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Fair Admission in the Context of Inequality

Colleges and universities depend on a pipeline that promotes opportunity and academic preparation for all students.

(William R. Fitzsimmons, in Phillips Exeter Academy (2007))

I remember years ago – in the early 70s, the [subject] tutor ... used to say: Oh, yes, but for somebody from that, comprehensive, ... or whatever it was then – this is a very good performance!

(Oxbridge academic selector)

Approximately 1 in 3 students at the 146 most selective US colleges come from the top quarter of the socio-economic status (SES) scale as measured by parents' income, education and occupation. Just 3 per cent come from the bottom quarter of the SES distribution (Espenshade 2009). Those from the bottom 20 per cent of income are 25 times less likely than the wealthy to enrol at a top college.

In England, young people who are from poorer families as identified by their eligibility to have free school meals are half as likely to continue into higher education than those not eligible for free school meals. While 37 per cent of the general public are identified as working class, they represent only between 11 and 14 per cent of the most selective Russell Group institutions. Why are there those differences in who attends selective universities?

The single greatest challenge and public media controversies in university admissions concern how admissions should take into account the wider social context of differences in education and beyond that students experience long before they file their applications for study at a university. Selectors are acutely aware of how different previous educational experiences influence and shape the range and strengths of applications: 'Education in America is very unequal. We can't close the door of our institution as long as the pipeline is not sorted' (Ivy League selector).

Studies in both England and the United States repeatedly find that students from different socio-economic backgrounds and different ethnic backgrounds

perform differently in achievement measures in education, be it SATs and GPAs in the United States or GCSEs and A-levels in England. Of course, there are always high-profile individual exceptions of poor students doing exceptionally well in education against the odds – but these students are not the norm.

Selectors were also keenly aware of the relationship between test performance and socio-economic background and schooling as this Big Three selector noted:

Some start their SAT test prep in the 7th grade – there is a whole industry for test prep. Some spent as much time preparing for the test as they do in school ... and then some private college consultants charge \$1000 an hour or so for test prep.

In SAT tests and the like in the United States, Asian students top achievement tables ahead of whites, with fewer high-achieving Hispanic and black students. In England, Chinese and Indian students sometimes outperform white and mixed-race students, whereas black and Bangladeshi and Pakistani students tend to perform lower in GCSEs and A-levels.

US admissions controversies and discourses have historically focused mainly on race and have only recently moved to overtly talking about how racial diversity on campuses can hide a lack of socio-economic diversity. The opposite is the case for England. Here, inequality in access to higher education by ‘social class’ has been the dominant theme for some time, with only more recent attention to the modest racial diversity at some of England’s most selective universities.

The present chapter then explores how inequality poses challenges with regard to prior opportunities in schooling and at home before describing ways in which universities in the two countries are responding to these challenges.

The challenge of differences in families and schooling

For some education-minded parents in both the United States and England, thinking about a child’s education may begin before conception or birth and may involve moving to an area with good early years education opportunities, calling prospective schools when the first baby scan arrives and, where such an option exists, to put children’s names down for elite private schools at birth. For example, the single-sex pre-preparatory school in London attended by the two Royal princes, William and Harry, advises that ‘Registrations are accepted from birth (we do not register babies before they are born) ... parents are advised to contact the school office as soon as possible after the birth of their son’

(Wetherby 2015). In the United States, early year application dates tend to be on annual cycles – for example, New York families mark the ‘Labor day’ prior to enrolment as the key time when application forms to private kindergarten become available – many applications are then submitted the very same day. American books like Schoenstein’s book *Toilet Trained for Yale* (2002), *The Ivy Chronicles* (2005) by Karen Quinn about kindergarten admission and Chua’s *Tiger Mum* (2011) about bringing up children in the competitive Yale university town of Newhaven have highlighted not only how early some parents start thinking about their children’s future but also to what lengths they might go to achieve their aspirations for their children.

The early years are also particularly expensive years in private education. The fees of, for example, over £18,000 per annum for an early years place at Wetherby’s, London or of \$42,000 per annum for an early year place at Trinity, New York, easily dwarf or equal the tuition fees of even the most expensive universities. They also put the private consultant fees some US families pay to place their children into kindergarten into perspective. The competition for desirable education is particularly heightened in urban centres like London and New York.

Participating in expensive and prestigious early year and middle school education is only enjoyed by an often privileged minority of children in both countries, and can set children up for a trajectory of educational success that enhances the chances of culminating in admission to higher education generally and in addition to highly selective higher education in particular: some private nursery schools have a preferential admissions policy for the children of alumni and they may provide a well-established pipeline to other private schools in the next stages of education. For example, the elite private school Harrow in England enrols 85 per cent of its students from private preparatory schools.

Private schools in both countries and at any stage of schooling are aware of the importance families place on where students continue their education after leaving a school and often showcase such information on their websites. Depending on the stage of schooling, this information may capture progression into private primary or secondary schools or higher education. In the latter case, ‘Oxbridge admission’ for England or ‘Ivy/MIT/Stanford’ admission in the United States are noted separately – especially if such rates are good for the school. Both countries also have research and league tables that look at which schools have the highest transition rates into those selective universities.

According to *Forbes*, Trinity School New York had a 41 per cent transition rate into these selected US universities (Laneri 2010). A table of the top feeder

high schools for the Ivy/MIT/Stanford has a strong presence of New York City private schools and New England prep schools – although publicly funded schools focusing on maths and science and other magnet schools also show high transition into selective colleges (The Wall Street Journal 2007). In England, the two private London schools Westminster and St Paul's Girl's school have half of their UK university-bound graduates going to Oxford or Cambridge with a further 35 per cent attending a select group of eleven other leading universities (Westminster School 2013; St Paul's Girls' School 2014).

Fewer than one in ten English children attend private schools. Yet, at the most selective universities, privately educated students can make up half of the student body. An analysis by the charity the Sutton Trust found that just forty secondary schools and colleges out of a total of 2,750 schools provided about a quarter of all Oxbridge entrants in 2011/12 (Sutton Trust 2008). Again, many of these forty schools are private schools with some notable exceptions of usually academically selective state-funded schools. US statistics on private schools suggest a similar trend.

While the majority of students at private school are from very wealthy families, notable financial aid and bursaries initiative by some of the most prestigious schools like Eton College in England and Phillips Exeter Academy in the United States are opening private schools to high ability students without the means to pay for their education. With \$1 billion endowment and a strong vision for the academic future of the school, Exeter Academy has 45 per cent of its students on scholarships, dwarfing Eton's £250 million endowment supported aspiration for 5 per cent of their 1,300 students to be on full scholarships. Similar to higher education where scholarships are more readily available at the absolute top institutions, the second tier of private schools with smaller endowments are usually less able to offer scholarships. While scholarships based on ability and ability to pay become somewhat more common in secondary or high schools, scholarships or bursaries for the very early stages of private primary school education remain scarce.

The state-funded school sector in both the United States and England also educates some of the highest achieving young people. Entrance examination performance and/or living in the geographic catchment area of the school are key ways for getting into those schools. Examples include Boston Latin School, Stuyvesant High School New York or Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in the United States and the publicly funded academically selective 'grammar schools' in England which educate around 4 per cent of all English secondary school students.¹

While in theory open to everyone with the ability to succeed, in practice, some parental or school support is required for potentially eligible students to know that these schools exist, to prepare for the required entrance examinations, and to submit applications on time. Research in England has shown that children from more affluent families are more likely to attempt the entrance examinations for grammar schools, that a disproportionate number of students in state-funded selective grammar schools have previously attended private, fee-paying primary schools, and that grammar schools have fewer children on free school meals in them than there are in the population of high achieving children. However, Asian students are well represented in grammar schools in England, a finding that is repeated for magnet schools in the United States where, for example, Chinese Americans have developed a successful system of disseminating information about the existence of these schools and the requirements for securing a place within their community (Waters et al. 2013).

However, the strong link between geography and catchment area for many state-funded schools that do not have entrance exams means that the state and private schools with the highest attaining students in them in both the United States and England can have rather similar socio-economic profiles. The premium in prices for properties located in desirable catchment areas can exceed the costs of several years of tuition fees for private school. In England as well as the United States, there are league tables and comparisons estimating the effect of a good school on property prices.

Furthermore, well-informed English parents are aware of the pressures universities are under to recruit more students from state schools (see Chapter 7 on governance). Some parents therefore ‘play the education game’ to their advantage by sending their children to private schools for the early part of their schooling and moving them to excellent state schools for the final years of their education.

The children who generally do least well in the system are those with interrupted schooling due to frequent moves and unstable home contexts. In England, the charity *ButtleUK* has raised awareness concerning the low attainment and particularly low transition rates into higher education and the even lower transition into selective higher education for children who have been in foster care families or care homes. A minority of 7 per cent of these children – compared with 47 per cent of children who have not been in care – participate in higher education and few apply to selective higher education. Children who had to flee their home countries also experience poor education outcomes although it can be more difficult to capture statistical information on their progression.

In the United States, undocumented migrants graduating from US high schools have significantly lower transition rates into college than equally qualified legal migrants or non-migrants, a finding that is at least partly due to their smaller chance of accessing funding or in-state tuition rates for college.

These findings on different attainment and schooling for different groups are partly driven by different access to the 'hidden curriculum' of how the education system works and which educational opportunities and support might be available. The English scholar Basil Bernstein (1974) and the French scholar Pierre Bourdieu (1986) have written about the effects of differences in ability to understand the 'assumed code' of educational systems. Generally, the educated middle classes are better placed to support their children through the way systems work. Indeed, one Ivy League selector noted how he had found navigating the process of helping his child go to college 'very difficult – and I am an expert in the field! So, how difficult would it be for low income kids without all this knowledge to navigate the process?'

An example from higher education of how detailed knowledge of a system can work in practice is the following observation: 'children of college professors very frequently will end up in liberal arts schools ... because the professors know that the teaching is best at liberal arts schools because professors actually have to teach ... you get to work with the professor' (liberal arts selector). Also, some knowledge is required to appreciate how a liberal arts education can be complemented by pursuing graduate study at a bigger, more recognizably branded research university later. Similarly, middle-class families in England know that a good route into a prestigious legal career is studying a non-law degree at a Russell Group university and then studying law in a short conversion course afterwards. This is the sort of knowledge that will be less obvious to first-generation university students or those who have no links to professionals.

The US scholar Annette Laureau (2011) also show how, from early childhood, different families have different parenting philosophies with middle-class families consciously structuring their children's environment and activity through concerted cultivation whereas working-class families use a more natural growth model. For an admissions system that rewards evidence of engagement and rounded portfolios or stellar performances, opportunities given through concerted cultivation might arguably advantage middle-class applicants. The exceptional achievement of self-starters who create rather than use opportunities given to them, however, also has to be acknowledged.

Networks or social capital and information, advice, and guidance – or the lack thereof – also explain differences in attainment and educational choices

and progression in a line of work attributed originally to the US scholar James Coleman. For parents who do not know the higher education system very well, the extent to which they can support their children is then not so much an issue of a lack of aspiration for their children, but some parents are not well positioned to advise their children on their educational journeys. Schools also differ in terms of course opportunities and subjects they provide, for example, US 'schools with higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch programs ... were less likely to offer AP, IB, and enriched curricula' (NACAC 2011). In other words, the poorer the students in a school, the less likely is the school to offer the robust academic curriculum highly selective universities are looking for. Ratios of counsellors to students vary significantly between publicly funded and private schools with more one-on-one support available in private schools. Similar patterns are true for England.

Another US selector noted how university admission is an 'emotional, not just a rational and logical process' and thus emotional support was crucial for successfully navigating the process. Some children, like those in foster care and refugees, might not have any family member supporting them. In England, there has been a long tradition of research – for example, by Diane Reay and colleagues (2005) – thinking about how some young people perceive higher education to have a certain culture or to be for a certain sort of person. For students with little history or knowledge of universities in their families, there can be concerns about 'fitting in' and having to adjust and learn a new way of being in the world. Such concerns can prevent students from applying to higher education and can affect experiences at universities.

Overall, the existence of differences in attainment and progression in education is well established and linked not only to issues around educational opportunities. Such differences reflect other, often multiple, differences in wealth, health, family structures and housing that persist in wider societies. So, how can universities and their selectors attempt fair admission in this context of differences in earlier opportunities and other inequalities?

Tackling admission in the context of inequality

The challenge for elite colleges today is to get more students from the bottom half and bottom quarter of the income distribution.

(Big Three selector)

There was a time when universities in neither the United States or England would have perceived the attainment gaps and the diversity of opportunities

in earlier schooling and family context as a problem for university admissions. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the idea of universities as a finishing school of the well-off and direct or indirect exclusions based on wealth, religion, gender, disability and race was common in both England and the United States. Indeed, Jerome Karabel (2005) has documented how Harvard, Yale and Princeton have gone to some length in the past to preserve higher education as a way for privileged social groups to consolidate status. Joseph Soares (2007) has documented the rise of the meritocracy at Oxford in the second half of the twentieth century. An Ivy selector recalled how his institution used to have this 'special rating system for prep school candidates'. Certain schools 'were pipelines for certain places, but that's changed a lot ... that's part of a blatant way you can be more meritocratic in your process ... a lot of schools don't have traditional feeder schools that way anymore'.

Similarly, in England, pipeline links between, for example, specific Oxbridge colleges and certain elite private schools are also a thing of the past. Only a small minority of respondents considered it 'not the role of universities to address wider inequalities' (academic selector England) or considered 'the primary aim of admission fairness to the institutional objectives rather than being fair to society' (US Ivy League selector) or being fair to individual, potentially disadvantaged, applicants.

The vast majority of selectors on both sides of the Atlantic are not only aware of the challenge of unequal prior schooling as we have seen in Chapter 1, many professionals have chosen to work in the admissions and outreach field with an intention to make a genuine difference to young people's lives.

Many selectors and, indeed, educational researchers and policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic note how the best way forward to change participation in elite higher education would be to 'fix the pipeline' (Russell Group admissions professional) and 'to change opportunities in the very early stages of schooling' (US selector) and that admission will be inevitably flawed 'as long as the link between schooling and property tax remains' (US selector): 'if we could, we would go back and change opportunities at 3rd grade, that's when opportunities are set' (Big Three selector).

As this pipeline is not easily fixable, admissions professionals and academic respondents in this project were keen for their own practice to be as fair as possible, although there was some disagreement as to what fairness meant in practice. The next section describes how selectors are rising to the challenge of addressing inequalities through outreach, making changes to the way they admit applicants, and changing the framework of admissions. The chapter then concludes with discussing some contested issues in admissions.

Widening the application pool: Outreach

You can't be admitted if you don't apply.

(Big Three selector)

We wish to increase the percentage of students from state schools and low higher education participation neighbourhoods.

(Russell Group admissions professional)

One aspect that makes elite universities 'elite' is the competitiveness of obtaining a place. Despite the already high competitiveness for gaining admission, 'barriers continue to exist in society and there is a need to cast our net widely' (Ivy League selector). While there are thus too many applicants in some ways, there are not enough applicants from groups that are under-represented in selective higher education.

Universities on both side of the Atlantic thus dedicate time and other resources to reaching out to schools and children from disadvantaged families or schools with little or no history of sending their graduates into higher education or selective higher education. These outreach or strategic recruitment operations often run alongside traditional recruitment activities that aim to maintain the steady stream of highly qualified applicants from more established pathways into higher education.

Examples of initiatives are the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP), or Cambridge University's HE+ programme to support and encourage adolescents from non-traditional university backgrounds into higher education. Princeton works with twenty-five organizations that in turn work on the ground with kids from families of low income. Harvard's Financial Aid Initiative encourages students from families with below \$80,000 to come to Harvard. There are also summer schools in the United States that offer, for example, AP courses or writing classes for students whose schools do not offer these. In the UK, Sutton Trust summer schools as well as those led by individual universities have been shown to be helpful in increasing preparedness and entry to selective higher education for participants. A recent addition to such schemes is the Sutton Trust-Fulbright Commission's programme of support for disadvantaged UK students to apply to selective US universities. If admitted, students can access the universities' generous international financial aid package to enable these UK students to study in the United States. These are all examples of initiatives that give bright, non-privileged students in publicly funded schools additional support, previews and tasters of higher education. Additional programmes in the

UK support and mentor disadvantaged students into specific careers such as law and medicine. Specific degree programmes such as the extended medicine and enhanced support dentistry programmes at King's College London allow disadvantaged students to take an additional year of study to complete their academic courses.

Some universities also run particular programmes for those giving information, advice and guidance to adolescents, such as US public school counsellors who are responsible for advising many more students than their counterparts in private schools. A non-Ivy selector observed, 'We might need a bit more outreach at public schools and public secondary counsellors, because they don't necessarily have the time or the resources dedicated to really focus on the college process.' English universities have also experimented with programmes for secondary school teachers to be part of outreach, for example, by being in residence at a university.

Outreach programmes tend to draw on knowledge about under-represented groups in higher education or in particular academic disciplines. Profiling software, family, school and postcode information can be used for identifying potential outreach students and to targeted school visits to help entice more higher education applications from disadvantaged groups. The aim is to make higher education more reflective of the general secondary school population in England and America respectively.

An example of strategic outreach or recruitment in the United States was recalled by this Ivy League selector:

I was in Alaska, and McCormick County [South Carolina] on Native American reservations. Because we do feel that there is great perspective there to be represented ... that history, that voice, is an important part of what should be in our community. So we feel that we need to act affirmatively in trying to recruit qualified students who are from under-represented backgrounds.

Several US respondents also noted how recruiting athletes was considered part of their strategic recruitment. Some thought that recruiting athletes also helped with the socio-economic diversity of students. However, research does not support this link for the Ivy League institutions. Athletes here are less likely to come from families with income below \$80,000 than applicants who are not recruited athletes.

There is evidence that private US colleges spend approximately two times as much as public colleges to recruit both applicants and admitted students, including outreach to previously under-served schools.

Even among those who strongly support outreach or strategic recruitment, there is acute awareness of some of the limitations of such initiatives even with the best intentions. For example, many universities rightly engage in a 'do it in your backyard' mantra and work with local schools and students. This can, however, lead to some areas like inner-city London being quite well served with outreach programmes whereas other, often rural or harder to reach areas, are not closely linked with universities. Some collaboration between universities is thus often desirable to achieve more equitable access to information for all young people. In England, collaborations between different universities tend to be least problematic when they concern early years interventions or aim to raise attainment for those participating in outreach schemes. In the final years of schooling, however, there can be more competition between universities as they compete for a potentially limited pool of high-achieving, disadvantaged young people.

The use of contextual or holistic admissions is a key strategy for converting outreach and strategic recruitment into admitted students.

Using Holistic and contextual admissions

We use a lot of context. As a university, we have been very conscious of the need to engage with contextual information. Contextual information comes in many forms, some of it is actually bits of statistical information, some of it is what people read in the personal statement, and probably more important, in the references about an applicant's background. And, I think one of the other myths is that we do not care about this sort of thing. Actually, we do. (Nicholson 2013)

We take into account the context within the school. If a kid is so much better than the rest of the school, that kid has a right to be at [this institution]. (Ivy League selector)

Holistic admissions in the United States or contextual admissions in England are a key strategy universities use for taking into account the social context of an applicant when making admissions decisions. In the United States, the approach means that each applicant is looked at individually in relation to all the information provided about or by them.

In England, contextual data flagging gives selectors at many Russell Group institutions, including Oxbridge, a quick view of a range of information about an applicant. A UK-wide review of contextual data in universities admission found that among eight case study universities a range of additional information

about applicants was added to application files before final admissions decisions were made (Moore, Mountford-Zimdars and Wiggins 2013). The range of factors flagged for inclusion included school performance at age sixteen and eighteen, school progression rates, coming from a neighbourhood with low transitions into higher education or an area experiencing relative deprivation or other measures of neighbourhood disadvantage. Family information regarding whether the applicant was the first in family in higher education, had been in care or other individual circumstances such as forced migration background could also be taken into account. Some universities also used information as to whether an applicant had participated in an outreach scheme to flag disadvantaged applicants. Universities can decide how many of these measures, if any, they wish to use and how to use them – for example, whether an applicant needs to be in more than one disadvantage category before being flagged for particular consideration.

An Oxbridge admissions professional explained how:

We evaluate these flags in terms of trying to make sure that everybody is conscious of them at the point of decision making ... and we also train the coordinators within a subject because we don't only moderate gathered fields within colleges, we also do it across the colleges, subject-by-subject, and in each admission subject there is a subjective convener and the part of the subject convener, while we train them annually, is 'remind everybody about the flags and what they mean' ... and the way [flags] are used, is then if there's someone with high scores and flags who's not being taken, someone's going to be put on the spot and then likely to be asked to justify that decision and if the justification is not a robust one ... that student is very likely then to be reassessed ... we are monitoring the difference it's making.

Academic selectors frequently use additional, more nuanced, ways to contextualize the academic profile of applicants. For example, one Oxbridge selector mentioned paying attention to whether the school offered advanced mathematics courses (further maths) as not to penalize applicants who had not taken it in the interview or noted that interviews themselves had to be contextualized as it would, for example, be 'quite unfair to expect to the same performance from someone who had done politics and someone who hadn't done politics at all'.

A Big Three selector also noted how the school context of curriculum offers was considered during the admissions process.

This public school in Detroit – I know that they don't offer this advanced curriculum – but I would want to see that the student has made the most of

what has been made available to them. And the way we can see that is through a school profile. And the school will let us know the kind of courses that are offered, the way that they grade those courses, and how well they're doing, and that kind of thing.

Another Big Three selector echoed this description of holistic admissions practice by explaining:

When we read students in context, we look at what they have done with what's been made available to them. So, for example, I know that the top private school in Michigan offers a huge number of advanced placement courses. ... I mean, the teaching is very, very good, and I would expect a student to be taking AP courses ... challenging themselves ... most high schools in the US will send us a school profile with the transcript ... some of the top schools will send us the profile of ... what kind of extracurriculars are offered, and how hard the students work.

For the United States, the annual 'national picture' report by NACAC shows that 'private college admission is more "holistic" than public college admission. Private selective universities considered a broader range of factors in the admission decision' (NACAC 2011). Contextual factors are considered alongside the other admissions factors discussed in Chapter 6 – grades in college, strength of curriculum, test scores, essay class rank, counsellor recommendation, demonstrated interest, teacher recommendation, interview, extra-curricular activities, subject tests and SAT subject scores.

For the United States, contextual factors or flags include race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, state or county of residence, high school attended and alumni relations. For example, a Big Three selector noted that while her institution did not have admissions targets by school, school information was 'definitely something we consider ... how many we're taking from private and from public schools.' Another Ivy League selector was keen to dispel the myth that some thought 'if you're from a high school where no one's ever applied to [this Ivy], you're at a disadvantage. And that's not the case at all. There are fewer applying from a smaller school in rural Indiana, for example, or inner-city Detroit. But, we'll want to see those students too.'

In both England and the United States, school recommendations are also contextualized. For example, there is knowledge that 'public secondary counsellors are very taxed ... whereas at a lot of private day schools and boarding schools, they have offices that are dedicated solely to college counselling' (Big Three selector).

Contextualizing applicants is not without its controversies. Criticisms come from two angles. First, there are those who are concerned about the impact on more privileged students who do not benefit from contextualization. Second, there are those who think contextualizing applicants is still not inclusive enough and can miss nuances of disadvantage and is open to being used to reproduce advantage as well as in the case of legacy admits.

A senior Russell Group strategist noted how contextual admission was ‘politically the most contentious thing you do, and on my governing body it’s a very difficult issue’. He elaborated that many of those who sit on the governing boards of selective English universities have children who are in private education and contextual admission is perceived as disadvantaging them and their peer group. Voices from the private school have also put forward that there is ‘private school prejudice’ and that they are being penalized for having graduates with high achievement. Universities also seek to balance the interest of outreach with maintaining their traditional parent and school support. One liberal arts college selector noted that his university did not wish to sever such ties by rejecting all applicants ‘from traditional feeder schools’.

In England, an interesting area in which the focus of critics from the private school privilege position and those seeking more nuanced contextualization overlap is the issue of scholarships. The existence of a scholarship system within an otherwise elite private school system – indeed, as well as the existence of excellent state schools – means that the school an applicant applies from cannot always be equated with their families’ socio-economic position. Not all applicants to university from prestigious secondary schools are affluent, and some applicants from state schools are as affluent or more affluent than some students whose parents pay for private schools.

Select applicants will have been to private schools because they won scholarships earlier on, others will have been in private education primarily because of their ability to pay or some lineage linking them with the school. One English selector stated that up to one-third of applicants to his university from private schools had been at the private school because of a scholarship.

While universities are matched against targets on the numbers of students they take by different school types, several Russell Group Institutions wish to present their intake statistics in a more nuanced way that takes into account the sometimes complex relationship between school type and socio-economic status as well as school moves during education between the private and the state school sector.

There are other voices arguing for enhancing the contextual data approach in admission. The question here is ‘who is not flagged?’ (Russell groups selector). Or, as this Oxbridge selector noted:

I think it's [increasing access] a laudable goal ... but I feel strongly about rural working class white boys and why do they not get an extra chance to make themselves heard and then you got other people arguing for other groups and that I mean does seem to me completely fair.

This selector then perceived that there was an element of different groups being played out against each other with regard to whose context was judged worthy of a ‘flag’ or special consideration and who was not in this group. Indeed, there are some differences in what context Russell Group institutions flag. For example, refugee status was flagged by one institution but not systematically by others. Such detailed differences in what institutions might consider as part of their holistic evaluation may be unclear to applicants and potential applicants.

Another complexity in contextualizing applicants was pointed out by a Big Three selector in that certain disruptive or disadvantageous life events – she used the examples of parental divorce or death – can happen across social groups and are not exclusive to socio-economically disadvantaged applicants. This might explain why US selectors prefer a ‘holistic’ approach of seeking to understand each applicant and their particular circumstances to the ‘contextual’ approach of flagging or given special consideration to particular groups of applicants taken in England. Despite these conceptual differences in contextualization, however, in reality, there might not be a huge difference between the two approaches as long as they use individualized rather than formulaic cuts-offs for admitting students and extenuating individual circumstances are taken into account.

Finally, in the United States, special consideration does not necessarily occur only for outreach purposes. For example, US admissions offices might ‘highlight’ those from ethnic minority backgrounds, athletes and legacies. Such special consideration, on the one hand, serves the purpose of meeting institutional objectives in terms of having an athletic team and alumni giving. On the other hand, the ethnic diversity consideration serves the mission institution see for themselves in the wider world with regard to educating diverse students. This is somewhat different from flagging those who have been in care in England to acknowledge their particularly disadvantageous start in life.

The US legacy consideration in particular is also not designed to rectify inequalities and might indeed serve to reproduce advantage – indeed, this is a controversial aspect of admission for many US commentators. In the practical

world of university admissions, one Ivy selector described some sort of horse trading of this controversial legacy consideration when explaining how he 'looked kindly' at applications from community colleges partly to 'counter-balance the effect of taking into account alumni connections'.

Changing the cost of higher education

The Ivies and other highly selective universities with large endowments have powerful policies in place to address the issue of the cost of higher education. The top tier of US institutions is needs-blind and can easily meet the financial cost of education for many of their undergraduates from endowment.

Indeed, this senior selector from a Big Three Ivy argued that the single greatest challenge in admission was.

making the case that [Big Three Ivy] is open to talent, not to a special high degree of means either in intellectual capital at home or lots of money at home or privilege in other ways you want to define it but the talented people are the people who want to come here ... and money is not a barrier.

She further elaborated how eliminating finances as a barrier was backed by strong institutional initiatives, saying:

In the past ten years we have greatly upped the ante, greatly upped the level of support, especially targeting this support for students whose families are either very modestly compensated or positioned in American society which, by the way, is the bottom half of the United States ... but we've also, ... greatly enhanced the support to families who ... have incomes of up to [figure close to \$200,000] which sounds like a lot of money but living in America is really expensive. We began to see – and we looked at our data very closely, as you can imagine; we're obsessed with our data and that's why we have it – we were concerned that we were beginning again to not to attract the interest of students whose families were in that kind of middle income range and so we needed to reverse course. A lot of the most talented – academically talented – students come from those [middle income] families, as it happens.

This Big Three Ivy then has put into place specific policies to address the challenge of the 'squeezed middle' by extending financial aid up to those not living in financial hardship.

There is a 'run-away top of the super rich' (Ivy League selector) who can easily afford the cost of the sort of early education and life experience that enhance

the chances of gaining admission to elite universities. Paying tuition fees and subsistence is also not a problem. At the other end of the wealth spectrum, for those with high demonstrated need, there has been a longer tradition of financial aid packages covering all the cost of higher education – although, as we have previously seen, young people in this group are generally less likely to have the grades required for admission. The concern is that those ‘in the middle’ who may have the academic credentials but are not so poor that they qualify for full aid struggle most with the costs of higher education. Indeed, one US selector reflected on his own experience of not enrolling at his first-choice university because ‘I could not afford them [the fees at a university] and they could not afford me’ meaning he had not qualified for financial aid nor did him and his family have sufficient disposable income to pay the fees. The shifting of financial aid to include greater fractions of the middle classes is a direct response to this challenge.

The impressive but costly financial aid initiatives of the Ivies are not always easily matched by institutions with smaller endowments. The issue of the ‘squeezed middle’ then is now perhaps a particular problem for those private institutions just below the top tier. Their smaller endowments, mean that there is a challenge when ‘schools [meaning universities] can’t give enough financial aid and students can’t pay what is required’ (Ivy League selector). A liberal arts college selector furthermore noted:

I totally understand the reasoning for [scholarships] because you want to make college affordable and not just something for rich kids but it’s very costly. If I get laid off from [my institution] because we don’t have any money I’m going to be really pissed about it because I’m going to think well the \$50,000 for the one kid that we take, that’s my salary, you know, that’s more than I get paid for one of these kids to come here for one year.

Having funding in place then is clearly key for supporting first-generation and poor as well as middle-class applicants in higher education. However, this observation is balanced against the observation that most US colleges – around 70 to 80 per cent – rely on student fee income to stay afloat.

In England, all higher education students are eligible for full loans to cover the costs of their tuition fees. In Russell Group universities, fees are generally set at £9,000 per year, this is the same for Oxbridge as for other institutions. Institutions are mandated to re-invest £1,000 of those fees into widening participation or financial support for students and the Russell Group universities have generous scholarship schemes for students from low-income

backgrounds. For students entering higher education prior to 2016, those with a household income of £25,000 were eligible for a full maintenance grant from the government of £3,387 per year and partial maintenance grants were available for students with household incomes of up to £42,620, other students could obtain loans. However, matriculants from 2016 onwards, all these grants will be replaced by loans that are available to all students. Universities continue to offer their own grant schemes for students with low household incomes, although the amounts awarded vary by institution and available resources. The costs of higher education can still influence decision-making whether to continue into higher education at all, but there is support accessible by everyone regardless of where they study and additional support is available in particular at the universities with the largest endowments.

The main general difference between the costs of higher education in the United States and England is that default set up for government US student loans is beginning repayment just after graduation whereas the repayment for fees is linked to income in England meaning students only repay the loans once they start earning. However, the elite US institutions presented in this study offer bursaries rather than loans meaning that poor students can get a free education without having to pay back any of the costs of fees or living expenses. There are also some full fees bursaries and maintenance costs bursaries at Russell Group universities in England.

Changing how elite higher education is viewed

For many parents, where their kid ends up going to school [university] is like a report card on their parenting.

(US Big Three selector)

For some parents, university admission can be viewed the ultimate test of how well they had done in navigating the prior education system and bringing up their child.

One way of dealing with the challenge is questioning the reference point that following a particular trajectory and getting into a leading university in either England or the United States is indeed the report card or judgement day for their parenting. Perhaps surprisingly, selective institutions are the first to admit that there are other routes to a happy life than admission to a selective institution. Leading institutions speak highly and respectfully of their competitor institutions and convey that they consider an education at many other

educational establishments as worthwhile. Selectors also value young people choosing to take time out or consciously choosing a different career path. In one instance, an English selector explained that he thought some students might find the environment, curricula and assessment systems at other institutions than his own more conducive for attaining highly.

One Big Three Ivy actively encourages students to take a gap year after school with the implicit aim to have time out of the pressured education system and to provide space to think. Another US selector encouraged students to view, 'Picking a college is like picking a spouse. You don't pick the "top ranked" one, because that has no meaning. You pick the one with the personality and character that complements your own.' Another US selector put it as 'finding the right fit, not the right sticker in the Volvo'.

Indeed, because well-informed parents and students can go to extra-ordinary lengths to gain a real or perceived advantage, educators are redesigning some education practices to prevent certain behaviour or playing excessive strategy games in education.

For example, some English private preparatory schools now split every month into three equal parts and select from births within each third to avoid a rush for being born on the first and an alleged rise in elected caesarians on that day. The Independent School Admissions Association of Greater New York has been so concerned about the impact of coaching and the culture of anxiety the admissions test to private preparatory schools administered at age four creates that many of their consortia schools abolished the tests.

In England, some universities go to some length to establish the different types of school an applicant has attended for their GCSEs (usually taken at the age of sixteen) and for their A-level or equivalent qualification when they apply to higher education. This work is undertaken in particular to contextualise students' school changes between the state and private school sector in the final years of secondary education. A wealthy student who has been educated privately and only changes to a state school for the last two years will be reported as a state school admit. Some affluent parents strategically move their children into the state sector for this reason. Equally, a poor student with a scholarship to an elite private school would count as a private school admit. Some universities therefore think understanding school moves is important for genuinely spotting talent and for understanding applicants in context.

Overall, selectors themselves are a perhaps unlikely group of proponents for toning down the race to the top institutions they represent and calling for some measured approaches in thinking about the value and opportunities of elite and other forms of higher education.

Remaining challenges

In England, national and institutional policies to widen participation and financial support have increased the representation of those from less affluent families in higher education and in elite higher education. At Harvard, over 20 per cent of students do not pay anything for their education meaning their family income is below \$65,000 (correct June 2015) with 70 per cent of students on some form of financial aid.²

While a lot of progress has been made to enhance the accessibility and affordability of higher education, several selectors also noted some limitations to how far their programmes went. As this Big Three selector noted:

Occasionally you get kids that have, maybe a parent in jail, or ... You do see ... kids from families who are struggling, but really, like, real poverty is rare. They're just not ... I don't even know if those kids are applying to college, let alone [this Ivy]. So I mean, it happens, but it's very rare.

Similarly, in England, the representation of children who have been 'in-care' remains low in higher education and particularly in elite higher education.

Other remaining challenges include that the effect of a policy change can be unclear. As a result, different institutions can sometimes have different policies aimed at enhancing their admissions process. For example, some consider selection interviews as offering unique opportunities to shine regardless of background, others consider interviews as a barrier that leads to social reproduction. Thus, some universities strongly support interviews and others would like to see them abolished or have abolished them. Controversies also surround additional admissions tests in England: Oxford University has supported the development and conduct of a range of admissions tests to make selection fairer and to enable selectors to tap into potential that might not have shone through in standard school examinations. In contrast, Cambridge University has significantly fewer admissions tests and views as a strength of their admissions system that it is rooted in public examinations rather than additional tests. Indeed, a professional Russell Group selector observed how with additional tests 'you are doomed if you do [administer them] and you are doomed if you don't'.

In the United States, there are also controversies surrounding tests as barriers or enablers. In recent years, some less selective institutions have gone 'test optional' meaning that applicants do not have to submit SAT or ACT results. Such policies are designed to enable a wider range of students to apply. However,

proponents of tests have also argued that tests allow applicants an opportunity to shine and offer additional information other than high school performance.

Chapter summary

Looking at societies through the lens of admission to higher education means trying to understand social inequality and the idea of education-based social mobility whereby those from modest social origins can be given an opportunity to develop their lives and employment prospects through education.

In the context of the constraints of their practice, many selectors sought of ways to support and admit students who had faced disadvantages. Perhaps ironically, the most selective and richest institutions are particularly well placed to offer bursaries to students who are high attaining but come from modest backgrounds. This is ironic in the sense that the majority of students from modest backgrounds either do not achieve the high grades necessary for filing a competitive application to the most selective universities or do not to apply even when they have such high grades. As a result, most disadvantaged students in higher education are in institutions that do not have generous institutional scholarships although they might be eligible for government-backed loans.

Nonetheless, significant changes have been made in higher education admissions over the past decades. Despite the fierce competition for places, admitted students are more diverse now in both England and the United States than they were in the past. Indeed, one selector reflected that:

We're inclusive ... we're more exclusive than we've ever been, and yet we're more inclusive than we've ever been. And it's really interesting to understand that and make sense of that at once. (Ivy League selector)

To conclude then, leading universities on both sides of the Atlantic understand the differential opportunities in early education and, by being mindful of such differences in admission and working to increase applications from disadvantaged students they avoid admitting only privileged students. In doing so, these universities are becoming more reflective of all high-attaining students, although they are some way off from being reflective of the profile of all school-leavers.

The next and final chapter then asks – does it actually make a difference to participate in elite higher education?