

Serial number 0111
Title Admissions staff and their values: how HE selectors reconcile personal identities, local needs and institutional demands
Session What is valued in higher education? Identity, equity and engagement in and around the neoliberal university (Lomer)
Submitter Dr. Steven Jones, Prof. Dave Hall, Dr. Jo Bragg

*SRHE International Conference on Research into Higher Education
Paper proposal*

For consideration in symposium:

What is valued in higher education? Identity, equity and engagement in and around the neoliberal university

Admissions staff and their values: how HE selectors reconcile personal identities, local needs and institutional demands

Abstract

The market turn in Higher Education changed the role of staff involved with admissions and recruitment. This paper focuses on the English system in the context of both a sharp rise in student fees and a tendency for the public university agenda and its associated social priorities, such as widening participation, to come up against more commercial priorities. Drawing on evidence from detailed interviews with admissions personnel, both academic and non-academic, across three disciplines within one higher-prestige university, we explore the notion of selectivity and the practice of selection. Tensions are revealed in relation to the traditional model of university admissions, as based on local knowledge and sensitivity towards underrepresented groups, and the purportedly merit-driven model, as driven by perceived market position. We report on the complex and often unexpected ways in which admissions staff reconcile their professed beliefs with their professional practices.

Outline

Initiatives aimed at achieving justice in the English higher education admissions process have been commonplace for several decades (Schwartz 2004; Burke 2013). Most systems have policies and praxis to recognise that not all applicants have had access to the same cultural and educational advantages (Leathwood 2004; Voigt 2007). 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). However, 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. Using the contemporary English model as a case study, we examine how admissions praxis is affected by broader shifts toward competition, consumerism and deregulation (Deem and Brehony 2005). We do this by exploring how undergraduate applications are handled within one English university and by profiling the staff involved (Fanghanal 2011; Fitzmaurice 2013). Who are they? How did they get their role? What place does admissions work occupy in their working lives? And how do they interpret key institutional and sector-wide agenda?

While previous studies have taken a quantitative approach to the outcomes of admissions processes (Boliver 2013), we focus more qualitatively on the day-to-day practices and experiences of individual staff. Following Watson's 'autobiographical identity work' approach (2009) and Sheridan's 'narratives of the professional self' (2013), we draw on testimonies from multiple university staff to build a picture of how policies are enacted (and values negotiated) at a local level. Like Clegg (2008), we understand professional identity not as a static property, but as a fluid expression of accumulated stimuli, from both within the workplace and beyond. We selected one university, a member of the 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. We took a phenomenographic approach (Marton 1986) to the interview data, qualitatively mapping the different ways in which professional experience was described and

personal identities and values implied. This approach has been used in previous research into Higher Education (Brown et al. 2016) and is discussed in detail by Tight (2016). 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.

Throughout all three of the case studies, we encountered staff who brought a deep personal investment to their work. For some, their narrative of social mobility made it natural to offer a helping hand to young people in a similar position. For others, it led to cynicism about the idea of positive discrimination. Merit-based rhetoric was common (Guinier 2016; Mountford Zimdars 2016), as was recourse to discourses about lower-attaining students from lower-attaining schools being unable to cope with the academic expectations of an elite institution. However, the main tension that emerged through the data was that between a personal instinct towards diversity and fairness versus one towards quality and competition. Integrity in admissions, and indeed a wider notion of social justice, was perceived to be under threat from an agenda that unproblematically positioned entry grades as an indicator of institutional quality (Marginson 2007).

Our findings suggest that that a more systematic, consistent and professionalised approach to admissions at selective universities would help to ensure that progress made in widening participation does not stall, or even reverse, in an increasingly metricised Higher Education landscape. Questions about where influence over admissions really lies – at institutional or discipline level? with academic or non-academic personnel? – formed a constant backdrop to our interviews. In all kinds of ways, personal identities were found to shape and rationalise professional activity (Nixon 1996). A commitment to fairness was evident throughout this study, but how ‘fairness’ was conceptualised differed markedly. Barriers were felt to arise in the shape of both management policy and its interpretation by colleagues. At such moments, admissions staff tended towards institutional language (Archer 2007; Hazelkorn 2015), seeking to locate equity at the point of admission and framing widening participation in terms of individual, rather than structural realignment (Burke, 2010). Within this perpetual renegotiation of personal and professional values, ‘big picture’ thinking about participation and social justice often became marginalised or muddied. The challenge for Higher Education is to create mechanisms by which the energy and dedication of admissions staff, like all staff (Cribb and Gewirtz 2013), can be harnessed and united behind approaches that speak to notions of the university as a public good (Giroux 2002; Barnett 1990) and promote genuine social mobility.

References

- Archer, L. (2007). "Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation." *Teaching in higher Education* 12.5-6 (2007): 635-653.
- Barnett, R. (1990). *The Idea of Higher Education*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Boliver, V. (2013). "How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?." *The British Journal of Sociology* 64.2: 344-364.
- Brown, K., Shephard, K., Warren, D., Hesson, G., & Fleming, J. (2016). Using phenomenography to build an understanding of how university people conceptualise their community-engaged activities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(4), 643-657.
- Burke, P. J. (2013). *The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation*. London: Routledge.
- Cribb, A., & Gewirtz, S. (2013). "The hollowed-out university? A critical analysis of changing institutional and academic norms in UK higher education." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34.3: 338-350.
- Deem, R., & Brehony, K. J. (2005). "Management as ideology: The case of 'new managerialism' in higher education." *Oxford review of education* 31.2: 217-235.
- Fanghanel, J. (2011). *Being an Academic*. London: Routledge.
- Fitzmaurice, M. (2013). "Constructing professional identity as a new academic: a moral endeavour." *Studies in Higher Education* 38.4: 613-622.
- Giroux, H. (2002). Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of Higher Education: The university as a democratic public sphere. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(4), 425-464.
- Guinier, L. (2016). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. Beacon Press.
- Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. New York: Springer.
- Jones, S. (2014). "Equity in the Higher Fees Era: a case study of English universities." *Revista de Docencia Universitaria*. 12(2), 61-76.

Leathwood, C. (2004). "A critique of institutional inequalities in higher education (or an alternative to hypocrisy for higher educational policy)." *Theory and Research in Education* 2.1: 31-48.

Marginson, S. (2007). The public/private divide in Higher Education: A global revision. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 307–333.

Marton, F. (1986) "Phenomenography—a research approach to investigating different understandings of reality." *Journal of thought* (1986): 28-49.

Mountford Zimdars, A. (2016). *Meritocracy and the University: Selective admission in England and the United States*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Nixon, J. (1996). "Professional identity and the restructuring of Higher Education". *Studies in Higher education* 21.1: 5-16.

Schwartz, S. (2004). "Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice." Nottingham: Admissions to Higher Education Review.
<http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf>

Sheridan, V. (2013). "A risky mingling: academic identity in relation to stories of the personal and professional self." *Reflective Practice* 14.4: 568-579.

Tight, M. (2016). Phenomenography: The development and application of an innovative research design in higher education research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(3), 319-338.

Voigt, K. (2007). Individual Choice and Unequal Participation in Higher Education. *Theory and Research in Education*, 5(1), 87-112.

Watson, T. (2009). Narrative, life story and manager identity: a case study in autobiographical identity work. *Human Relations* 62, 425-452.