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Meet the Selectors

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce readers to the people working in university admissions and to examine some of the differences in the admissions systems in the United States and England. After reading this chapter, readers will find it easier to understand both the purpose and the process of admission, which are explained in more detail in the following chapters. In particular, the chapter explains why some of the quotations in the subsequent chapters are based on interviews with academic faculty while others are taken from conversations with full-time admissions professionals.

United States

To recap, all the US institutions that participated in this project were private not-for-profit institutions. Most were drawn from the Ivy League, but two liberal arts colleges and two private non-Ivy League universities also participated. All these US institutions had centralized offices for undergraduate admissions.

A centralized system means that there is one central place that answers questions from prospective applicants, organizes recruitment and information visits to schools within the United States and abroad, decides which applicants for admission will receive an offer and liaises with admitted students after offers have been made. Admissions offices are generally no longer directly involved with students as soon as they enrol and become current students. In exceptional circumstances – usually when a student runs into academic or social problems – admissions files might be revisited to see whether there were any ‘red flags’ in the application that might have been overlooked.

The admissions offices discussed in this study have between fifteen and forty full-time staff – the difference in range is partly due to whether or not financial aid staff are included in the headcount. At busy times, additional part-time staff

are sometimes employed, usually to help with reading applications or to help with campus visits.

This undergraduate admissions model can be described as an admissions professional-led model and, as we shall see, it contrasts with the academic-led model in some of the English institutions in this study. In US undergraduate admission, academic faculty play only a minor role – although this scenario changes for postgraduate admissions. The academic role for undergraduate admissions can entail being part of selection panels and strategic admissions practice and policy groups, and in exceptional circumstances, evaluating the submissions from applicants with unusual talents in a particular subject specialism. However, by and large, it is the full-time admissions professionals who are in charge of engaging with prospective applicants up to the point of enrolling new students.

The admissions professionals

A respondent for this project who works as a full-time admissions professional in a selective liberal arts college (see glossary) explained the structure of the admissions profession in the United States as follows:

I'm 24 and I've been doing this [working in admissions] for three years and it is amazing to me how many admissions are done by 23-year-olds in their first job. At least in North American admissions offices you have two kinds of people. You have the 22-year-old that is doing this as his first job that typically only does it for two years. There is a two to three year turnover rate in admissions, it is about 90 per cent – 90 per cent of people that starting admissions leave after two or three years ... they go off and do something or go to law school or grad school [see glossary 'graduate study'] or go into consulting or do something completely different. The other half is – you have the career people, the people who are usually in their 30s or 40s who have been doing this from the beginning. That's the way my office is. There are those of us in our early 20s and those of us in our late 30s and that's it.

Another experienced full-time admissions professional working for one of the Big Three institutions (Harvard, Yale, Princeton) also described how there were recent graduates from the institution as well as more experienced admissions professionals in her team, but also some people who had been doing different things outside admissions.

A lot of the people hired here [in the admissions office] are actually recent graduates from [this institution], so there's kind of a mix ... of people who

graduated last year and then people who've been out of college for a while and doing other things, and then ... come back. ... So there's a whole mix. And I think the recent graduates they bring in, of course, because they have the real, most current experiences, and can talk about [this institution] in a very fresh way ... [but we also] like ... an outside perspective, as well, I think, is very important. So it's about half and half.

Returning to the recent liberal arts college graduate from the previous quotation, the respondent elaborated further on how and why he had started his employment in higher education admissions:

Well I worked in the admissions office at [liberal arts college where he got his first degree] the whole time I was a student as a tour guide. That's the primary things students do in the American admissions offices. I don't know how familiar you are with the whole thing but primarily when you visit an American college the thing you do is get a tour from current students so students take you around and show you the campus. That's what I did for two years and in my senior year, my final year I interviewed prospective students for the college. Where I work now we don't do this but where I have worked they want to interview everyone who is applying and they have so many kids applying ... so then they use students. So I did that, it seemed interesting and it seemed like something I could get hired in.

The sentiment that admissions work was a reasonable option for a first job especially for humanities graduates was also observed elsewhere. This more experienced selector from one of the Big Three institutions noted that

for somebody with a degree in English or history, who isn't going to law school right away, and isn't sure what they want to do, and maybe the job market's not that good ... You know, it's a good generalist job. You get a lot of general skills. You get public speaking skills, you get the writing skills. You know, but ... there's a lot of turnover, because you work really hard during certain times of the year, and you have to travel a lot.

Returning yet again to the story of our liberal art graduate's journey into admissions work, he recalled how after deciding to work in admissions, the choice of where he would work was then largely taken out of his hands:

You know, I applied to about 50 different colleges and I got job offers from two. And [liberal arts college that employs him now] was the more selected of the two colleges, it was the primary thing that made the decision. ... Typically with

admissions even if you go to other jobs you try not to go down, you trade up and be at a more selective place each time. The type of admissions that I do is sort of different than a lot of other admissions because if you're at a selective place you're really dealing with admissions but if you're at a place where they are accepting more than 50 per cent [of your applicants] and your job is primarily recruitment, it's actually getting kids to apply and convince kids to come. I don't have to convince kids to come; I am mostly selecting the ones I want. ... [Big Three Ivy] of course is the extreme of that.

Readers familiar with university rankings will see how the selectivity of the institution is clearly not something that only the *US News and World Report* or parents and applicants consider when deciding where to apply for undergraduate study. It is also something that the admission practitioners themselves (or at least some of them) consider in their career options and choices.

Another still relatively recent graduate with just over three years' experience of admissions work explained how he ended up working at the particular Ivy League institution. Like the previous respondent, he had started off helping out at the admissions office as a student and then moved into full-time employment in admissions upon graduating:

I lived [near this Ivy] on campus at [another non-Ivy League university where he got his first degree], a very residential experience, like here, where all of our students live on campus for four years essentially. I got very involved in a lot of volunteering, just at the admissions office. So I was tour guide, I was speaking on panels at different houses for prospective students, and there's ... a lot of what admission officers do, ... and it wasn't paid work really, until my senior year, where I was an intern. So that's where I was exposed to the admissions office, but I also debated through college. And I thought I wanted to go to law school, because that's what debaters do, and that sounds more prestigious and more scholarly; and I had done law as an undergrad, so had worked for a law firm ... for a year and a half. I absolutely despised the experience. Just ... it was not for me, the work, I didn't feel like I was helping anyone, and I really enjoyed what I did as ... in the administrative type of work I was doing in higher education. So there was an opportunity, because there was an opening in [degree awarding] admission office, maybe it has 15, 16 full-time staff members, including a dean and a director. And there was an opening, and it was the right time and towards the end of that summer, it was after working at the law firm for a year. So, this is one year after I graduated. ... So I was hired, fortunately, and spent two years there. It was fantastic, and I just got promoted, when on a Listserv in higher ed, I found out that [Ivy League institution where he works now] had a couple of openings.

As in the previous narrative, when given a choice, this admissions professional moved to a more selective institution when the opportunity presented itself. At the point that he participated in this research project, it seemed like he was now seriously considering joining the group of those who work in admissions as their long-term career.

Another selector from the Big Three had more fallen into her admissions role rather than making a conscious decision to go into this role:

I did a master's degree at [Big Three Ivy] in education, and then we moved to [other Big Three Ivy] because my husband wanted to pursue his PhD. And I got the job [in the admissions office] because ... when they get very busy, they hire what they call part time tutors and readers ... and you do a first read on the application, and you write your comments on it. ... They were very happy with my work and offered me a job afterwards, and I found it very interesting, so I said, yes, great.

Some other, more senior respondents had career trajectories that included working their way up from entry level to a senior level, coming to admissions after a stint as an academic social science faculty member, and moving their way up across seniorities and institutions to be a leading Ivy League admissions professionals.

Overall, diversity in terms of age and life experiences within admissions offices was valued, but all admissions staff were themselves university graduates and many had master's level degrees in education. This Ivy League selector explained how such a policy of diversity among staff was designed to counter potential biases in the admissions process:

I think your own subjective bias does come in, but ... we try to be very aware of it through socially engineering, even our own Committees. ... [dean of admission] lived an incredibly different life than I have. And you have that all throughout the office. We're not an elite office, in terms of not everybody went to [Ivy League institutions], some went to [names of other four year institutions]. All sorts of schools, all sorts of perspectives, gender balances, sexuality balances, age balances, race balances, first generation students (see glossary), when they went to college, people in this office who's, you know, they went to [a particular Ivy] and their father went to [the same Ivy]. So, it's a very diverse mix, even here. I mean, we're practising what we preach in terms of our own office.

Diversity was valued among admissions staff and among incoming students. However, one Ivy League respondent also observed that 'there's a lot of women

at the lower levels, but at the top levels, they tend to be males. ... I think it has a lot to do with, just, the lifestyle and the travel. I mean, it's very hard to leave your children.' We will revisit the idea of how diversity plays a role in selection decisions in the coming chapters.

There was some general consensus among practitioners that working in admissions aligned with some of their deeply held values, as well as offering a fun job that allowed opportunities for honing a range of skills. Several admissions professionals explained how they had chosen to work in education and one selector commented how he thought it 'would be hard for me to work for a company where all you're concerned about is the bottom line' and that he wanted to 'do something good for the world'. Another Ivy League selector elaborated on further aspects of the role he found intrinsically rewarding:

I think it's fascinating. I interview lots of people in our office and you find that people ... don't do it for the pay cheques, certainly. It's the ... you feel like you're, for the most part, helping in the social grid because you are fighting for people, you're fighting for policies that do include ... and you're changing people's lives by the admission decisions you make, by how you recruit, by ... what high schools you visit, by how they find out about [this Ivy] and who's the face of [this Ivy] that they see? So, they meet me first, or they meet a student first, that's their impression of [this Ivy].

In particular, the young admissions professionals also enjoyed the professional skills they were developing through on-the-job training, professional development and sometimes staff retreats. They thought it was 'fun because you get to travel', and offered an 'unbelievable amount of autonomy and responsibility for being 22'.

There is some movement and connection between the different highly selective institutions and respondents seemed to know each other. Occasionally, I was even asked whether I had spoken to a particular person and whether they would agree with this sort of statement. For research confidentiality reasons, I could affirm neither whom I had spoken with nor what had been said, but the question itself showed familiarity with colleagues and their specific roles. Respondents commented on career moves of colleagues, for example, one Ivy League respondent remarked that someone from their office had moved to a highly selective West Coast institution. In other instances, selectors looked forward to travelling with colleagues from other institutions, in particular for overseas recruitment visits, and were knowledgeable about their personal life

and circumstances. One Big Three selector explained how such joint overseas visits were

very friendly. I'm doing a talk at Eton (prestigious private school in England) next Monday, and I'm doing it with [other Big Three Ivy] and it's probably with [colleague]. ... We often do that. Schools will do, ... yes, kind of, double-bill, sort of thing. Yes, so I'm probably going to be doing it with her. Yes. So she'll, ... she'll talk about [Big Three] and I'll talk about [other Big Three].

The admissions office

In terms of how the admissions office and their processes work, a Big Three selector explained the structure of her office as follows:

You have the dean, then you have a director, and then you have what they call assistant and associate deans, and they are all the team leaders. And what that means is, essentially, they have a region, and they do the second reading. They make the decisions about which students are going to come to committee. And then you have ... admissions officers at the bottom, and they're usually entry level, right out of school.

Another Ivy selector elaborated on the structure of his office as follows:

We are 19 now, with two officers having dual appointments. They're both admission and financial aid, because otherwise financial aid is separate. ... We have 18 full-time or 19, who are on the Committee who are reading and evaluating candidates for admission, and that includes our executive director which, in other schools, would be called the dean. Every school, kind of, has a different formula for it. And then we have our support staff. We have two main support liaisons who work behind that front desk, and then two who sit at the front desk all day, who answer phones here. We also have a visitors' centre in the library, and there's support staff that's based there. And then we have student employees ... and we have a whole lot of student volunteers.

In terms of how work was split, this Big Three selector explained her role this way:

Basically, the way it works ... each of the admissions officers is responsible for a different area. So, for example, I have [two US states] and [five international territories]. And I read all of the applications that come from those areas first. Then I will ... send off some of the applications to other readers to have a look

at, so there's two readers on a lot of the applications, and then those are sent back; those evaluations are sent back to me, and I will then decide on who I feel should be presented for a committee (committees make admissions decisions). And the committee is made up of admissions officers, usually the dean or the director of admissions, if not one of them, probably two associate directors, the, sort of, next level down from dean or director. And then, also, sometimes faculty, deans of residential colleges, but usually a committee is made up of about five people, and there has to be a majority vote for someone to be admitted to [this Ivy].

The admissions office also had relations with various other offices and departments such as 'the development office, the athletics department and the music department' (Big Three selector). Another Ivy selector elaborated further on how the various parts of the university were involved in the admissions endeavour:

We [the admissions office] are constantly feeding all that information in, so our deans [names] who are probably the two most senior people in the office, and a couple of other people who have been here for a very long time, are constantly meeting with deans and faculty members, and everyone has an opinion and everyone's involved. And so we have to constantly funnel all that information in. Then the alumni office is involved. And in American universities, because it's all private ... money is very important and a lot of the institutions pride themselves on being as accessible as possible ... like, [the money] has to come from somewhere. So, there's all of these larger issues that weigh on the admission office.

The respondent describes a close link between US admissions offices and other university offices, such as the alumni office, that are not usually part of the admissions process in England. We will also see in the subsequent chapters that relations with the sports and some academic and music departments are also part of the US admissions process. In England, admissions offices may have input from recruitment and marketing, widening participation and planning and finance.

To summarize, admissions at selective universities in the United States is run out of professional, centralized admissions offices. The admissions work is mostly undertaken by full-time admissions professionals who were either relatively recent graduates or career admission professionals. Occasionally, additional staff was hired for key peak work times. Many of those working in admissions are motivated by some underlying values about doing something

good for society. In addition, especially the newer staff valued the experiences and skills they could gain in the post. The staff was trained through professional development, on-the-job training and retreats. The admissions offices had strong links with high schools, geographic regions, other offices within their institution, and previous graduates.

In the next section, this model of how university admissions is organized in the United States is compared and contrasted with how admissions is done in English universities.

England

In England, there are three different models for organizing the admission of undergraduate students. Today, the most frequently used model is centralized admission, where selection is undertaken by admissions professionals. Next are decentralized or devolved admissions systems, where the admissions decisions are made by academic faculty and not by the central admissions team. And the final one is a mixed model. This means that for some courses and subjects, admissions is centralized, and for others, it is devolved.

In recent years, there has been a trend across the higher education sector towards centralizing admissions processes and functions as found by surveys conducted by the organization Supporting Professionalism in Admissions. Between 2010 and 2013, the percentage of higher education institutions with devolved admissions systems decreased from over 40 per cent of the sector to just over 10 per cent, and centralized admissions systems are now over two-thirds of the sector, with a quarter of institutions operating mixed models (SPA 2014).

In practice, the centralized admissions offices in England share many ways they operate with US admissions offices. They are staffed by full-time admissions professionals. Some, but not all, English admissions offices also look after outreach and recruitment into schools and coordinate open days and campus visits. In other cases, outreach and recruitment is undertaken by separate departments. The admissions professionals are in charge of admissions decisions. This can be as straightforward as applying academic grade cut-off points to admission to particular subjects, but can also involve a more detailed reading of the entire application dossiers and looking at non-academic factors. Just as their US counterparts, some English admissions offices hire temporary additional

staff for working through application forms. Some centralized systems have committee decisions for particular applicants such as those coming through an outreach scheme.

One Russell Group respondent at a centralized institution explained what he valued about being in a centralized admissions role compared with his previous position in a devolved institution:

We have a very centralized system, which means we can be much more consistent in the way we approach [admissions] and ensure that every student is treated exactly the same way if they're from one group or another. ... So for me, it was quite freeing to be able to come [to this institution] and say, here's a policy ... we have the operational wherewithal to be able to implement this pretty much immediately, we've got senior management buy-in, let's go for it.

In this central model, staff in admissions offices and senior university teams including academics have input in deciding admissions aims and criteria but policies are implemented by the central admissions offices. In mixed models, some of the admissions decisions are made centrally and some are made by academics in their departments, as this Russell Group respondent explained:

Mostly, those decisions are made within the [institution admissions] offices by professional admissions staff, so they will have their criteria and they'll apply them. Exceptions tend to be professional and vocational courses, where academics or clinicians or whoever might be involved and there might be another stage of selection, ... in a very few cases, we interview, and we have portfolios for art and design and that kind of thing. But the vast majority of decisions are made by professional staff.

In devolved systems, all admissions decisions for undergraduate study are made by academic faculty in their academic departments. Academics, usually working in teams or small groups, make decisions and the admissions process can involve academic-led interviews as part of the selection process. The actual admissions decisions are then processed centrally. Those familiar with graduate or professional school admissions process in the United States may see similarities here. Devolved admissions systems also have admissions offices. The function of these offices is primarily an administrative co-ordinating function in processing and preparing applications for academics to read and ensuring that the process is compliant with guidelines and quality assurance, and that there is consistency across processes. Admissions offices also increasingly

add some information to the application files from other sources with an aim to give selectors as much information as possible about the applicants. As one admissions professional in a devolved system explained his role:

And our responsibility is basically the running of the admissions process; so the handling of applications from UCAS (see glossary) and dissemination of that information across the colleges and departments for them to make their decisions.

The admissions professionals facilitate the admissions process, and often there are additional staff who work in outreach, but these professionals do not make admissions decisions. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge both operate devolved admissions system. Overall, just over 10 per cent of English universities operate devolved admission (SPA 2014).

At Oxford and Cambridge, admissions is not only undertaken by devolved departments but also coordinated through the colleges that constitute the university. In fact, one of the respondents in this study noted how someone not familiar with the working of a collegiate university would find the decision-making process rather complex at first glance. He observed how ‘the collegiate universities have this incredibly convoluted ways of making decisions’. The then director of admissions to Oxford elaborated how his professional role sat within the collegiate university:

My main responsibility is trying to keep the university honest, would probably be the best way to describe it. So we’ve got 30 undergraduate colleges plus ... private halls who are the admitting authorities. We’ve got 29 different subject areas who also have a hand in the admissions process, and we’re trying to get them to work in a common fashion. (Nicholson 2013)¹

The organization of admissions in a devolved system then requires solid co-ordination processes as explained by another Oxbridge admissions professional:

Each college has an admissions tutor and then each subject within the college has their own committee. ... Many colleges would split [the committee], Arts and Sciences or something even finer grain than that. Some only have the one [committee]. Some colleges would have an admissions committee that might bring together the senior admissions tutor, the admissions tutor or some of the senior fellows, most colleges don’t. But the decision taking is taken between the admissions tutor or tutors and the specialists who have done the selecting

that year in a given subject who would oversee that subject. It's the admissions tutor that plays the coordinating and oversight role and at the margins, says to a subject, 'don't be greedy', or to another subject, 'yes, you can have a bit more this year, you've got a strong field' ... [furthermore] in each admission subject there is an [intercollegiate] subject convener.

Collegiate universities like Oxbridge then have various ways to co-ordinate admission to individual colleges and to different subjects, for example through 'agreed intercollegiate policy' or a 'common framework for admission'. There is also compulsory training for academics who are new to admissions. At the same time, decisions continue to be made at a local subject level by academics. The then director of admission to Oxford explained who the academics are, who make selection decisions and also how his role worked in relation to the academics:

Thirty, forty, fifty years ago, many of the people who would be doing the selecting were themselves products of the system. And, probably, the biggest shift at Oxford has been the change in the tutorial staff at the university. So, almost 50 per cent of our tutors are not themselves UK educated and most of those who come to work in the university have not studied at the university [Oxford] or at Cambridge. And, I think that's actually a helpful thing because it opens up debate. People bring their experiences from elsewhere and they question why we do things constantly. Which is a healthy thing – I think if everybody accepted that everything is set in stone and perfect, than that's where the weakness would be.

The biggest change ... in my time at Oxford compared with my previous roles in admissions, is actually, as far as I am concerned, I would rather have a highly engaged tutorial body who want to do admissions well and all think that they are my boss. Because with all 1600 bosses, then actually, I am always under scrutiny, and the process is always under scrutiny. In previous institutions were I have experience, I might've been the only person ... who actually cares about who gets in ... so it is important to recognize that there is a lot of engagement and this is a very very positive element of how Oxford approaches its selection. (Nicholson 2013)

So, while selective admissions offices in the United States might have as many as forty professional staff, the collegiate English universities can have potentially more than 1,500 people involved in admissions. In addition to the staff in colleges and departments, doctoral students might sometimes be involved in interviewing processes as co-interviewers, thus further increasing the number of people involved. While diversity is not a formal criterion for hiring at Oxford, the quotation highlights that there is diversity in terms of prior educational

experiences and geographic origin among the academic staff. This diversity is valued as a constant source of discussion, ideas for enhancement, and feedback on the process.

Senior academic admissions leads in subjects and colleges then support all those involved in selection and promote awareness and knowledge of the context and processes in admission. Individual subjects have their published admissions criteria, although it was partly the job of senior admissions leads to promote awareness and to safeguard consistency across admissions decisions for the same subject.

The vast number of people involved in academic-led admissions systems and the room for discussion and debate about admissions can also mean that not all academic selectors agree on whether they should or wished to undertake the selecting or someone else should select on their behalf. Such views could be strongly held. Faculty also had ongoing detailed discussion about aspects of the selection process and the relative weight of different parts of the application. As noted in the previous quotation from the former director of admissions at Oxford, such debates and discussions were viewed as strengths of the process as they provided constant scrutiny.

An example of an academic strongly in favour of selecting his own students was an Oxbridge science selector, who was originally from the United States, where he had undertaken his own undergraduate studies. He highlighted how he considered, in particular, the academic admissions interview to be a useful part of the admissions process. This was because of how closely the interview related to the subsequent educational experience at Oxbridge and teaching in small tutorials. He noted:

If I'm going to sit in a tutorial with these two people I need ... to interview them myself. I need to find out what they're like myself. I'm not going to take a student that I haven't seen. ... This is a very unique system: the tutorial system is very unique. In the States everything's done with classes and big classes. I was never in a class of fewer than twenty people until I was, there in the fourth year in a very specialist area ... So I would much rather have colleagues who do this tutorial teaching, interviewing candidates, assessing whether they think these candidates can handle a system like the tutorial system based on their own experience, 'right? I'd be much more confident in that than have some bureaucrats in central administration trying to determine it on the basis of targets.

Other selectors were not so enamoured with the interview process and the idea of academics selecting their own students. An Oxbridge social science academic

who had also experienced selection systems that were led by professional admissions staff stated how this alternative system had worked well for him previously:

My own general view about admissions is that I have ... no commitment to picking my own students. ... I have taught at other places where I had absolutely no role in picking the students. And I was very comfortable with that. And, maybe there are people in [this university] who are not comfortable with that. But my own view is that I would be ... it would make no bit of difference at all if someone else picked the students, ... I have no commitment at present to picking my own students.

These two quotations are illustrative of the range of opinions and views concerning academic selection for undergraduate admissions in a devolved system. The diversity of academic selectors at Oxbridge, many without prior experience of collegiate systems, has played part in the emphasis on subject choice rather than college choice in admissions – selectors wish to admit the best academic students regardless of the college that provides their residential home and social life. The fact that lawyers have successfully argued that admissions is a matter for the subjects and not the colleges to decide, and that it would be of concern if different colleges had different evaluation processes for the same subject has also been part of the push for change. Intercollegiate meetings, a pool system and college ‘blind’ applications now aim to ensure consistency in admission for applicants to the same subject.

In some other English universities, a college or house system only maintains nominal meaning, and allocation to a college or house occurs only after the academic decisions have been made. This is more similar to the way house or college membership is assigned in some US universities.

Unlike the US respondents, who often volunteered information about why they were working in admissions without prompts, English respondents only infrequently drew on their personal motivations for their jobs as part of a discussion of admissions.

Academics are primarily driven by interest in research and teaching to choose their profession, although for some academics, their profession is also a way to make a difference in the world. For many academic selectors, undergraduate admissions is thus just one of many aspects of their academic role.

However, for academic leads in admission, there is often an element of self-selection in having applied for such a position in the first place. Several academic leads recalled personal histories or other values as the reason why they had

been motivated to lead on admissions. For some, this was because of an interest in society and schooling. For example, during the observation of a science admissions meeting at a devolved university, the chair was clearly motivated to promote social justice concerns and to make a particularly strong case for students who had not been able to fully develop their educational potential. He later explained that this was part of his personal experience of educational inequality and his deep-seated view of the role of admission in addressing the shortcomings of previous education. Only one admissions lead voiced a more career-oriented motivation for taking on a senior admission role as a stepping stone for moving further into university management and away from being a full-time academic.

While US admissions professionals viewed their own personal histories as an integral part of why they were in their role and how the backgrounds of others contributed to diversity, English admissions professionals tended to discuss their own backgrounds either not at all or as part of the informal, unrecorded 'warm up' or closing parts of a conversation. Those working in outreach and recruitment rather than admissions were most open in talking about their personal experience and social justice motivation for having chosen their roles. However, while US admissions professionals were undertaking recruitment and school visits as part of their role, in England outreach and recruitment are usually undertaken by different staff than those making admissions decisions.

Among the personal histories shared by admissions and outreach professionals in England were examples of growing up in mining communities with the mines closed, resulting in few opportunities, having gone to a particularly poor performing primary school, having to be geographically mobile in order to participate in higher education and to undertake their current role. For many, participating in higher education had had a profound impact on their own lives. Several respondents mentioned being the first in their family to have gone to university, one mentioned being the only one from their school to have progressed into higher education. Respondents mentioned initially lacking experience or an understanding of how higher education worked: 'I did not have all this cultural capital. I didn't even know what questions to ask or how to ask for support.' Another outreach professional noted:

No one in my family had ever gone to university. I got involved in working in outreach as a student ambassador. After graduation, I worked in the voluntary sector but then went back to working in higher education, I am now back at the university where I graduated – but with a fresh pair of eyes.

There are similarities here to the accounts from the younger US admissions professionals who had often also acted as student volunteers and were sometimes working for the university from which they had originally graduated.

Chapter summary

The way in which admissions works is organized in the United States is different from that in England. In the United States, all the institutions represented in this book had central offices staffed with full-time admissions professionals, who make the admissions decisions. Some, but not all, English universities also have centralized admissions offices where admissions decisions are made. In Oxbridge and some other universities, devolved, academic-led systems mean that admissions decisions are made by academic faculty as part of their academic role. The centralized offices in such devolved systems have an administrative but not a decision-making function. The current chapter has thus set the scene for why some of the voices we hear in the next chapters are from academic selectors, who undertake admissions as part of their wider academic roles, and why other voices are from full-time admissions professionals.

With this in mind, we can now consider the key question in admission: What is the goal of the admission process? What are institutions and selectors trying to achieve in offering places to some and not to other applicants? What are they looking for and why?