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Evaluating the fairness of admissions to UK higher education

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** The concern to promote fair access to higher education remains high on the UK policy agenda, with the 2016 Higher Education White Paper setting out challenging targets for increasing the numbers of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups entering UK universities generally, and highly selective degree programmes in particular (DBIS 2016). An essential ingredient of fair access is *fair admission*, commonly defined as equal chances of admission for equally well-qualified applicants regardless of social background. At present, the evidence regarding the fairness of current admissions decision-making practices is mixed. This paper exploits UCAS data to explore the question of fair admissions in definitive detail

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### Abstract

The concern to promote fair access to higher education remains high on the UK policy agenda, with the 2016 Higher Education White Paper setting out challenging targets for increasing the numbers of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups entering UK universities generally, and highly selective degree programmes in particular (DBIS 2016). An essential ingredient of fair access is *fair admission*, commonly defined as equal chances of admission for equally well-qualified applicants regardless of social background. At present, the evidence regarding the fairness of current admissions decision-making practices is mixed.

On the one hand, a body of academic research suggests that applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, state schools, and ethnic minority groups are less likely to be offered university places than applicants from more advantaged backgrounds, even when they have studied the same subjects and achieved the same grades in A-level and equivalent qualifications (Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009; Boliver 2013; Noden, Shiner and Modood 2014; Boliver 2015 and 2016). However, the findings

of these studies cannot be considered conclusive due to data limitations including the absence of important variables such as predicted (as opposed to achieved) A-level grades and a lack of detail on variables such as the specificity of applicants' chosen degree subjects. Moreover, contrary evidence published by UCAS (2015, 2017), using different variables, different modelling techniques, and more recent data, suggests that university offer rates by socioeconomic background and ethnicity are within expected margins of error once predicted A-level grades and specific degree programme applied to have been taken into account.

However, UCAS research is also far from conclusive, leaving a number of important questions unanswered. First, because the UCAS analysis is restricted to applicants studying for at least three A-levels and no other qualification type, and because it makes use of data on predicted rather than actual A-level grades, it remains unclear whether or not non-traditional applicants are systematically disadvantaged by disproportionately holding qualifications other than A-level, and/or by being more likely to have their grades under-predicted. Second, because the UCAS analysis is restricted to 18-year old applicants who are applying for immediate entry and have yet to sit their A-level or equivalent examinations, we know little about the comparative admissions chances of those who apply after age 18 – including advantaged students who have taken a gap year, and disadvantaged students who return to education as mature students – or about those who apply for deferred rather than immediate entry, or who apply on the basis of actual rather than predicted A-level grades. Third, because the UCAS analysis presents an overview for all courses, including a large number of 'recruiting' courses with very high offer rates, it is not clear whether the UCAS findings of no socioeconomic or ethnic biases in offer making hold for the most prestigious courses where offer rates are much lower than the sector average of 84%. Fourth, UCAS has modelled the data by socioeconomic background and ethnicity, but not by school type, raising questions about possible differences in offer rates controlling for predicted grades and chosen course when comparing applicants from independent schools, grammar schools, comprehensive schools and FE colleges.

UCAS data has been inaccessible to researchers for the past six years, making it impossible to provide firm answers to important questions about the fairness of university admissions in the UK. Fortunately, UCAS data has recently become accessible to researchers again and is available in much more detailed form than ever before. This paper exploits this newly available data to explore the question of fair admissions in definitive detail.

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