University admission practices – UK

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Relevant country background

Education in the UK has recently undergone a great deal of structural reforms. Currently, it is jointly regulated by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). DfE was set up in May 2010 (taking over most of the responsibilities of the former Department for Children, Schools and Families) to organize education for children up to 19 years old. BIS regulates higher education.

Universities in the UK are publically funded (with two exceptions: the University of Buckingham and BPP University) and government funding, together with tuition fees, make up for the bulk of university funding. Until 1992, the universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were funded by the UK-wide Universities Funding Council. This Council was replaced by four regional funding bodies as a result of the devolution of higher education funding (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 [3]).[2] These funding bodies use various criteria related to teaching (e.g. number of students), research (e.g. research quality indicators) and related activities to allocate funds across universities (see e.g. [10] for a description of the practices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England). Funds are given as block grants and universities are free to use them in any way they see appropriate.

Tuition fees that universities charge are also regulated. In 1998, a uniform £1,000 cap was imposed for all countries. This tuition cap later evolved differently across the 4 countries. England has first increased its cap to £3,000 in 2004, and £9,000 in 2010.WalesandNorthern Ireland have followed similar practices. In contrast, Scotland first abolished tuition fees and replaced them with graduate endowments, a system of deferred tuition payment for graduates (see the Cubie report [8], and Scotland's Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) Act 2001 [5]). The graduate endowment system was replaced in 2008 by free higher education system for Scottish and EU students (Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Act 2008 [6]), however not for English students. the cap of £9,000 per year is applied to.

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[2] These regional bodies are the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC)(now known as Scottish Funding Council (SFC)). Universities in Northern Ireland receive funding from the Department for Employment and Learning of Northern Ireland (DELNI).

Student capacities at each university are regulated by the four regional funding bodies, and over-recruiting is penalized (see [13]).

Universities have full control over the design of academic programs. Both undergraduate programs (leading to bachelor degrees, with exceptions that in some ancient Scottish universities, 4-year undergraduate arts degree programs leading to master degrees) and postgraduate programs (for masters and doctoral degrees) are offered.

Admissions to full-time undergraduate programs are organized through a centralized platform, called the University College Admission Service (UCAS). For postgraduate programs, students apply directly to universities or colleges. The current article focuses on undergraduate admissions.

Summary box

Organization of higher education	Mostly publically funded universities.
Stated objectives of admissions policy	Universities set their own admission policies. Academic excellence and equity are the two most common criteria.
Who's in charge of admissions?	Universities and UCAS.
Admissions system in place since	1993
Available capacity	Each university decides the capacity under the regulation of corresponding governing bodies in each country (HEFCE, HEFCW, SHEFC, and DELNI).
Timing of enrolment	Enrolment takes place over several rounds that spread over the period from October to August.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	UCAS' website serves as a portal to provide students with information ("entry profile") on universities requirements, application procedure and student satisfaction. HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency provides curriculum-based data such as number of applicants and acceptance rates in the past.
Restrictions on preference expression	Applicants can apply to a maximum of 5 degree tracks (with some exceptions). They are not asked to rank their choices.
Matching procedure	The actual matching is largely decentralized but manages congestion by imposing constraints on applicants' behavior. In the main matching round, students submit their applications on UCAS' online platform. The applications are sent simultaneously to all of their choices, which then decide independently on admissions. Admissions can be unconditional or conditional on meeting some criteria in their final exams. Student must respond to offers by a deadline. They can only accept one offer, unless the offer is conditional, in which case, the student can also keep an "insurance" offer. The second and third rounds match unmatched students to remaining vacancies and allow for some reoptimization.
Priorities and quotas	Medical schools have quotas for domestic and international students. For the rest, universities have complete freedom to evaluate applicants (interviews are common).
Tie-breaking	Left to decide by each individual university/college.

Description of current practices

The current university application process for full-time undergraduate programs in the UK is coordinated centrally by the University College Admission Service (UCAS, www.ucas.com), an organization created in 1993 through the merger of several admissions councils. Actual admission decisions are made independently by individual universities. UCAS facilitates the matching of students to universities by reducing congestion and putting constraints on the timing of decisions.

The main matching round (which is called "Apply") takes place from mid-October to April. It starts with students filling in their applications online on UCAS' platform. Application forms are standardized. They require personal details, information on past education/employment, choice of curricula that the students would like to take (a choice is a curriculum at a particular university), a personal statement and reference letters. Students are not asked to rank their choices, but cannot specify more than five choices (special limits apply to medicine / dentistry / veterinary medicine / veterinary science, and to Oxford and Cambridge).

There are three deadlines for students to apply:

- 15 October – for students applying to medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine and veterinary science, and for students applying to Oxford or Cambridge.
- 15 January – for all other applications, except for some art and design curricula.
- 24 March – for some art and design curricula.

All applications are then sent to universities, which must send their decisions by to UCAS by May 10 at the very latest (UCAS recommends that universities send their decisions by March 31). Universities reach their decisions independently.

There are four types of decisions that universities can send: conditional offer, unconditional offer, withdrawn application, and unsuccessful application. "Conditional offer" means applicants can only be admitted if they meet the conditions specified by the university. The typical conditions are to achieve specific UCAS tariff points, a system of assigning points to qualifications used for higher education admissions, or grades in a required subject, or a degree by the end of August. "Unconditional offer" means that the university accepts the student's applications without conditions. Withdrawn application can be used by both students and universities, for reasons such as absence in interviews. Unsuccessful application means the university or college rejected the student's application. Universities can make more offers than their capacity in anticipation that not all offers will be taken. Sometimes a university will inform some students that they are on a waiting list, although this is not the official part of the UCAS service.

Students who have received offers must reply to the offers within a certain interval that depends on the time at which they received the offer. For each offer, students have three options: firm acceptance, insurance acceptance and decline. "Firm acceptance" means that the student accepts the offer firmly; he/she can only accept one offer firmly. If the offer that the student firmly accepted is a conditional offer, he/she can accept one other offer as insurance. All other offers must be declined. Thus four combinations of positive offers are possible: (i) unconditional firm (compulsory to decline all other offers), (ii) conditional firm (the student is determined to try to achieve the conditional offer and not willing to take any other choice), (iii) conditional firm and conditional insurance, and (iv) conditional firm and unconditional insurance.

The second round (called "Extra") takes place from the end of February till early July. Students who have no offers or declined all offers received in the main round can apply for programs with vacancies

remaining. They are allowed to apply to one program at a time (and wait for the answer before applying to another one). Universities decide on Extra applications on an ongoing basis.

To finalize a conditional offer, students need to send the results of their qualifications or requested subject to the university that accepted them conditionally. This can be done through UCAS[3] or by students themselves. Three scenarios are possible: (1) If the results meet the conditions, then the conditional offer can be finalized; (2) if the results do not meet the conditions of any offer, the student can enter a third round called Clearing[4] for the remaining vacancies; (3) if the results not only meet but exceed the conditions of the student's firm choice, this student has the option to search for a better match before finalizing the conditional offer. This is done through the so-called "adjustment process." In that case, students have five days to contact directly the program in which they are interested to see if they can be admitted. The original conditional firm choice is kept during that time.[5]

Recent policy change

There have been recent policy changes in the UK aimed at tackling the increasing demand for higher education and the widening participation rates in higher education (between private and public schools, and between children from low income households and high income households).

Among the four countries, England has been the most active on this front. The policy changes focus mostly on tuition fees, funding, and student number control, but not so much on the admission process itself.

One set of changes follows the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (known as the Browne Review) [10]. As a result, tuition fee caps were increased to £9,000 per year, student loans were generalized (with repayment conditional on future income) and a new National Scholarship program to attract bright students low income households was created.[6] These changes will apply as of academic year 2012-13.

The other major change concerns university capacities. Capacity controls for full-time undergraduate programs have been in place since 2009. The 2011 white paper [8] from the Department of Business Innovation and Skills proposed to assign capacities based on quality and cost-effectiveness. The reform will introduce the "core and margin model", in which universities compete for capacities outside their core allocations, and core capacities reduce yearly. Competition for extra capacities will be awarded to providers who combine good quality education at low cost (at or below £7,500). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has already implemented this model for year 2012-2013.[7

Perceived issues

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[3] UCAS help students to send the results of some qualifications, for the list of qualifications please refer to UCAS website http://www.ucas.ac.uk/students/results/examresults

[4] For more details on Clearing, refer to http://www.ucas.ac.uk/students/nextsteps/clearing/

[5] For more details on Adjustment please refer to http://www.ucas.ac.uk/students/nextsteps/adjustment/

[6] For more information on the National Scholarship Program, see: http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/n/11-730-national-scholarship-programme-year-one

[7] For more details on how HEFCE allocates the seats, refer to its publication: Student number controls for 2012-13 Invitation to bid for student places [13]. The is no bidding mechanism involved, but instead the allocation is based on the assessment of three criteria, namely demand, quality and tuition fee by a panel of both internal and external members. For a non-technical summary of student number control please see [12].

The recent reforms were not devoid of debates and concerns. In particular, there are still concerns that the increased tuition fees, despite the student loans and the National Scholarship Program further decrease participation from low income students into higher education.

As far as admissions are concerned, UCAS has recently completed a thorough review of the university admission process (see [7]). The review recommends several improvements to provide better support for applicants. It also recommends several changes that will increase students' flexibility. For example, the current system only allows one personal statement. In the future, students will be able to tailor some sections of the statement to the programs to which they apply.

One key issue that was discussed concerned the timing of the admission procedure. The current system is a pre-results application system: it requires students to apply to universities before they know their final grades in secondary schools. Changing to a post-results application system would seem desirable, since students would then be more informed about their own qualification and will therefore be able to apply to institutions where they are more likely to be admitted. However this post-results system is problematic: such a system would need to clear in an untenably short period of time, students may focus more on their grades than their interests when applying, and delayed applications may increase the stress of students in the final year. UCAS has postponed such a change for now.

Another aspect of scheduling that received attention in the review concerns the timing of university decisions. Currently, universities may send offers to students at different dates, even for the same program. This may create difficulties for less-informed students. Students may want to wait longer for their desired offers, but deferring their response to existing offers will decrease their choices if later on they enter the Extra round (recall that the Extra round overlaps partially with the main matching round, therefore if the students wait for too long before responding, there will be less programs available at the Extra round if they are unfortunately unmatched in the main round). On the other hand, universities highly value the flexibility that the system currently gives them.

Existing data

[1] University College Admission Service (UCAS) has collected data from 1996 to 2010, with information ranging from details of all applicants to full-time undergraduate programs to the popularity of courses. More information please refer to: http://www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/

[2] Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects sector-wised data for higher education institutions in UK, including statistics on students demography, performance indicators for new first-year students, drop-out rates etc. More information please refer to: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/

Legal texts

[3] Further and Higher Education Act 1992, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents

[4] Higher Education Act 2004, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/contents

[5] Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2001/6/pdfs/asp_20010006_en.pdf

[6] Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Act 2008,
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2008/3/contents

Other resources and references

[7] Admission Process Review, Findings and Recommendations, UCAS, 2012,

http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/apr-findings-and-recommendations.pdf

[8] The Cubie Report, Scottish Parliament. Information Centre, 2000

[9] Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System by Department for Business, Innovation and Skills http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/

[10] Guide to Funding: How HEFCE allocates its funds, 2010

[11] The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010,
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/

[12] Paul Bolton, HE in England from 2012: Student numbers, 2012

[13] Student number controls for 2012-13 Invitation to bid for student places, HEFCE, 2011,
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2011/201130/11_30.pdf

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), University admission practices – Germany.

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), Matching practices for universities – Ukraine.

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), University admission practices – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – UK.

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 9 Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), University admission practices – Belgium.

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), University admissions practices – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 16 Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), Matching practices in secondary schools – France.

MiP Country Profile 17 Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain.

MiP Country Profile 18 Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia.

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland.

MiP Country Profile 20 Terrier, Camille (2014), Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France.

MiP Country Profile 21 Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany

MiP Country Profile 22 Cantillon, Estelle (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).