

Permeation or compartmentalisation? The impact of a radical new admissions route at an elite university

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Abstract

This paper explores the mutually shaping impacts of mainstream admissions norms and a new admissions route on each other in the context of the University of Oxford. The Astrophoria Foundation Year, which can lead to undergraduate admission for disadvantaged students with significantly lower grades than normally required, is potentially problematic for many of the normative positions salient in Oxford's pluralist and negotiated undergraduate admissions ecosystem. This paper explores the varying conceptualisations of and responses to it in the undergraduate and teaching ecosystem, which I conceptualise as ranging from permeation to compartmentalisation. Although the paper does not directly examine staff 'activism' in the traditional sense, the ideologically disruptive introduction of the scheme poses the chance to explore how radical action on admissions by one part of a university is engaged with and responded to by other elements of it, and the implications this may hold for progressive admissions practices more broadly.

Full paper

Instituted as part of the University of Oxford's 2020/21 – 2024/25 Access and Participation Plan, the Astrophoria Foundation Year (AFY) allows significantly disadvantaged students to undertake a preparatory 'year zero' through a specially designed course in their subject at Oxford. If participants pass the course at the required level, they are automatically offered a place on the cognate undergraduate course at Oxford. In recognition of their socioeconomic backgrounds, the entry requirements for the AFY are significantly lower than for its cognate undergraduate courses. However, this surfaces normative tensions within the Oxford admissions ecosystem. Mainstream undergraduate admissions are inflected by plural normative positionings regarding attainment, merit and fairness in relation to assessment, not all of which support the lowering of entry grades on contextual grounds (Penn, forthcoming), even in this non-standard instance. How norms of credentialist and contextualist meritocracy inflect the introduction and reception of schemes like the AFY are therefore fruitful grounds for exploration to understand responses to radical internal institutional action (if not traditional activism) in elite university settings.

The paper draws on a case study of the AFY's introduction at the University of Oxford to explore these issues, supplementing semi-structured interviews with direct observations and document analysis. I employ the concept of institutional habitus (byrd, 2019), specifically the relational institutional habitus

(Penn, 2024), combined with institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011) to conceptualise the relationships between institutional norms surrounding admissions and the AFY, and situated individuals' responses and strategies towards them. Institutional habitus can be understood as an institution's established and accepted modes of being and acting as related to its structural position within the field; relational institutional habitus refers to *management* of these plural and tensioned institutional habituses within a given organisation. Institutional work, conversely, is simply agentic but structurally limited action taken in relation to an institution. I argue that such responses can only be holistically understood through an analytic framework which incorporates both institutional habitus, including its relational aspects, and the practical enactment of institutional work.

Deploying this analytic framing, I suggest that strategies of institutional work range from *permeation*, through pragmatic waiting-and-seeing, into *compartmentalisation*. Actors engaging in strategies of permeation perceive the admissions principles and teaching strategies deployed in the AFY as compatible with their normative frameworks of fairness and merit and are open to varying degrees to the incorporation of these principles into wider admissions and teaching practice. Conversely, those favouring compartmentalisation perceive the AFY as threatening to or incompatible with mainstream admissions and teaching practices and aim to maintain strong distinctions between the AFY and the wider admissions and teaching ecosystem. I argue that the interaction between individual stakeholders' institutional habitus leanings, their structural positions within the university, and the relational institutional habitus specific to Oxford, help to explain when strategies of permeation or compartmentalisation are favoured and how they are deployed.

I then focus particularly on the concepts of compartmentalisation and permeation, exploring how participants who oppose or support further incorporation of the norms of the AFY conceptualise them and the meanings of their engagements in institutional work towards them. Following work conducted in organisational studies (Lok and de Rond, 2013; Raynard, Kodeih, and Greenwood, 2021), I discuss whether such compartmentalisation and permeation should be considered what Ansell, Boin, and Farjoun (2015) term 'dynamic conservatism'. I argue that compartmentalisation is simultaneously dynamically conservative and cautiously creative as a form of institutional work. It both constrains and enables, illustrating the paradox of radical change in elite institutions. Permeation, conversely, might be considered a less ambiguously *disruptive* form of institutional work, challenging mainstream admissions and teaching processes in their current forms. The coexistence of these differing responses demonstrates the paradoxical nature of action which seeks radical change in elite institutions. Different individuals within such institutions are able to enact different works of institutional work towards such change. The institution itself is caught between the need to satisfy norms which demand dynamic conservative maintenance, and norms which seek disruption, leading to fragmented and sometimes contradictory institutional actions. This contradiction highlights the tension of attempting to widen access in higher education contexts which are deeply embedded in meritocratic norms. The pace of institutional change in admissions and teaching, and the modes of institutional work employed, are inescapably inscribed with the uneasiness between normative frameworks which favour standardised meritocratic narratives, and those which afford room for contextual consideration of merit.

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