

Introduction

The aim of the Fair Enough? project was to improve the offer decisions made by higher education admissions tutors and administrators by making the admissions process more transparent and informed by objective criteria related to academic success. Implicit within the aim was the goal of widening participation to increase the number of successful applications from young people from social classes IIIIM, IV and V by identifying those who have the ability to succeed but whose potential would otherwise be missed.

The project has resulted in the identification of objective criteria linked to success on courses in fifteen different subject disciplines at six higher education institutions across England. Four criteria and their associated behaviours were identified that were common across courses and HEIs. The generally described common criteria were:

- self organised;
- works well independently;
- motivated to learn; and
- interested in subject area.

Another relatively common criterion was that of 'ability to work with others'.

All courses identified 'intellectual skills' as being linked to student success. The behaviours within this criterion heading differed between courses.

Some courses also identified particular criteria and behaviours associated with mathematical, English and IT ability.

Implementation of the project criteria for the 2002 admissions round has highlighted the potential for the information derived from the project to be used in many ways that have gone beyond the original project objectives. This includes the use of the criteria to identify borderline applicants who have the potential to benefit from undergraduate study. The information is also thought to be useful at course level in the identification of those applicants who can be accepted at confirmation with lower exam attainment than the offer, and at Clearing in deciding who to accept without

having access to the UCAS form. Additionally, the project criteria are being used in some cases in the development of a framework for interview questions and for recording interview performance for non-traditional applicants.

The project criteria are also being used across institutions in the development of UCAS Entry Profiles, providing further transparency for the admissions decision making process. Some HEIs are disseminating the criteria to partner schools and further education institutions in order to develop potential applicants and their referees so that they can provide evidence required against the criteria. One HEI has used the criteria in the development of an admissions pack for academic departments. Another has appointed a member of staff to investigate the potential of psychometric testing as a means of supplementing information derived from the criteria. Some institutions are using the criteria as a basis for the training of admissions interviewers. Their potential as a framework for information to be sought from supplementary application forms and for assessing these has also been identified.

The original project remit appeared to particularly fit the needs of selecting courses. In the event, there were only four such courses involved in the study. These courses tend to attract applicants with high predicted grades. A major finding has been that the project criteria tend to be met consistently by such candidates and are, therefore, not useful in discriminating between them. They appear to be more useful in identifying those borderline applicants with the potential to succeed. The possibility of using the project criteria, together with information on school performance, to identify applicants from educationally deprived backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education is being investigated further for some of these courses. Some courses are hoping to interview such applicants using the project criteria.

The Fair Enough? project is just a beginning. Courses and HEIs plan to use the ideas they have developed as a result of project involvement in the future. There is a need to monitor, evaluate and disseminate the outcomes of these plans.

Recommendations to higher education institutions

Courses that are selecting

It is recommended that selecting courses at HEIs should:

- use the course related Fair Enough? criteria for borderline applications to identify those that are likely to be successful at undergraduate level;
- use school performance data to identify those applicants with relative educational disadvantage, whose potential to succeed may otherwise be unidentified;
- use Fair Enough? criteria to elicit evidence of potential to succeed from UCAS forms, interviews and supplementary application forms for those applicants identified as experiencing educational disadvantage;
- consider making offers to applicants identified as having experienced educational disadvantage and having the potential to succeed in line with their predicted grades;
- encourage applications from applicants with vocational qualifications; and
- disseminate information on admissions criteria and procedures, including Entry Profiles.

Courses that are recruiting/ selecting

- For these courses it is recommended that the Fair Enough? criteria are used, together with school performance data, to decide on whether applicants that are on the borderline or would be rejected should be made offers. Applicants should be made offers that are in line with their predicted grades.
- Fair Enough? criteria should be used at confirmation to decide on which applicants who have not achieved offer grades should be accepted.

Courses that are recruiting

- For these courses it is recommended that Fair Enough? criteria are used to identify applicants who are likely to be successful at undergraduate studies but do not achieve the threshold predicted grade. Institutions should consider making offers to these applicants in line with their predicted grades.
- The undergraduate success related Fair Enough? criteria could also be used at confirmation as the basis of the acceptance decision for applicants not achieving their offer grades.
- Fair Enough? criteria should be used at Clearing, in interviews over the telephone and in person to help in the decision on which applicants should be accepted onto courses.

The predictive validity of project criteria

- The project has identified student characteristics that lecturers associate with successful performance. A more quantitative examination of the relationship of these attributes to student success at undergraduate level requires research. This could be carried out at institutional level, and disseminated at regional and national levels.

Monitoring of student progress

- The progress of students accepted onto courses using the project criteria needs to be monitored, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, to identify issues requiring action at admissions or course teaching levels.

Staff development issues

The following issues should be considered as part of institutional staff development programmes:

- dissemination of good practice on fair admissions in a general sense within HEIs;
- providing new staff with admissions roles with the skills and knowledge to implement fair admissions values, including appropriate selection and interview techniques;
- providing admissions staff with the skills to use the wider range of information that a fair admissions focus requires in making offer decisions;
- developing staff to use fair admissions criteria as a basis for the development of the curriculum, and to support the skills development of students once they have enrolled on courses; and
- using external consultants for development purposes where necessary.

Recommendations for national and regional action

Fair admissions and the future funding of Widening Participation

- It is recommended that Partnerships for Progression (P4P) regional lead contacts be encouraged to incorporate the dissemination and development of good practice in fair admissions into their regional strategies.

Disseminating the learning from the project

- It is recommended that contact with academic admissions staff be made through the Learning and Teaching Subject Networks with the possibility that academic staff involved with the project will become its ambassadors to colleagues in their subject disciplines.

Debating the role of exam attainment at admissions

- There is a need to open up the debate on the role of exam attainment in admissions decisions and the use of differential offers at a subject level since it is clear that entry qualifications are used by academic staff to gauge the quality of courses in their subjects at other HEIs. There may be a role for the Learning and Teaching Subject Networks here.

Developing guidance for applicants and referees

- The higher education (HE) representative bodies, as well as UCAS, should consider the development of national guidance to applicants and referees on how to use the project criteria to provide evidence through the personal statements and references required for application to HE.

Legal considerations

- The wider legal implications of fair admissions practices will need to be considered before some HEIs will feel confident in taking forward the practices identified in this report.

Further research

The project has highlighted the following areas where additional research would be useful:

- cost benefit analysis of the use of fair admissions;
- applicants' decision making strategies as they go through the UCAS process;
- researching the use made of the Fair Enough? project criteria by UCAS applicants and their referees.

The six participating higher education institutions in the Fair Enough? project are as follows:

Kingston University
The University of Leeds
University of Manchester
St Mary's College
University of Southampton
University of Sussex



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ISBN 1 84036 092 5

January 2003

The full report can be viewed and downloaded from the Universities UK website at: www.UniversitiesUK.ac.uk/fairenough



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Fair Enough?

Wider access to university by identifying potential to succeed

