**The Challenge of Fair Admissions**

The Challenge of Fair Admissions - and a challenge it certainly is! But what is meant by ‘fair’? One person’s ‘fair access’ is the denial of a place to someone else. Fairness is not absolute. My ‘fair’ will be someone else’s ‘unfair’.

I want to ask whether the current laudable Widening Participation initiatives go far enough. Are ALL universities doing enough to engage youngsters from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds?

But who am I, to speak to such an august company of people, representatives almost exclusively from the university sector and its associated organisations?

I am head of Northampton School for Boys, a state comprehensive Teaching School with a sixth form of over 400, some 190 of whom each year go to university. Last year, I was President of the Association of School and College Leaders - an organisation that represents 18 000 heads, principals and other senior leaders in both the state and independent sectors.

But I am here to represent my students - and hopefully the students of all schools - state and independent.

We Heads are all passionate about our students, not as numbers; not as targets to fill quotas; but as young people. We KNOW our students. We have nurtured them for seven years; through good times and bad. We know their capabilities. We know their potential.

We want to help them get on the right course at the right university.

But let me first applaud the efforts to widen participation. It is GOOD that increased numbers are going to university overall. It is GOOD to hear from UCAS last month that in terms of social mobility, the increases in university admissions are greater for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. And it is GOOD to hear only this weekend that some universities - Exeter, Bristol, Aston and UCL - are increasing their admissions numbers by over 30%. Expansion is good!

But is there a price to pay? Is there a temptation to focus on the popular, not on the nation’s needs? Do universities offer only subjects that are cheap to deliver? And what are the consequences for universities unable to attract sufficient students?

It is a given that we ALL have to work harder to encourage able youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds to aspire to university. In schools, we must ensure that youngsters choose the right subjects for GCSE, and again for A. level. Our students are entitled to quality advice and - as emphasised in the recent HEFCE report - guidance needs to begin in Primary schools. It is here that aspiration needs to be nurtured - and universities can help.

We need to make sure that a youngster’s hopes and aspirations are not dashed by inappropriate choice of subjects.

And - politicians please note - in we need rather more intelligent accountability measures than, for instance, how many disadvantaged students leave my school for Oxbridge or Russell Group universities.

In schools, we must give honest and accurate predictions of likely A. level performance. We need to give wise counsel on the importance of the Personal Statement so universities have a better understanding of you, the person. And we must write honest references on the potential of our students; use **our** knowledge to help **you** come to your decisions on offers.

And this is where you come in!

We need absolute clarity on what you mean by ‘facilitating subjects’. We need honesty about which subjects are not just ‘acceptable’ for a degree course, but which combinations are ‘preferred’ and more likely to lead to an offer. There must be no ‘secret garden’ of unwritten criteria - (such as the English department not keen on those doing Drama at A. level… but doesn’t say so!) Do not leave an outstanding student with no offers because no-one was honest enough to tell him or her the criteria.

But apart from good academic backgrounds, just what DO you want? We get confused!

Do you want well-rounded individuals who can converse confidently on a range of topics, and who have taken full advantage of a host of experiences beyond the curriculum? Or do you want the ‘nerd’ with an abiding passion for … well, whatever?

My school has a distinct ethos. We engage students by providing a huge range of activities in our co-curriculum. We use sport, music, drama, dance, outdoor and residential education to develop character and promote self-esteem.

But then at a recent university admissions seminar, I hear an admissions tutor say students shouldn’t waste their time on Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes, but devote themselves to their chosen undergraduate subject. (One university off the list!)

Is there a bias towards the independent sector ... or against it? This is of HUGE interest to newspaper editors. Individual stories are turned into unhelpful generalisations and headlines. There is evidence that state-educated students gain better degree classes than those from the independent sector with the same A. level grades. But do such studies inform ‘fair admissions’?

And so to the personal statement. How important is it? I hear admissions tutors cry out: “Please - no more passion for physics” or whatever - and I understand!! But I am disturbed when I hear an admissions tutor say - in a public forum - that he doesn’t even read it, believing such statements to be ‘cut and pasted from websites’! I won’t be sending students to HIS university, either - another off the list!

Yet more sensitive universities say they go back to the personal statement and look at it carefully if a student misses their offer by a single grade. They presumably, rather sensibly, would prefer to fill a place with a student who actually wants to **be** there rather than import someone with a better grade who really wants to go somewhere else!

(As an aside - thinking of results day - could I also please urge that universities and UCAS agree to schools being informed of university decisions at the same time as - or preferably before - the students? This day is huge for us and our students. We have to give immediate support - advice, tea, sympathy and Kleenex tissues. We need to be prepared, not rely on students telling us their bad news!)

And in your musings on fairness, do you focus on past attainments, or future predicted performance? How important are GCSE grades - and subjects. And how important are AS grades? You won’t have them much longer! Will school A level predictions be valued, or dismissed - as by some - as hopelessly inaccurate and overly optimistic - especially in state schools!

In a recent small-scale piece of research responded to by all but one of the Russell Group of universities, only one university felt that GCSE was a better predictor of A level grades than were AS levels. In fact most used the AS scores in some way - even if only to compare with teacher predictions and to look in the school reference for any explanation of apparent discrepancies.

That seems an intelligent use of data.

But some will be aware of my concerns regarding the use of Contextual Data and Factors when deciding on the fair allocation of places.

Only about a third of universities use such data, and in a variety of ways. I am heartened that the SPA report: “Contextualised Admissions - Examining the Evidence” emphasises the need to - and I quote - ‘ensure transparency and be clear about what constitutes good practice … for the benefit of applicants’.

SPA recommends that universities need to ‘share data to identify conclusions about the relationship between prior attainment, degree performance, and practices that ‘add value’ for educationally disadvantaged students’.

I was pleased to hear one prestigious university say not so much how these factors affect to whom offers are made, but rather - once admitted - how these students were given targeted support - not just financial, but social too. And helped to find placements on internships since they would not have contacts in medicine, accountancy or legal chambers.

As to the factors themselves, I understand postcode, but what is meant by ‘school type’? Independent? State? Grammar? Academy? And how does this affect offers? Are Independent students assumed to be advantaged? Many are not. What about those on scholarships?

And what is meant by ‘school quality’? Is it fair to students and schools if those at ‘successful’ institutions are penalised and denied access to HE, their places going to those attending a less-well-regarded school?

How would **YOUR** university feel if KPMG gave employment to students who had the ‘disadvantage’ of attending a less well regarded university than your own? Would you feel that was ‘fair’ to **your** students?

So use contextual data if you have to - but use them intelligently - and transparently.

And maybe disadvantaged students who **are** ‘flagged’ - and our references should be of enormous benefit here - could benefit from differentiated offers? That will really stir things up! I remember the press reaction when one prestigious university ‘tweaked’ their offers. Parents happy with a system that rewarded the advantages from which their own children benefit, were furious that others might be given an alternative advantage!

I recognise that seeking to make an unfair life more fair will always be met with opposition. Is social engineering, however, the province of admissions tutors?

So what do I think universities **should** do to make things more fair?

The HEFCE report recommends that university outreach work **must** be progressive, sustained, and properly resourced. It must start in primary schools, and be sustained throughout secondary education.

It is not enough to do a few visits to nice sixth forms, the odd lecture, and involve a couple of fresher students to ‘sell’ your university.

Universities need to work together in a region. They need to build a planned programme, perhaps with Teaching Schools as the hubs. They need to address mature students too, through major employers. They need to build links with the local community.

Sir Michael Wilshaw in a speech to the North of England Conference recently highlighted a city with one of the poorest records of school student attainment in which there were two highly regarded universities? How had they and their education departments - he asked - stood by and allowed local schools to decline to such an extent, with little apparent determination to step in and help?

Universities have it in their power to create a win-win-win situation. You could improve the quality of schools in your region, encourage youngsters to aspire to university, and forge links which would enhance your reputation locally and nationally.

At a SPA seminar some months ago, I was appalled to hear a delegate dismiss ‘state schools on a line from Liverpool to Hull’ as ‘rubbish’.

Well I say to that person now - and I say to you all - that there is a solution. Liverpool has - to my knowledge - at least 3 universities; probably over 40 000 undergraduates. Why not make a commitment to help - to engage with schools and school pupils in that great city?

Why not make it an entry requirement to YOUR university that every student will commit to give half a day a week for just one term of your degree course to supporting local schools? Most of my pupils would be attracted to a university making such a commitment!

That support could be helping literacy by listening to children read, or helping hard pressed primary teachers with sport and PE. Or languages, drama, or musical expertise in secondary schools?

Yes - it would need to be structured. Yes - it would need to be funded. And yes - it might not be entirely ‘fair’ to every school student in the land, but it could and would TRANSFORM literacy and attainment in our schools.

I estimate that EVERY school in the country could have 10 university students every single week of the year.

It would create a positive attitude in the most disadvantaged youngsters to universities. It would enhance social mobility. It would improve attainment. And it would improve the quality of students you attract.

(And yes - I expect it would help recruitment into our profession too, as students experienced the excitement of working with youngsters!)

So, to sum up, we want university admissions to be fair - based on merit.

We want universities to commit to supporting schools and school structures in your region, not just with lectures and talks on finance and student life, but with sustained activity in our schools.

We want clarity on subject and course choice to help with our guidance programmes.

We want intelligent use of contextual data, so that disadvantaged youngsters feel valued, not patronised.

We want students to be offered places on merit for what they can bring to a university, and for it not to depend on which school they attend.

We want our references treated as a valuable resource in identifying disadvantaged students with outstanding potential - far better than any contextual data - and to make differentiated offers where appropriate.

We want our predicted grades to be valued as honest professional assessments of each student’s potential.

We want the care with which our students construct a personal statement to be valued.

And we want our students to make the right decision as to whether university is appropriate, whether the course will take them on the next stage of their learning journey, and which universities are best suited to them and their aspirations.

I know that many universities are already doing at least some of these things. It is important to maintain and increase the momentum so that we can be sure that universities are making ‘fair’ decisions when offering places to our students.

Sir Michael Griffiths

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