The Transition from Vocational to Higher Education from the Perspective of Higher Education Admission Staff

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Introduction

Internationally there are ongoing attempts to increase both the participation rate in Higher Education (HE) and to widen access to underrepresented groups. On the part of the individual this pressure emanates from a growing realization of the importance of a university level education to access well paid, interesting jobs. From a government perspective, investment in increasing the number of students entering HE is fuelled by the belief that this will increase productivity and economic growth, while also attracting inward foreign investment by increasing the pool of skilled labour (Brown et al., 2011).

For example, in the UK context a central tenet of New Labour's social policy was that economic efficiency and social justice run together, a notion that seems unchanged in the policies of the current Coalition government. Employees are construed as actors striving to make themselves marketable in a more flexible labour market:

> What all this means is not that the role of Government, of the collective, of the services of the State is redundant; but changed. The rule now is not to interfere with the necessary flexibility an employer requires to operate successfully in a highly fluid changing

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economic market. It is to equip the employee to survive, prosper and develop in such a market, to give them the flexibility to be able to choose a wide range of jobs and to fit family and work/life together (Blair, 2007).

The state's role is thereby reconceptualised primarily as ensuring adequate opportunities for individuals to develop human capital rather than, say, regulating the labour market. Such a policy vision is predicated on a belief that:

1. The development of more diverse educational opportunities beyond the age of 16 will increase the participation rate of learners beyond compulsory schooling, a decisive pre-condition for increasing and widening participation in HE (see for instance Education and Employment Committee, 2001, p. 33);
2. Any increase in educational participation and attainment will produce both individual and social returns on investment in further education and training.

However, such expansion implies the need to support the progress of those from pre-HE learning pathways that have not supplied a large number of HE students in the past, for example those in vocational and education training pathways. The following extract from the UK's Report of the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (AHESG), led by Steven Schwartz, pin-points the connection between the UK government's goal of increasing the proportion of hitherto underrepresented groups in vocational learning and then supporting their progression into HE with the admissions processes adapting to take this connection into account.

> … while admissions processes today continue to benefit from careful planning and management, there is a need to ensure that they respond appropriately to a system of mass participation by a diverse pool of applicants entering HE via a variety of routes. This need is particularly pressing in view of the Government's commitment to expanding the provision of vocational learning pathways and to increasing and widening participation in HE (AHESG, 2004, p. 19).

Against this background, this paper analyses the practice of admissions at a number of HE institutions in the UK, focusing primarily on less selective institutions and applicants with vocational learning backgrounds. In order to set the scene, some historical background is needed.

Prior to the 1992 Education Act, UK HE was arranged into Universities on the one hand and Polytechnics and a variety of Colleges of Higher Education on the other. This so-called binary divide was abolished by the 1992 Act with Polytechnics and increasingly Colleges of Higher Education adopting the title of University. Those HE institutions that were universities prior to 1992 are termed pre-92 Univer-

sities and are typically more selective in terms of recruitment than those that became universities following the 1992 Act, the post-92 Universities. Such institutions are in the front-line of the push to widen participation in HE by, *inter alia,* admitting sizable numbers of students with vocational qualifications (Hoelscher et al., 2008). Therefore, these institutions are of particular interest if one aims at achieving what the Schwartz Report calls for, namely a better understanding of the important role of admissions processes in the interplay between vocational pathways leading to HE and the aim of widening participation.

Background – the Politics of Widening Participation

The debate on widening participation in HE in relation to Vocational Education and Training (VET), needs to consider two issues. First, educational participation beyond the compulsory school age has increased in the UK since 1945, with a massive increase in participation in full-time provision between 1985 and 1994 (Hayward, 2006; Hayward et al., 2004, 2005, 2006). The increase can partly be attributed to the increased availability of Level 3 vocationally-oriented qualifications aimed at 16-year olds. Such qualifications are increasingly marketed as providing a means for progressing into HE, so constituting an important component of attempts to widen participation. Expansion of post-compulsory participation in education was seen as a decisive pre-condition for widening participation in HE (see for instance Education and Employment Committee, 2001, p. 33 and HEFCE, 2000). However, while such expansion might be a necessary condition for increasing participation in HE, empirical studies suggest that it is not in itself sufficient. For instance, the empirical study of 13 countries by Blossfeld and Shavit (1991) comprehensively negates the thesis which assumes 'that educational expansion results in greater equality of educational opportunity' (p. 29). In terms of access to HE, despite the overall expansion of the sector, the incremental growth in student numbers remains greatest for middle class students holding traditional academic, GCE A-level qualifications (Ball, 2003; cf. also Sutton Trust, 2005).

The second issue is that the increase in participation in post-compulsory education in recent decades suggests that the expansionist aims have been achieved in secondary education to a certain degree, partly by a substantial increase in participation in vocationally-oriented programmes. However, an US study of educational participation concludes that: 'vocational education at the secondary level … does inhibit students' chances of continuing on to college and as such, it probably inhibits their chances of reaching the professions and most prestigious occupations'

(Arum and Shavit, 1993, p. 20). The same conclusion was reached in a more recent study of 15 countries (see Shavit et al., 2007). Furthermore, investigations into the educational value of many of these qualifications in terms of their currency for further progression have concluded that they de facto only offer a 'mirage of wider opportunities' (Pugsley, 2004, p. 28; see also Connor et al., 2006; Hayward and Williams, forthcoming; Vickers and Bekhradnia, 2007; Wilde and Hoelscher, 2007; Wolf, 2011). Instead, each wave of new vocationally-oriented qualifications has contributed to the overall tendency toward educational credentialism.

Nonetheless, within current UK policy a key lever for raising the perceived value of vocational qualifications is to ensure that they provide a means for progressing into, and providing a solid basis for study in HE. Typically this policy challenge is framed in terms of the acceptability of vocational qualifications to HE with the social perception of vocational qualifications by young people and their families being based, in part, on the signals that emanate from the HE sector (Pugsley, 2004).

However, little is known about the transition into and progression within HE of those holding vocational qualifications. Therefore it seems timely to investigate whether growing participation in VET has resulted in increasing participation of people with a vocational background in HE in the UK and whether this has, in turn, contributed to widening participation in terms of people from socio-economic backgrounds and/or regions that had tended not to take part in HE before. Existing studies in this area (cf. for instance, Ainley, 1999; Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Gokulsing et al., 1996) are too old to provide an overview of the current situation.

This paper utilises data from the project *Degrees of Success: The transition between vocational education and training and higher education* which investigated whether growing participation in VET has resulted in increasing participation and successful progression, of people with a vocational background in HE. It draws on an innovative combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop a deeper understanding of issues significant for students who are making the transition between VET and HE, and relevant for the wider policy debate on widening participation in HE.

Degrees of Success used the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) undergraduate dataset for 2003/04, matched with corresponding UCAS[1] applications dataset, for the quantitative analysis of transition patterns from VET to HE. The

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[1] UCAS is the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. The UCAS tariff is the system for allocating points to qualifications used for entry to higher education. It allows students to use a range of different qualifications to help secure a place on an undergraduate course. For instance, the highest grade (A*) in an A level counts for 140 UCAS tariff points (see http://www.ucas.com/students/ucas_tariff/tarifftables/).

large-scale administrative datasets allowed exploration of the distribution across institutions and subjects of students coming to HE via different educational pathways. This analysis was supplemented by case-study work at five HE institutions. The macro-level perspective of the factors that influenced student distribution across HE institutions was thus combined with a student-level perspective on institutional and subject choice. The five institutional case studies included two surveys with the entire intake of students in three subject areas (business studies, nursing and computing) for the 2006/07 academic year. The case studies also included interviews with students, lecturers and admissions staff.

Data and Data Analysis

Since the analysis of most of the data sets generated by *Degrees of Success* has been reported elsewhere (Ertl et al, 2010; Ertl and Hayward, 2010; Hayward and Hoelscher, forthcoming; Hoelscher et al, 2008) this contribution focuses on the interviews conducted with admissions staff. Overall, fifteen interviews were conducted with staff responsible for admissions for three courses (business, computing, nursing) at five institutions, including two Further Education Colleges (one in Scotland, on in England), two post-1992 Universities (one in Scotland, one in England) and one pre-1992 University in England.[2]

The interviews sought to understand how admissions procedures are conducted, which criteria are used for selecting students and which types of information are used to make admissions decisions. They included a number of questions on issues affecting the probability of transition from VET programmes into the HE context. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to follow up the particular insights and areas of expertise of responsibility of interviewees.

The process of analysing the data from the interviews aimed at going beyond simply reporting the verbal exchange between participants and to interpret the meanings of the interviewee's responses in the context of the questions raised by the *Degrees of Success* project. Interpretive approaches to data analysis must be clear, systematic and transparent (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009); these principles guided the development of the analytical framework. In the context of this study, data analysis has been a 'continuous and iterative enterprise' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 12). The data derived from the interviews were analysed adopting the three key stages described by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions.

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[2] For details on the sampling of subjects and institutions see Ertl and Dunbar-Goddet (2007).

After transcribing the interviews and familiarisation with the data, data reduction consisted of a number of steps including the omission of irrelevant dialogue (ranging from friendly small talk to brief discussions of aspects of student life). The second step involved identifying key phrases, ignoring the talk which serves to set up the key point. The third step of data reduction involved assigning various codes to represent the databits. Codes were developed inductively through the familiarisation and continued analysis of the data. Simple descriptive codes, illustrating participants' roles within the admissions office and common admissions criteria, were the first to emerge. These codes were useful for condensing lengthy descriptions into more manageable measures of data. Going beyond simple description, interpretive codes were assigned to databits which illustrated certain themes or concepts.

Once codes and concepts became more concrete, the frequency of each code and category was recorded, keeping in mind the type of HE institution and the course of study represented by the admissions staff member. This was done to understand the relative importance of different themes in different admissions processes. The distilled databits were then displayed in a series of conceptually clustered matrices for each respondent, each type of Higher Education Institution (Further Education (FE) college, pre/post-University, etc), each course (business, computing, or nursing) and ultimately into a comprehensive display. The displays facilitate the ability to draw conclusions from the data. A truncated example of this approach, using only one theme (retention) for three courses (computing, business and nursing) at one institution (Scottish FE College), is shown in Table 1.

These displays facilitate data analysis and drawing conclusions from the data. Similar displays were created for each institution and each theme that emerged from the data. Through this process, consistent and valid results began to emerge from the raw data. The following section presents those results most germane to the current paper's focus.

Results

Institutional Differentiation and Standard

Each respondent discussed a range of criteria that were considered in the process of selecting students. Although academic and non-academic criteria were used in the evaluation of applications at each institution, there were significant variations in the expectations between institutions what we term 'horizontal differentiation'. There is

Table 1 Example of analytical display

INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES – Scottish FE College		Analysis
Retention	• *A number of students will have to drop out because they can't afford, they'll have to go out and work (Computing)* • *We have an attendance, well we have an attendance policy anyway, so students who are falling away a bit, we offer them advice to come in a speak to us (Computing)* • *If you have, um, what we call a 'sap', at the end of the year, if 50 per cent or fewer students pass the course, we put into place an action plan at address it and reverse it for the following year (Computing)* • *They're going to have to be committed to attending the classes, paying the fees (Business)* • *From the employer's point of view, they are quite often following them up, they're checking their attendance, seeing if they're coming along to the college (Business)* • *We just interview all the time, cause you get, come the August intake, they're be a lot of people who just withdraw, so, um, that's how we just keep it back up with people who can come on the course. (Nursing)*	Retention is a key issue for each department at this College, but the departments manage this risk in different ways. For computing and business, drop-out rates are closely linked with the ability to pay for the course. The computing department provides support for students upon their arrival. They also adapt their practice through the creation of 'action plans' which address student numbers and retention by influencing future admissions cycles. For the business program, retention and financial risk is mitigated by admitting students with sponsorship from their employers. In this way, risk is diffused from the College and onto the student and the employer. For nursing, retention has less to do with finances (perhaps due to the bursary scheme). Other nursing programs indicate a 'change in heart' or personal problems as retention risks. The Nursing programme at this College manages these risks through continuous selection and semi-annual entry points.

a supply and demand dynamic behind this type of differentiation. The pre-92 University is typically a selective institution with high standards and the opportunity of

choosing from a number of applicants for each place they have available, the number of places being limited according to a centrally applied funding formula operate by the Higher Education Funding Councils. Post-92 Universities and colleges involved in the study were, on the other hand, primarily recruiting institutions and had necessarily lower entry requirements for a variety of reasons. Respondents from recruiting institutions cited lower entry requirements as a way to remain as accessible as possible, thereby promoting social mobility by opening the doors of HE provision to applicants who would have struggled to gain entry to university in the past. In practice, this means that recruiting institutions are more open to considering qualifications other than academic GCE A level qualifications using data on equivalence between qualification types supplied by UCAS for example.

'We are signed up to widening participation, so we look at equivalences [between qualifications]' (Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

Lower entry requirements and the willingness to consider a variety of different types of qualifications also widens and enlarges the potential applicant pool, ensuring that the institutions have enough applicants to meet course enrolment targets. However, this approach may simply replace one institutional risk (i. e. not filling available places) for another – increased risk of drop-out and non-completion of courses. Both carry severe financial risks in a system where funding follows the students and is dependent to some extent on students completing their degree programmes successfully. Efforts to widen participation have succeeded in bringing in applications from students at the lower end of the achievement spectrum with a concomitant increase in the risk of drop out and non-completion. Furthermore, as the door to HE widens, admissions staff may encounter applicants with unfamiliar qualifications with no track record of supporting successful progression into HE, making it even more difficult to make a decision on the candidates' suitability for a course. This is particularly the case for students with vocational qualifications. These students were regarded by many interviewees implicitly or explicitly as risky propositions, in terms of survivability and retention, and requiring closer scrutiny of their suitability as potential students during the admissions process.

Academic Criteria and Qualifications

Each of the five institutions relied on a variety of academic criteria, including qualifications obtained, to act as proxies for their applicants' intellectual abilities. As institutions vary in selectivity, each respondent offered a different set of academic guidelines which acted as the baseline for evaluation, clearly identifying the horizontal differentiation between HE providers. For example:

'… the entrance qualifications that the youngsters are offering would be the Scottish higher certificate. … They're mostly offering highers. At the moment, the so-called going rate would be two B's and two C's at higher' (Business Admissions, Scottish Post-92 University).

'They're [most applicants are] 18, they're UK students, they're either taking their A-levels or the International Baccalaureate' (Computing Admissions, English Pre-92 University).

'Standard entry criteria is basically one Scottish Higher at C or above for a HNC [Higher National Certificate], two at C or above for an HND [Higher National Diploma], or three Cs and above for a degree program' (Computing Admissions, Scottish FE College).

'So, uh, minimum qualification [for diploma] would be an NVQ-2 [National Vocational Qualification at level 2], with a GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] grade C or above, and at degree level it would be 200 UCAS points' (Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

Respondents were quick to detail, early in the interviews, the academic standards which represented the minimum criteria for admission. Perhaps understandably, the academic expectations varied across institutions and courses. Nevertheless, each admissions staff member made assurances that academic criteria were a key piece of the evaluation they were making as to the suitability of applicants for enrolment on the programmes that they were offering.

Admissions staff at each institution also discussed the relevance of certain qualifications in the context of the evaluative process. Generally speaking, admissions staff appreciated relevant qualifications for all candidates, but relevant qualifications appeared to be especially important for students with a background in vocational learning. Responses from recruiting institutions seemed to indicate that level three academic qualifications, regardless of the subject, were suitable for admission.

'We have this notion here, in the computer science department that we don't really, um, stipulate what type of A-levels people do before they come on to the program. So, uh, an A-level is an A-level is an A-level, OK?' (Computing Admissions, English Post-92 University).

'Somebody who has got three A-levels and their A-levels were in retail to start with doesn't mean they can't be a nurse, so it would be awful to turn someone away because they've got an A-level in history and not in biology. It denotes for us a level of study that would make them able to cope in our course' (Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

These responses illustrate a generous appreciation for A-levels in the admissions process at these particular institutions, and seem to confirm Stanton's idea of the 'royal route to university' (Stanton, 2008, p. 9). A-levels appeared to be the most

valuable currency in these admissions processes, but these offices also frequently interact and evaluate candidates with less traditional qualifications.

Other work in the *Degrees of Success* project has shown that HE teaching staff often have little knowledge about vocational qualifications relevant to the subject they teach. This, in turn, has serious consequences for the way teaching staff interacts with students from vocational backgrounds, ranging from a lack of relevant learning support to neglecting the particular types of knowledge that students with vocational qualifications bring to HE (see Ertl and Hayward, 2010). The lack of familiarity with certain qualifications at the level of HE institutions represents a particular risk for equal access to HE.

Unfamiliar and Non-traditional Qualifications

Each member of admissions staff acknowledged that they routinely encountered applicants with unfamiliar qualifications in the course of their application review. According to the respondents, mature applicants, international students and applicants with vocational qualifications make up the majority of applications with unfamiliar qualifications. Which qualifications are regarded as 'unfamiliar' or 'non-traditional' varied between the case study institutions.

'What can often happen is, particularly in computing, is that the students come with perhaps not the most normal of qualifications' (Computing Admissions, English Pre-92 University).

'We have taken mature students who haven't got, who haven't got, what we would say is the traditional qualifications' (Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

A particular problem for UK HE admissions staff is that they have to rely on predicted grades to make offers of places to a student. This means that the only information they have available is what a student's current teachers think they will achieve in the qualification(s) for which they are studying. This leads to considerable uncertainty about the information being provided. Here an admissions tutor questions the validity of predictions in an advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) given an applicant has done poorly on examinations (GCSEs) taken two years previously.

'You get a lot of applicants that have really done badly on the GCSEs, may only have one (acceptable GCSE) and the rest are Fs and so forth, but they're predicted at AVCE two C's, and that actually does worry me' (Nursing Admissions, English Post-92 University).

Poor, unfamiliar and non-traditional qualifications seem to create an air of uncertainty within the evaluation process. Divergence from the normally encoun-

tered standard qualifications being used by applicants to support progression to HE clearly involves taking account of a variety of risks. Admissions staff have developed a number of behaviours to manage the risk posed by non-traditional qualifications. Sometimes the simplest way to manage risk is to deflect it or distribute it to another person. One of the key risk management strategies that emerged at each of the institutions involved an upward diffusion of risk. When faced with 'risky' applicants, admissions staff members sought the advice of senior admissions professionals or academic staff. In some examples, high-risk candidates were identified and passed directly on to supervisors.

'I see something that worries me, that's when it would, again, go to [the admissions supervisor], and I would ask [the supervisor's] opinion … and if we're unsure at that stage as well, it also involves course directors to find out what their feelings are on a case-by-case basis' (Computing Admissions, English Pre-92 University).

'Applicants that don't fall into that [the standard academic criteria], they meet with the course leaders to determine whether they would gain an entry or not' (Business Admissions, Scottish FE College).

This practice gains the insight of colleagues while redistributing the risk involved in making an admissions decision. If the decision turns out to be incorrect and the student fails to cope with the program, then the blame can be shared among the group of people involved in the decision rather than a single staff member. Often, these senior staff members, concerned with making an appropriate match (and managing institutional priorities), rely on additional criteria beyond qualifications and utilise other behaviours to manage the risk introduced by candidates with unfamiliar academic backgrounds.

Admissions Interviews, Personal Statements and Work Experience

Non-academic criteria offer additional opportunities for gathering information about applicants. They can provide additional context or justification for the recognition of given academic and/or vocational qualifications. In other words, non-academic criteria can help mitigate the risks introduced by applicants with non-traditional qualifications or poor academic backgrounds. The respondents cited interviews, personal statements and work experience as useful tools for learning more about the background and motivation of prospective students.

The purpose of *admissions interviews* is to discover more information about the candidate in order to make a better judgement on the quality of the potential match between courses and applicants. However, the role of the interview differs from

one student to another. For traditional students, institutions expressed an anxiety about incoming students' commitment to the course. Although these students might have the academic qualifications necessary to gain admissions, interviews provided admissions staff with an opportunity to gauge each applicant's commitment to the course. In these cases, the risk is student attrition through a change of heart. The interviews seek to confirm an enthusiasm and a dedication to the subject rather than academic ability.

'As part of the interview process, they will be asked about a topic of business that interests them, so they have to come up with some sort of supposed discussion or rationale about why they are interested in business' (Business Admissions, English FE College).

For applicants with vocational, non-traditional and/or less well known qualifications, non-academic criteria are key components of the admissions process. In one case, at one of the Scottish institutions which assigns a point value to various admissions criteria, the outcome of the interview was four times more valuable than whether or not the student had earned a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) at level 3. In the absence of traditional or more readily acceptable qualifications, non-academic criteria may be used to gain enough information to make an admissions decision, not least because of the restrictions inherent in applications procedures. These restrictions seem to have an impact on the applications of non-traditional students in particular:

> The UCAS form doesn't lend itself very well to actually detailing all the different things that they [mature students] may have done, so I always get in contact with them, usually by email, in fact most of our correspondence is by email. Um, and they may come in for an interview with [the admissions supervisor] (Computing Admissions, English Pre-92 University).
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> And then there are students who don't have any A-levels, and these are student who I call up and have a consultation with. These are the more mature students, you try to give them the fact that it's very important that you take it seriously and talk through the whole programme with them, and I think that face-to-face contact with the mature students without A-levels helps (Computing Admissions, English Post-92 University).
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> Often with computers, you know, it's their [mature applicants'] hobby usually, you know they're enjoying programming and so on, so if we can see that that's there, then we can see an ability for them to learn, so that's half the battle, knowing that there's an enthusiasm there (Computing Admissions, English Pre-92 University).

In these cases, the admissions staff members have recognised the knowledge asymmetry. The reliance on UCAS for applications compounds the difficulty for non-traditional applicants seeking entry to the full-time programme. Admissions staff address this problem by employing a different criteria for non-traditional students and students with vocational backgrounds compared to school-leavers.

Where the qualifications fail to reveal the applicants' ability, interviews are used to correct the knowledge gap.

'So the academic qualification gets them (non-traditional students) started, if you like, but they've still got lots of hurdles, … they all come for interview'(Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

The opportunity to directly interact with individual applicants is regarded as an invaluable tool in assessing the background of the student and the quality of a potential match. The nursing programmes, for example, felt that interviews were absolutely essential in determining whether or not an applicant could be trusted with the responsibility of looking after patients. Interviewing each applicant, however, creates a considerable amount of work for admissions staff and is therefore costly. For most programmes, interviewing every candidate would place an unworkable amount of stress on the resources of the admissions staff. To address this problem, respondents at the other programmes described how they triage applications, identifying borderline applications and bringing those students in for an interview.

Personal statements fulfil similar functions as admissions interviews. Like interviews, personal statements enable admissions staff to discover the motivations behind the decision to study at a particular course. At the most selective institution in the study, the respondent used personal statements to make decisions among similarly qualified candidates. After identifying clearly admissible and clearly deniable students, the admissions staff member at this institution described the role of the personal statement in her programmes' admissions process:

'And that's when we really drill down to what their personal statements are from the middle pile, um, and their references, so yeah, it's more the second stage where we use those' (English Pre-92 University).

Like interviews, personal statements can be particular influential for students with non-traditional and vocational qualifications. Again, commitment and enthusiasm for the course and subject are the common themes in the evaluation. For the nursing programmes, personal statements were seen as being particularly valuable:

'What I look for particularly more than anything is their supporting statement … we'd rather see someone actually that hasn't got a wonderful string of GCSEs, but actually can demonstrate on the supporting statement that they want to be a nurse' (Nursing Admissions, English FE College).

'You've got good academic criteria, lovely, and some of them have got very good GCSEs and predicted, very good A-level grades, but if they don't demonstrate commitment to the area that they've applied for in their personal statement, I don't think that it reflects very well' (Nursing Admissions, English Post-92 University).

The personal statement can have other uses as well. Some respondents from the least selective institutions explained that the personal statement is also used as a simple way to assess candidates' familiarity with and use of English language. Despite its usefulness in this regard, the same institutions expressed concerns about the ability to verify authorship of personal statements. As a result, these programmes have developed *ad hoc* entrance examinations in reading and writing to combat against false representation in the personal statements.

Both interviews and personal statements provide opportunities for admissions staff to explore potentially relevant work and life experience that each candidate brings to the table. *Work experience* relevant to the course was consistently cited as a valuable commodity in applicants at each of the institutions. Admissions staff explained that they were more likely to rely on experience for mature students, students with vocational qualifications and those with no qualifications.

'If they left school without any A-levels, maybe without any O-levels, and has [sic] worked in the business environment and has [sic] proved that they can work in that environment, then I'll give them the chance' (Computing Admissions, English Post-92 University).

'Certainly, if they haven't got the formal qualifications to get into [the programme], then we look at the experience that they have and get them on that way' (Business Admissions, English FE College).

'A lot of the time, the qualifications are like 10 years old, so we can't really look at all the qualifications. So, it tends to be that we take them on, on an experience' (Business Admissions, Scottish FE College).

Respondents, especially at the recruiting institutions, felt that work experience could be an effective substitute for qualifications. There was a common belief that students would be able to translate their work experiences into academic success. This rationale was more commonly cited in conversations with admissions staff responsible for computing and business programmes. Representatives from the nursing programmes appreciated applicants with some exposure to the medical field, but tended to rely more heavily on interviews and personal statements to make their admissions decisions. Nevertheless, experience was a factor considered by each programme.

Not only does experience indicate a degree of familiarity with the chosen field, it also confirms some level of commitment. Commitment, as seen in the context of interviews and personal statements, is seen as an all-important quality in prospective students. Similarly, students with a range of work and life experiences were viewed by admissions staff as more responsible in comparison to some school-leavers. Furthermore, there was an understanding of the demands of work and, in some cases, family life compels non-traditional students to develop time-management skills.

'We have a look at their career to date, um, you can tell a lot from the forms whether they're motivated to do the course … and again we're looking at, well, they're much older and they know how to balance a college life with a home life and submit course works and meeting deadlines' (Business Admissions, Scottish FE College).

In some cases, maturity was viewed as proxy for responsibility, and thus perceived as a factor which might mitigate any risks posed by sub-par or absent qualifications. Admissions staff would also seek out and respond to applicants with employer sponsorship. These candidates were particularly safe bets due to a guaranteed source of tuition income, and an additional incentive (in the form of responsibility to their employer) to continue with the programme. Such candidates are highly prized because they satisfy each of the institutional priorities, including enrolment, payment and retention.

Summary and Conclusion

Over the course of the analysis, a pattern emerged in the data indicating a distinctly different set of criteria applied by admissions staff for non-traditional students when compared to traditional school-leavers. Admissions staff relied more heavily on academic qualifications in the evaluation of traditional school-leavers. The average, middle class student dutifully turning in A-levels or other easily recognisable and acceptable academic qualification seemed to be seen as posing little risk of attrition. These students represented a safe bet, and the institutions were keen to respond to them. Non-traditional students, including those with vocational qualifications, needed to go through a longer and deeper evaluation. Since vocational qualifications were perceived to be signalling a degree of risk to future success in HE, additional criteria and sources of information were used to establish a sound basis for the admissions decision. The institutions, needing to meet enrolment targets, aim to bring these students into the programme, but this goal is tempered by the possibility of attrition and the loss of tuition income.

Already in the early stages of the analysis of the interviews with admissions staff at the five case study institutions it became apparent that the institutions were less pre-occupied with admitting necessarily the best students and in many cases were compelled to admit students with weak academic credentials. Risk management behaviour and matching processes, linking applicants and courses, began to emerge as an alternative to the traditional, meritocratic, notion of admissions.

This finding is interesting in the context of the discussion on the notion of 'merit' in the Schwartz Report (AHESG, 2004). As the Report was particularly interested in notions of fairness in the admissions process it argued that meritocracy should continue to be the gold standard for fairness in admissions but acknowledges definitional problems: 'Everyone agrees that applicants should be selected on merit; the problem arises when we try to define it,' (AHESG, 2004, p. 22). This outlines a key issue for admissions at the five case study institutions as the definition of merit is contentious. Attempting to base a standardised admissions system on a contentious standard is a dangerous endeavour; and the interviews analysed for the research presented here clearly indicate that the standards against which different types of applicants are measured are not consistent across and within HEIs.

Sen (1999) argues that there is a degree of tension in the way that merit is perceived. Merit is a reflection of what a society, an institution or an individual values; a notion acknowledged for the area of education in Michael Young's satirical *Rise of the Meritocracy* of 1958. However, as discussed elsewhere (Ertl et al., 2010; Hoelscher et al., 2008), UCAS tariff points and traditional qualifications are not evenly distributed among individuals. The mainstream system of HE appears to favour traditional (i. e. predominantly middle-class) candidates with A-levels (Smith et al., 1995), with vocational qualifications not being recognized by large parts of the HE sector as suitable equivalents (see Hoelscher et al., 2008). This existing system is an example of 'sponsored mobility', a social system in which the elite class replicates itself through careful selection (Turner, 1960), hearkening back to the *de jure* exclusivity which continues to exist in the present HE sector.

The development of a risk management approach to admissions processes arguably intensified with the explosion of demand for HE access and the later push to widen participation. More students applying to HE programmes require the development of admissions criteria. Efforts to widen participation necessarily mean including more students with qualifications backgrounds other than traditional A levels. This also means that HEIs need to acknowledge that students with vocational qualifications '… bring radically different skills, and knowledge to HE than those brought by students with standard qualifications who come from more privileged backgrounds' (Smith et al., 1995, p. 124).

As the population entering HE changes, admissions criteria must also adapt to respond to the changing applicant pool and the changing needs of the institution. The risk posed by students with weak academic backgrounds, many of whom apply to non-selective institutions (such as the two FE Colleges in our sample), requires an admissions approach with an even greater emphasis on risk management which might be at odds with traditional notions of merit. Further analysis of the data revealed a number of other key issues and observations, including that the parallels

between job matching and HE admissions were quite strong, especially in the use of admissions criteria to address the knowledge asymmetry between the candidate and the institution.

Admissions professionals want to gather as much information on candidates as possible. Admissions criteria achieve this goal to some extent and provide the admissions staff with the information needed to make an informed decision on the candidacy of each student. In this regard, non-traditional students and students with vocational qualifications represent a risk because they present a profile that is inconsistent with the standard admissions criteria. As a result, additional information is gathered through interviews, personal statements and entrance exams. The use of these sources of additional information constitutes a significant difference in how applications from students with vocational qualifications are perceived and processed as compared with applications from students with academic qualifications. Further research on the impact of this difference on the chances of being admitted and on the experience of students of their HE programme is necessary to unpick the connections between admissions processes and outcomes.

The analysis of the interviews with admissions staff also demonstrated that admissions processes vary across the HE sector due to differentiation among programmes and institutions. The notion of horizontal differentiation describes these differences at the institutional level. A selective institution with more demand (applications) than supply (places) has the luxury of being able to rely on traditional notions of merit, closely connected to prior academic achievements, to bring in what are regarded as the best possible students. Recruiting institutions, meanwhile, must make the most of their applicant pools. Vertical differentiation is one approach which routes applicants into different levels of a programme at an institution. This enables institutions to meet institutional priorities while containing and compartmentalising risky students into certain sub-degree programmes. These patterns are clearly visible in the interviews conducted.

Often, programmes will present a 'bottom line' describing the basic requirements for admission. From the interviews, however, it seems that there is a great deal of flexibility in the bottom line and admissions staff will present one image (usually of some 'objective' standard based on merit) while acting differently (selectively applying certain criteria) to ensure that institutional priorities are met. This finding is in line with evidence collected in the work of Pickering and Gardner (1992) which found striking discrepancies in the admissions process between what is said to be done (in line with the principles of transparency) and what is done in reality. Pickering and Gardner attribute these discrepancies to some of the pressures that admissions departments face from their institutions, regarding reaching student number targets.

In conclusion, this part of the work of *Degrees of Success* offers some additional insights on admissions, but more work can certainly be done. It is unconscionable to consider the lack of scholarly literature about admissions, but this research might contribute to advancing the understanding of both admissions practice in general and especially the admissions landscape for non-traditional students and non-selective institutions. As the push towards mass and universal HE continues, the significance of this topic will only increase.

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