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Theoretical Framework

At a national level, initiatives aimed at achieving justice in the English higher education admissions process have been commonplace for several decades (Schwartz 2004; Burke 2012). Most systems have policies and praxis to recognise that not all applicants have had access to the same cultural and educational advantages (Hoare & Johnston 2011). Some institutions adopt specific measures to 'correct' for perceived lack of opportunity; others assure candidates that their application will be considered holistically and in its appropriate wider context (Jones 2014).

At a local level, admissions processes are often devolved and subject to interpretation. Institutional autonomy is highly prized and guarded, so processes and decisions can potentially vary not only from university to university, but also from discipline to discipline. In such a context, the barriers to justice are potentially significant (Jones 2012).

While national higher education admissions policy comes under regular and close scrutiny (e.g. Kotzee & Martin 2013, Westkamp 2013), the process of assessing applications once they reach individual universities has been relatively under-explored (though see Burke 2012). This is an area of increasing importance in the current climate of the English system, which in 2012 witnessed one of the biggest hikes in the cost of university participation seen in the sector, with the annual fee for most undergraduate degree programme raised from £3,375 to £9,000. Using the contemporary English model as a case study, this paper examines how admissions praxis is affected by broader shifts toward competition, consumerism and deregulation. We do this by exploring how undergraduate applications are handled within one English university and by profiling the staff involved. Who are they? How did they get their role? What place does admissions work occupy in their working lives? How do they interpret key institutional and sector-wide agenda?

The job of admissions tutors at universities around the globe is changing (Camara & Kimmel, 2005). This paper sheds new light on the process, looking closely at how decisions are reached, and how those responsible reconcile their individual identities with the evolving, and often contradictory, requirements of their professional role. It has the potential to inform the sector, and contribute to debates about how the admissions process can embed social justice. With many nations moving toward more marketized funding models for higher education (Jones 2014), this is a critical time for established widening participation practices to be reconsidered, and for a more nuanced understanding the personnel involved to be developed. We explore how, in the English system, strains continue to arise between, on one hand, individual praxis, often implemented by staff whose personal identity is constructed in ways that align with widening participation agenda, and, on the other hand, structural imperatives, often driven by market forces and necessitating the filling places at all costs.

Methods

Rather than take a quantitative approach, as previous studies have, this research focuses on the nuances of the day-to-day practices and experiences of the individuals involved in higher education admissions in England. We selected one university, a member of the highly regarded Russell Group, which receives over 40,000 undergraduate applications each year. Three discipline areas within the university were randomly selected, and face-to-face interviews were conducted individually with up to five key personnel involved in each area's admissions process. Our overriding goal was to learn how staff deal with the myriad (and often contrary) pressures that influence admissions decision-making in the quick-turnaround context of a modern, large university. We wanted to understand better how competing agenda (such as widening participation, target culture, the need to maintain or increase academic standards, etc.) were negotiated at a local level.

A purposive sample was implemented to obtain a range of views from participants in different circumstances (i.e. both administrative and academic employees in both senior and more junior roles). University staff were approached by email, provided with details of the study and invited to participate. Those who accepted the invitation took part in one semi-structured interview lasting up to one hour.

The main ethical issues were informed consent, right to withdraw, confidentiality and inconvenience. To address these issues, participants were (a) provided with an information sheet which outlined the purpose of the research and given at least two weeks to consider whether they wished to take part; (b) advised that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason; and (c) given a pseudonym and assured that great care would be taken to disguise their institution and discipline area so that individuals could not be identified. All data was stored securely and analysis conducted in a private study area.

Findings and Conclusion

The findings presented here derive from a case study relating to three interviews conducted in one discipline area only. Interview data show broad agreement on several topics, including the (unacknowledged) importance of the role, but some disagreement about the value of widening participation, the mechanisms by which fairness in admissions is best achieved, and the value to society of affirmative action.

All of our data point to the admissions process being a growing area of localised contention in the higher education arena. Pressure develops because of the increasing number of (often contradictory) agenda bearing down on personnel. While the sector may champion diversity, the institution may privilege attainment. While decisions may historically have been made by staff with local knowledge and first-hand experience of disadvantage, more centralised processes increasingly frame the debate in alternative terms, with discourses of meritocracy replacing those of social justice.

The case study presented offers rich insights into the ways in which policy-level changes impact on everyday praxis. With the sector under pressure both to meet recruitment targets and maintain

academic standards, widening participation agenda are under renewed stress (Jones 2014). This is reflected in the tensions uncovered through our project. For those interviewed, a strong personal identity informs their mission to recruit a particular type of student (Zimdars 2010). However, the influence of admissions tutors whose personal identities are shaped by their own educational background, is becoming diminished.