

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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What Do Universities Mean By 'Fair' Admissions?

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: This set of two papers presents findings from a Nuffield Foundation funded study of the idea of 'fairness' in undergraduate admissions policy and practice. Both papers draw from a sample of universities offering highly selective degree programmes across England. The first paper will focus on access agreements and the second on in-depth interviews with Heads of Admissions. We draw on Boltanski & Thevenot's work on the ways in which social actors (individuals and/or organisations/institutions) develop criteria for the placement of people or things in 'orders of worth' (2006 [1992]) to select applicants within different institutional contexts (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010; SPA, 2012). We evidence the typically conservative nature of conceptualisations and operationalisations of 'fairness' and show how these ineluctably misrecognise the capitals (Burke & McManus, 2011) of prospective students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. In addition, we evidence the ways in which admissions processes work to justify selection decisions.

Paper: Widening access to higher education generally and to highly selective degree programmes in particular remains high on the policy agenda, with the Office for Students calling on higher-tariff HE providers to rapidly reduce the ratio of young entrants from high and low HE participation areas from approximately 5:1 currently, to 3:1 by 2024-25, and to 1:1 by 2038-39 (OfS 2019). Alongside this, there are continuing calls for universities to increase further the transparency of their undergraduate admissions practices, to address concerns about the potential influence of unconscious bias and other inadvertently discriminatory practices on admissions decision-making (Cameron, 2015), and to consider the threat to widening access posed by rising academic entry requirements (DBIS, OFFA & HEFCE, 2014; CoWA, 2016). There is growing appetite across the sector to improve policies and practices around fair admission, with for example more than half of all UK universities now using contextual data about applicants to inform admissions decisions (SPA, 2015). However, the scope for developing fairer admissions policies and practices is hindered by the currently limited evidence base relating to the conceptualisation and implementation of 'fairness' in admission policies and practices. These papers set out to build on the valuable body of prior research involving policy document analysis (Archer, 2007; McCaig and Adnett, 2009; Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010; Bowl and Hughes, 2013) and qualitative research within particular higher education institutions (Zimdars, 2010;

Burke & McManus, 2011; Rainford 2017) to explore how 'fair' admissions policies and practices are framed, justified and implemented by the institutions that make them.

The first of these papers entails an analysis of the access agreements of high tariff universities made publicly available on their websites (2018-2019). The second entails an analysis of in-depth interviews with Heads of Admissions in a sample of universities across England that offer undergraduate degree programmes identified as being highly academically selective and in high demand by applicants..

To guide our analysis of these data sources we draw on Boltanski and Thévenot's work on 'orders of worth' and 'repertoires of evaluation' (2006[1992]) which offers a framework for understanding the ways in which social actors (individuals and/or organisations/institutions) develop criteria for the placement of people or things in 'orders of worth', which recursively provide the cognitive scaffolding needed to understand and negotiate the rules of justification for situated action. The model was originally developed in relation to techniques for the systematic valuation of work, but represents a valuable sociological theory for understanding how social actors construct concepts in the abstract (fairness, equity, equality, merit, and so on) and develop criteria and procedures to apply these concepts in practice. The analytical power of the orders of worth approach is linked to the fact that actors' accounts of the decisions they make are conceptualised as entailing not only processes of sense-making but also as requiring an appeal to a particular mode of understanding the situation or 'moral order' (Thévenot, 1984). This suggests the possibility of developing an analysis of undergraduate admissions policies and practices through understanding the conditions under which decision-makers draw on certain generalised forms of the 'common good'.

Drawing on the 'orders of worth' theoretical framework, we take a dialogic, reflexive and constructively critical approach to the analysis of this data, with a view to better understand the basis of current framings of 'fair' admissions and to help universities develop genuinely fairer admissions strategies. We evidence the typically conservative nature of conceptualisations and operationalisations of 'fairness' and show how these ineluctably misrecognise the capitals (Burke & McManus, 2011) of prospective students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, doubly disadvantaging prospective students from those backgrounds in the competition for university places. We also evidence the ways in which admissions practices work to justify selection decisions made within different institutional contexts.

References

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