0.050	0.101	-0.148	0.252
School Type (reference Independent School)				
Grammar School	0.165	0.115	-0.056	0.387
State School	0.521**	0.085	0.356	0.688
Further Education College	0.896**	0.130	0.641	1.153
Sixth Form College/Centre	0.448**	0.104	0.245	0.654
Other School Type	0.870**	0.170	0.538	1.206
Unknown School Type	0.928*	0.427	0.071	1.740
Candidate's Ethnicity (reference White)				
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.046	0.151	-0.251	0.343
Indian	0.130	0.116	-0.099	0.360
Black African	-0.046	0.219	-0.473	0.384
Black Caribbean	0.629	0.324	-0.018	1.248
Chinese	0.119	0.215	-0.308	0.538
Mixed Race	-0.016	0.172	-0.357	0.315
Other Ethnicity	0.049	0.168	-0.283	0.370
Unknown Ethnicity	-0.076	0.279	-0.635	0.449
Female (reference Male)	-0.061	0.056	-0.171	0.049
Age 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2006 (ref. 18 Years Old)				
Under 18 Years Old	1.603**	0.480	0.629	2.524
Over 18 Years Old	0.274**	0.072	0.131	0.415
Predicated Grades Point Score (-grand mean)	-0.007*	0.003	-0.013	-0.001
Points for General Studies (-grand mean)	-0.004	0.004	-0.010	0.004
No. A Levels ex. General Studies (-3)	0.930**	0.113	0.713	1.158
No. General Studies/Critical Thinking A Levels	-0.036	0.347	-0.761	0.601
No. A/AS Level Points Achieved 2005 (-gm)	-0.001	0.001	-0.002	0.001
Relative Tariff Rate (-grand mean)	-0.009**	0.003	-0.015	-0.004
Mean Points Score Accepted Applicants (-gm)	-0.005	0.003	-0.010	-0.000
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-gm)	0.008	0.164	-0.316	0.316
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (-gm)	-0.015**	0.003	-0.022	-0.008
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (-gm)	0.006*	0.003	0.001	0.011
Institution Type (ref. Russell Group University)				
Pre-1992 University	-0.111	0.239	-0.566	0.372
Post-1992 University	-0.440	0.282	-0.998	0.108
Non-University HE Provider	1.302*	0.550	0.234	2.416

Table X4.3: Hindrance Offer of Admission (full model) Random Effects

Reference Category: No difference	Parameter	SE	CI 2.5%	CI 97.5%
Residuals at level 2 (student) $u_{0ijl}$	0.003	0.001	0.001	0.004
Residuals at level 3 (course) $v_{0ijl}$	11.487	0.803	10.006	13.147
Residuals at level 4 (institution) $f_{0ijl}$	0.719	0.300	0.237	1.392

Table X4.4: Hindrance Offer of Admission (full model) Fixed Effects

Reference Category: No difference	$\beta$	SE	CI 2.5%	CI 97.5%
Constant	-1.634	0.314	-2.253	-1.021
SES (ref. Higher Managerial/Professional)				
Lower Managerial/Professional	0.121	0.107	-0.085	0.334
Intermediate	-0.337**	0.109	-0.550	-0.124
Lower Supervisory and Technical	-0.053	0.116	-0.283	0.174
Semi-Routine	0.045	0.112	-0.176	0.266
Routine	0.084	0.118	-0.150	0.317
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	0.150	0.113	-0.066	0.373
Unknown	-0.091	0.115	-0.319	0.132
School Type (reference Independent School)				
Grammar School	-0.138	0.113	-0.360	0.081
State School	-0.246**	0.083	-0.410	-0.087
Further Education College	-0.060	0.159	-0.379	0.251
Sixth Form College/Centre	-0.270*	0.107	-0.477	-0.065
Other School Type	-0.442*	0.213	-0.862	-0.029
Unknown School Type	0.534	0.490	-0.443	1.464
Candidate's Ethnicity (reference White)				
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.297	0.179	-0.055	0.646
Indian	0.266*	0.133	0.003	0.527
Black African	0.000	0.275	-0.553	0.526
Black Caribbean	0.776	0.425	-0.094	1.597
Chinese	0.299	0.213	-0.120	0.719
Mixed Race	0.441*	0.186	0.069	0.801
Other Ethnicity	0.026	0.195	-0.369	0.400
Unknown Ethnicity	0.061	0.322	-0.577	0.681
Female (reference Male)	-0.005	0.064	-0.129	0.124
Age 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2006 (ref. 18 Years Old)				
Under 18 Years Old	0.551	0.533	-0.549	1.558
Over 18 Years Old	0.012	0.086	-0.158	0.184
Predicated Grades Point Score (-grand mean)	0.016**	0.005	0.006	0.024
Points for General Studies (-grand mean)	0.014**	0.004	0.006	0.023
No. A Levels ex. General Studies (-3)	-1.461**	0.145	-1.740	-1.178
No. General Studies/Critical Thinking ALs	-1.163**	0.450	-2.093	-0.329
No. A/AS Level Points Achieved 2005 (-gm)	-0.003**	0.001	-0.005	-0.001
Relative Tariff Rate (-grand mean)	-0.002	0.004	-0.010	0.008
Mean Points Score Accepted Applicants (-gm)	-0.015**	0.004	-0.022	-0.007
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-gm)	-0.061	0.270	-0.611	0.458
Weighted Stage 3 Attrition Percentage (-gm)	-0.022**	0.005	-0.023	-0.012
Weighted Stage 4 Attrition Percentage (-gm)	0.013**	0.004	0.005	0.022
Institution (ref. Russell Group University)				
Pre-1992 University	-0.389	0.381	-1.145	0.378
Post-1992 University	-0.646	0.532	-1.615	0.446
Non-University HE Provider	2.849**	0.815	1.232	4.461

Table X4.5: Offer Helps or Hinders Multinomial Model Random Effects

<b>Reference Category:</b> No difference with weighted mean offer level	<b>Helps Student</b>		<b>Hinders Student</b>	
	Parameter	SE	Parameter	SE
Residuals at level 2 (course)	1.079	0.063	1.984	0.094
Residuals at level 3 (institution)	0.120	0.036	0.062	0.031
<b>Covariance residuals level 2:</b> 0.174 (0.055)	<b>Covariance residuals level 3:</b> 0.056 (0.025)			
<b>DIC Diagnostic (MCMC) Intercept:</b> 27679.729	<b>DIC Diagnostic (MCMC) Full:</b> 26132.844			



Table X4.6: Offer Helps or Hinders Multinomial Model Fixed Effects

Reference Category: No difference with weighted mean offer level	Helps Student		Hinders Student	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Constant	-1.525	0.128	-1.049	0.115
SES (reference Higher Managerial/Professional)				
Lower Managerial/Professional	-0.088	0.074	0.098	0.064
Intermediate	-0.162*	0.073	-0.125	0.065
Lower Supervisory and Technical	0.016	0.074	0.022	0.068
Semi-Routine	-0.076	0.074	0.088	0.066
Routine	0.133	0.074	0.121	0.068
Small Employers and Own Account Workers	0.079	0.074	0.144*	0.066
Unknown	0.014	0.074	-0.008	0.068
School Type (reference Independent School)				
Grammar School	0.097	0.082	-0.077	0.067
State School	0.326**	0.060	-0.104*	0.050
Further Education College	0.600**	0.093	-0.078	0.089
Sixth Form College/Centre	0.264**	0.073	-0.093	0.062
Other School Type	0.538**	0.118	-0.136	0.118
Unknown School Type	0.566	0.301	-0.108	0.273
Candidate's Ethnicity (reference White)				
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.034	0.100	0.056	0.097
Indian	0.077	0.079	0.130	0.074
Black African	-0.000	0.148	0.036	0.147
Black Caribbean	0.478*	0.216	0.338	0.221
Chinese	0.054	0.153	0.109	0.133
Mixed Race	0.060	0.120	0.106	0.110
Other Ethnicity	0.047	0.117	0.022	0.111
Unknown Ethnicity	-0.049	0.202	-0.032	0.183
Age 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2006 (reference 18 Years Old)				
Under 18 Years Old	1.022**	0.318	0.308	0.300
Over 18 Years Old	0.171**	0.052	0.025	0.050
Female (reference Male)	-0.036	0.040	-0.004	0.037
Predicated Grades Point Score (-grand mean)	-0.006**	0.002	0.007**	0.002
Points for General Studies (-grand mean)	-0.003	0.003	0.005*	0.002
No. A Levels ex. General Studies (-3)	0.592**	0.078	-0.551**	0.080
No. General Studies/Critical Thinking A Levels	0.034	0.266	-0.421	0.248
No. A/AS Level Points Achieved in 2005 (-gm)	-0.000	0.001	-0.002*	0.001
Relative Tariff Rate (-grand mean)	-0.006**	0.002	-0.001	0.002
Mean Points Score Accepted Applicants (-gm)	-0.004**	0.001	-0.005*	0.002
Competitiveness: Log Transformation (-gm)	0.023	0.092	0.005	0.107
Weighted Initial Attrition Percentage (-gm)	-0.010**	0.002	-0.005*	0.002
Weighted Final Attrition Percentage (-gm)	0.004**	0.001	0.004*	0.002
Institution Type (ref. Russell Group University)				
Pre-1992 University	-0.273	0.142	0.043	0.134
Post-1992 University	-0.659**	0.171	-0.039	0.172
Non-University HE Provider	0.590*	0.280	1.380**	0.307

## **Appendix 5: Case Institution Recruitment and Widening Participation Initiatives**

### **Introduction**

This appendix gives an overview of the mainstream recruitment practices and widening participation initiatives used by the four case study universities. Institutions' marketing mixes (promotional activities, price factors, programme characteristics and methods of delivery) are considered in turn for each university. Widening participation initiatives are discussed as a separate section in promotional activities. These details support the analyses presented in Chapters 7 and 8 which consider mainstream recruitment and widening participation respectively.

### **Southern Rural University**

Southern Rural University is a less-sizable institution with a more compact campus and student population. It consequently has a small central marketing and recruitment team

#### *Promotional Activities*

The core promotional activities at this university comprise two principal components: campus visits and schools liaison. Widening participation initiatives also fall under this category of the marketing mix.

#### *Campus Visits*

University recruiters felt strongly that it was important for prospective students to have visited the campus, either as part of a general open day or for an applicant visit day once they had received their offers. This was deemed to be of particular importance due to the nature of the institution. Recruitment staff members described the university as like Marmite, with students either falling in love with it or hating it on first sight.

In order to promote the accuracy of the impression given to students on campus visits, current students were employed to answer questions and to give campus tours.

Campus visits were advertised via the university's website; and there were additional recourses dedicated to attracting local candidates, for example radio advertising. Campus visits were evaluated via formal feedback mechanisms in the form of questionnaires.

Applicants attending further selection stages such as auditions and interviews were given tours of departmental facilities on the day they visited.

### *School Liaison*

The bulk of the university's non-widening participation outreach work was undertaken via school liaison activity. This was carried out by one member of staff, who was an alumnus of the university.

School liaison activity was concentrated in areas close to the institution; not solely the nearest cities but also areas further afield into neighbouring regions. The reach is partially dependent on resources and how far the schools liaison officer could feasibly travel to visit a school as well as the strategic goals of the university.

The focus of the school liaison activity, in common with other institutions was 'soft sell': general talks, for example on making a UCAS application or student finance were delivered at the request of teachers or following contact from the university to advertise these services. Where the opportunity presented itself, the schools liaison officer illustrated talks with examples from Southern Rural University, for example "At my institution we offer these bursaries". However, talks which were specifically about the institution were given if requested by the school teachers.

Staff considered the school liaison activity to be particularly affective because of the skills of the staff member who delivered them. As a recent graduate of the institution, this staff member had an insight into the student experience, allowing prospective student enquiries to be dealt with effectively. School liaison activity was evaluated through informal feedback received after the delivery of the talks.

### *Widening Participation*

Southern Rural University engaged in a wide variety of widening participation activities, which were delivered by a separate team which concentrated on widening participation only. Activities focused on younger students were aimed at raising aspirations and involved placing the pupil in the world of a student either via campus visits or through meeting student ambassadors. Activities focused on older students were focused around particular subjects such as taster days. This is principally funded through Aimhigher and consequently focused on the local area.

The students targeted for WP activities by follow the government's stated priorities. Therefore, the groups concentrated on were: students from lower socio-economic groups; students from low participation neighbourhoods; first generation students within these groups and additionally children in care and students with disabilities. In addition to this, Southern Rural University worked with students from minority ethnic backgrounds, mature students and white working class boys.

The widening participation activities were characterised by the involvement of local organisations and partners for delivery, for example the local football club and local disability groups helped deliver some programmes.

### *Price Factors*

As with the other universities in this group, this institution charged maximum tuition fees of around £3,000 per annum for all degree courses. Non-degree courses, including HE Diplomas and Foundation Degrees delivered in partner colleges, were the same price.

Means-tested bursaries were staggered according to income so that the government minimum was delivered to the correct income group with the remaining fee income reserved for university bursaries distributed on a means-tested basis. The maximum amount of bursary was over £1,000 per annum and the minimum amount was less than £300 per annum. Students could be eligible for bursaries with moderate as well as low levels of parental income.

The university had some money available to spend on scholarships and decided to allocate this to students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects at the university. There were no other scholarships.

### *Programme Characteristics*

In terms of product offerings, this university provided a narrower range of courses than other case universities, with provision focusing on arts and humanities subjects. Some STEM and medical-related courses were also provided. Degree level and sub-degree courses were offered.

The university was described as a 'mid table' institution, in the upper ranks of the new universities. This perception was supported by the institutional league tables.

### *Method of Delivery*

Foundation degrees were provided by local partner colleges, enabling local students from across the city area to access learning opportunities. These were particularly attractive to mature and local students. Students successfully completing these courses could subsequently study a degree level course at Southern Rural University.

The campus itself was in a rural area at a little distance from an aesthetically pleasing city, which is popular with tourists. Transport links between the city and campus were convenient. Buildings on campus were in the same architectural style as found in the city, interlaced with some more modern developments.

There were concerns that the accommodation and social facilities were insufficient to meet the requirements of prospective students. The university was unable to modify or update its facilities because there were planning-related barriers to campus development.

To overcome this problem, at the time of the research the institution was considering purchasing an additional site. Although the site was not chosen at the time of the research, it was possible that the additional campus could be located in different area.

## **Eastern New University**

This institution had a larger student population spread over several sites. Two campuses were based in different towns of the same region. There were also sites for medical-related courses. All elements of the marketing mix were used, although this university organised widening participation activities differently to the other case institutions.

### *Promotional Activities*

Promotional activities were heavily concentrated in local schools and in the areas within commuting distance of the university. National activities were restricted to UCAS fair attendance. Institutional recruitment activities for home students concentrated on two main areas: campus visits and school liaison activity. Some activities focused on students from further afield.

Student recruitment at this university was synonymous with widening participation. There was no separate widening participation office although there is an Aimhigher office to coordinate the activities undertaken with Aimhigher funding. This is discussed in the final section.

### *Campus visits*

Open days were provided for prospective applicants and those who had received offers. The main and secondary campuses held their own separate open days. Open days were attended by more parents than students. The two groups were not separated, but undertook all activities together.

There was a general talk followed by subject talks. Staff members from across the university were available to visitors who wanted to drop by and ask questions and the Vice Chancellor delivered one of the talks.

The popularity of the open days had been steadily increasing. Staff at the secondary campus were considering running additional open days to cope with demand.

### *School Liaison*

School liaison work focused on the local 'catchment' area and there were plans to allocate recruitment officers to cluster of named schools to form long-term links with school administrations.

School liaison work used a soft-sales approach. The emphasis of school liaison activity was focussed towards presenting students with the options available to them and providing them with advice regarding course options and post-compulsory qualifications.

### *EU Students*

At Eastern New University a recruitment director had responsibility for increasing custom in the EU and accession countries in particular. They made international visits, distributed literature and raised awareness of the university.

This activity was supported by the university's summer school, which provided English language tuition to students. Students studying for the summer school programmes could seek work and build their confidence about studying abroad. The summer school was organised along the lines of a private international school for language tuition: lessons were provided during the day and there were organised social activities during the afternoon and evening and at weekends.

### *Widening Participation*

In addition to the main recruitment activities which could be described as synonymous with widening participation, the university also engaged in specific Aimhigher activities. Aimhigher activities were both institution-wide and based in specific academic departments. One of the university's faculties was particularly involved in Aimhigher and delivered Aimhigher taster days.

The main Aimhigher office delivered outreach programmes using current students both at the university and in partner colleges who were Aimhigher Associates. The university also used a Higher Education Progression Officer to cover the local 'patch', both the schools feeding into the main campus and the secondary campus.

### ***Price Factors***

The university charged around £3,000 per annum for all undergraduate degree programmes. Foundation degrees had the 'regulated' lower fee of around £1,500 per annum, and those taking 'sandwich years' were charged 50 per cent of the undergraduate annual fee.

There were means-tested bursaries for students determined on the basis of parental income. The university felt that it had a generous bursary scheme, with all students qualifying for some amount. The maximum bursary amount was less than £1,000 per annum. Bursaries were available to part-time students in their second and third years.

There was also a bursary of less than £500 per annum targeted at students who attended partner colleges prior to entering the university and a further bursary of over £1,000 for students living in particularly deprived areas of the surrounding area. This latter fund was financed from alumni donations.

Additionally, the university had large scholarships of over £1,000 per annum for students with strong academic and sporting attainment.

### ***Programme Characteristics***

Eastern New University had a wide variety of courses, but there were some gaps. Unpopular STEM courses had been closed whilst new areas have been created in response to market intelligence about prospective students' course demands gleaned from enquiries received at education fairs.

Some concerns were expressed about the lack of time there is between the introduction of a new course and when it needed to be launched into the marketplace. Admissions staff were concerned the frequently changing course portfolio meant they sometimes gave incorrect information to candidates.

### ***Method of Delivery***

Foundation degrees were provided by local partner colleges which can be seen as a way of increasing accessibility of higher education to students living in the local area. At the time of the research, further expansion in the region was being sought.



However, the principal means via which Eastern New University used different delivery mechanisms to influence recruitment is through the merger and the acquisition of a new campus in a different town. Furthermore, Eastern New University delivered medical-related courses via hospital sites spread throughout the region and postgraduate courses at a further site, set more into the country.

The university was investing in a programme to update campus facilities which was on-going at the time of the research. The secondary campus had received this investment previously.

The main campus was in the centre of a town, which had a diverse population. This was reflected in the student population at the main campus. The secondary campus was based in a different town located in the same region. This town was more affluent and it was felt had a better reputation and appeal to the middle classes. The secondary campus itself was more self-contained, being set a little distance from the town, and was greener and less diverse. The architecture on both sites was modern.

The main campus had good transport links for students wishing to visit parents at home and abroad and who wished to engage in tourist activities. The secondary campus was reasonably easy to access using university transport. There were transport links between all of the university sites in the two towns.

### **Northern Town University**

Recruitment here was delivered both by the central recruitment team and through the faculty staff, with admissions tutors heavily involved with schools liaison activity and faculties having participating in the institution's compact scheme and summer school. All elements of the marketing mix were used.

#### ***Promotional Activities***

In common with other universities, Northern Town University used campus visits and schools liaison activity to increase recruitment. Officers also ran particular campaigns as and when required. Widening participation initiatives were delivered separately.

### *Campus Visits*

Northern Town University had three main ways of encouraging prospective students to visit campus. Firstly through general open days, secondly through applicant visit days and interviews, which were organised by departments, and finally through the programme of taster lectures and other events offered as part of the university's compact scheme.

Applicant visit days were organised by admissions tutors and other departmental staff. Academics and sometimes current students organised a programme of events which showed applicants departmental facilities and the campus. For some courses, this day was delivered alongside an interview.

There were also university-wide open days. Students could attend events and visit stalls manned by admissions tutors and officers from university departments such as the careers and accommodation offices.

Finally, the university encouraged students to come onto campus via its Compact Scheme. Any prospective applicant or school pupil could participate in taster lectures and lab-based sessions. They were subject-orientated and aimed at the post-compulsory pupils. Students who attended these events were issued with their own student card, giving them access to the university library.

Any Compact Scheme participant who applied successfully to Northern Town University could attend an associated Summer School after completing their post-compulsory qualifications. Successful participants were given some UCAS points towards their conditional offers.

Compact events were evaluated both through formal mechanisms in the form of questionnaires and through informal feedback to staff.

### *School Liaison*

School liaison activity was concentrated in the regional area. Information talks were delivered and school parents' evenings were visited. School liaison activity was undertaken both by central university staff and faculty staff, either admissions tutors

or their own administrative staff and recruitment managers. As with other universities, the approach used is a 'soft sell' approach.

The university's school liaison team all had either professional experience of or training in careers guidance.

### *Campaigns*

In addition to these common recruitment activities, Northern Town University delivered publicity campaigns for new courses which were not included in the prospectus or in the UCAS guide and for 'struggling courses'. The struggling courses campaign started at the end of the Michaelmas term, when an assessment of which courses were not hitting their recruitment targets had been completed. Additional web-based advertising was purchased for this.

### *Widening Participation*

Northern Town University worked with Aimhigher cohorts and students identified as in need of intervention such as white working class boys, disabled students and care leavers in addition to having its own priority groups including refugees and asylum seekers.

The university's widening participation activity was located in the local community and took the form of aspiration and attainment raising. The activities undertaken by the university take four forms: outreach; campus-based tuition activities; other aspiration-raising and guidance activities and campus-based summer schools.

The widening participation team had suffered from managerial *laissez-faire* in the past and this had lowered staff morale. The current manager was working to overcome this perceived problem.

In conjunction with faculty staff, the WP team helped to run a children's university to provide education on campus to young cohorts in STEM subject areas. Separate summer schools for both pre-18 year olds and mature students were also provided.

Widening participation activity was also carried out by the faculties independently of the centre and there was an acknowledgement that there is not an awareness of all faculty activities in this area.

### ***Price Factors***

The university charged the maximum £3,000 fee level for all undergraduate courses. However, Foundation Year fees are lower than this.

The bursary scheme was staggered so that it increased each year the student progressed on their degree. Foundation Year students were given the same bursary amounts as first-year degree students. The maximum bursary was less than £1,000 per annum with students from low and moderate income backgrounds eligible for awards.

Student who attended the university's Compact scheme received an additional bursary of less than £500 per annum.

### ***Programme Characteristics***

The university had two levels of provision, degrees and foundation years. This can be seen as a means for attracting local and mature students. The university also ran a course aimed to increase access to the medical profession, which was linked to a medical degree at a nearby Russell Group university.

The university had a strong focus on seeking external professional accreditation for courses where possible. This extended beyond the usual accreditation for courses such as social work or medical-related areas.

### ***Method of Delivery***

This university did not offer courses in conjunction with local FE providers: foundation years were taught on campus. Therefore the university delivery all took place from one of its three campuses, all of which were located in the city and are easily accessible from one another.

The university offered lifelong learning provision delivered in community facilities throughout the city by the Widening Participation team.

The university campus was large and modern. At the time of the research, building works were being carried out to upgrade campus infrastructure. New social spaces which had been built were non-alcoholic.

The main campus within but not in the middle of a city. This city had suffered from bad media coverage in the recent past, which staff felt gave students an unfair impression of the city. The city was diverse ethnically and socially, and was located in close proximity and with good transport links to other large cities.

### **Central Research University**

Recruitment was delivered both through the central administration and the faculties. There was a separate widening participation department. Faculty staff also carried out some widening participation activities, under their own initiative.

#### ***Promotional Activities***

University activity concentrated on two main areas of recruitment: campus visits and schools liaison activity. All of these activities are currently under review following the recruitment of a new manager who was tasked with ensuring the university's activities were worthwhile and represented value for money. Widening participation work was managed by a different staff member and was outside of this review.

#### ***Campus Visits***

There were several open days throughout the year, campus visits every week and applicant visit days for students who had been offered places, which were organised by departments.

Applicant visit days, open days and campus visits followed a similar format to those given by other universities with departmental and informational talks. Professionally trained student ambassadors as well as central and faculty-based university staff worked at these events. There was a student ambassadors scheme which was incentive-based with awards available to successful ambassadors.

Some of the faculties had a great deal of autonomy over their recruitment activities to the extent of running their own general open days, rather than just applicant visit days. The central team were keen not to interfere with this activity, although each faculty could liaise with a named recruitment officer if support was needed.

#### *School Liaison*

The central marketing team concentrated on the home, non-WP section of the market. The university received more requests for school visits than it could fulfil, so staff choose a sample of schools to visit. The selection decisions are made on the basis of whether the school had sent pupils to the university in the past and the UCAS point standing of the school, with high-achieving schools targeted. Lower-achieving schools were referred to the WP team.

School liaison activity consisted of talks to students on a number of topics; the approach taken was soft-sell. Activities were delivered nationally, with the local schools visited by the widening participation team.

#### *Widening Participation*

Widening participation activities were focused both on raising aspirations and attainment and are undertaken by both the central team and by individual faculties.

The widening participation students targeted followed government guidelines (low SES students, which are the university's key focus, looked after children, disabled students and first generation students) and their own objectives (black boys).

Activities for the gifted and talented cohorts took place via a central scheme which Central Research University engaged with alongside other prestigious universities. In addition more conventional outreach activities are undertaken by the WP team. School liaison work with local and lower-attaining schools was undertaken by this team.

Activities aimed at 'unlikely' students were also undertaken both by the centre and faculties. One of the faculties provided learning support and tuition for a local pupil

referral unit. The centre worked with student volunteers on a project aiming to improve the confidence and self-actualisation of sex workers in the region.

### *Price Factors*

All degree courses cost £3,000 per annum. Fees for the first part of a 2+2 degree, where students undertook two years of study in a partner college and joined the university in the second year of the degree at the university, were charged at a lower rate.

Means-tested bursaries were available which focused on giving larger amounts to students from less affluent backgrounds. The maximum bursary amount was less than £2,000 per annum. This was the largest single bursary amount of any of the case institutions. Students taking the 2+2 degree were also given bursaries.

The university raised money from alumni to provide additional scholarships. The criteria for allocating funds were decided upon by the donors but the alumni office did try to interact with them during the process to influence the criteria. There were two main types of scholarship available: a significant scholarship (around £2,000 per annum) which was distributed to students on top of their means-tested bursary if they were in receipt of state benefit and had other disadvantaged circumstances such as coming from a looked-after background. There was also a scholarship reserved for students studying in a particular faculty from certain minority ethnic backgrounds, which were associated with educational disadvantage.

### *Programme Characteristics*

This university had the most homogenous course provision in terms of qualification type. Aside from the 2+2 degree, courses were generally three-year degree courses.

Course development and curriculum offerings were updated in order to fit with staff interests and expertise and changed to influence recruitment, both in general terms, for example by changing a course title to make it 'sexier' and to recruit specific students.

Lifelong learning opportunities are available on campus via a separate programme of courses which are not linked to the university's degree provision. In some cases, credits gained from lifelong learning can be used towards a degree at the institution.

### *Method of Delivery*

The university's courses were all delivered on campus, with the exception of the first two years of the 2+2 degree which are delivered in partner colleges. The campus itself was not split-site.

The university prided itself on having an engaged student population which brought vibrancy to the campus. The university was located not far away from a nearby city, but transport links between the campus and surrounding areas were not good, meaning it was more self-contained.

Buildings were modern, and the campus also benefitted from a rural-like setting, with plenty of green spaces and natural features. Building works were on-going at the time of the research to update campus facilities, mainly focusing on social facilities.