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Title Meritocracy and the University: What universities are looking for

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This presentation addresses the question: 'What is the aim of undergraduate university admission?'. It addresses the question in a comparative context by drawing on qualitative research with US and UK admissions professionals.

### **Methods:**

The empirical research is based on over 50 qualitative interviews with admissions professionals and academic selectors at highly selective universities in the US and the UK. Most of the interviews took place between 2011 and 2013. Full institutional ethics approval was granted prior to the commencement of the project.

### **Findings:**

The findings regarding the purpose of the university are grouped under five headings: The purpose of the university; Admitting "the best"; Making a contribution and using opportunities; Models of learning and Admitting groups, admitting individuals. In the SRHE presentation, I will focus on the last aspect of the purpose of university admissions: 'Admitting groups and admitting individuals' and I will also present an overview of the other aspects of the aims of admission.

In 2007, Mitchell Stevens published a book about admissions to a liberal arts college in the Northeastern USA. The title of the book is '*Creating a class*'. The title succinctly summarises a key aspect of the admissions process to private selective institutions: the result of the holistic admissions process, is creating a holistic class. In the words of an admissions professional from a big three (Harvard, Yale, Princeton) institution:

"we are putting a class together. This is about us...we will take the ones who will contribute to campus, we build a community...we are building a multicultural community – and we are supporting the engineering degree, the orchestra, varsity [athletics] and we are only able to take a fraction of the qualified candidates"

The intake of the admitted cohort should have certain features such as having a certain number of athletes, those with special talents, a mix of racial and geographic backgrounds and representation from other 'special interest' groups for admission. Because different parts of the university organisation represent different interest groups another big three selector observed:

'The admissions office gets marching orders from the president, the trustees, the faculty as well as from athletic coaches and the music department...these are the constituents you [admissions professionals] are answering to - they are setting policy'.

The multidimensional class that is admitted then has a range of characteristics that are conducive to students learning from each other and contributing a variety of qualities to the group but the class also meets organisation objective. In fact, one US respondent went further than her colleagues by stating that the purpose of admission for her big three ivy was:

'It is not about fairness to the students. We are putting a class together. And we have to answer to our board. We are putting the very best class together that meets our institutional objectives'

This idea of crafting a class rather met with lack of appreciation when English selectors learnt about it. During a 2009 visit to the US, the Head of an Oxbridge college remarked how:

"They [the Americans] don't even pretend it is about equal opportunities over here. They just say – these are our organisational objectives, these are our

stakeholders and then they admit them so it suits them! At least we are trying to be fair to the individual.”

In England, the admissions processes aim to select the best individuals, however defined. The idea of ‘creating a class’ is alien to English admissions professionals or academic staff. In fact, because of the importance of admitting a class in the US context, I asked English selectors to comment on this idea. Were they looking for some diversity in the admissions process? The answer was univocal as illustrated by this Oxbridge selector’s response:

“No. We like having diverse students but we, take the best people, and if they all happen to be female in a particular year then we take them all. So... we would never say oh we’ll drop this person and take this person because that would make a better mix. I mean we’d be very upset if they were all male...and we’d think there was something wrong with our recruitment process if they were all male, if they were all female, if they were all something, but we would never drop someone because we would say, we would say that was unfair to the to the candidate who was who had been dropped because, you know, that would be saying, candidate A is better than candidate B but we’ve taken candidate B to make, the numbers even...

And, just to be clear, the respondent confirmed that ‘each applicant is considered individually independent of the composition of the others’.

### **Summary: the aim of admission in the US and the UK**

To summarise, both, England and US institutions wished to admit ‘the best’. The key difference between the two countries was the breadth regarding the definition of ‘the best’. The US selectors considered the academic side as a necessary but insufficient admissions criterion. The selectors were interested in students who would make use of opportunities, contribute to the institution, have a good time, and go on to be successful in terms of wealth and leadership positions – and in terms of giving back to the institution. In contrast, English selectors had a narrower remit and their focus was trying to admit the best in terms ability and potential to succeed academically. Whether admissions ‘had worked’ was defined by success decades after graduation in the US context but earlier in terms of degree performance and employment in the English context. US selectors sought to ‘craft a class’ whereas UK selectors sought to admit individual students.

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