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**Admissions, the Virus and Widening Access**

At this difficult time many of us are struggling to come to terms with impact of the Covid 19 crisis on both our personal and professional lives. We are definitely finding new ways to communicate!

The disruption has been profound for those post-16 students expecting to take their A Levels and BTECs this summer. Now it is likely that their futures will be decided by predicted grades and teacher judgement rather than the formal examinations they were expecting to take this summer. Admissions offices in universities across the UK are reviewing their carefully laid plans and systems to work out the best way forward.

Also, there have been calls for a cap on student numbers. THES 30 March

[Bring back student number controls VC says - Times Higher Education](about:blank)

It is not very often that the WP community considers supporting a cap on student numbers. I know it’s the first time I have ever seen the need for it. Traditionally a cap has meant that under-represented groups lose out as it forces admissions offices to make some very stark choices. But these are strange and uncharted times and it may be that the calls for limits on recruitment may be necessary to avoid destabilising the sector.

It is well known that HEIs with more selective courses habitually offer more places to students than they can accommodate, working on the assumption that not all applicants will meet their predicted grades.

Given that we are at the nadir of the demographic downturn in 18 year olds and there is great uncertainty about international student numbers, the risk that selective courses will fill at the expense of other HEIs is clear to see.

While this might provide a short-term fix, in the longer term this would decrease opportunities for students from under-represented groups to access HE.

Whether there is a cap or not this is a golden opportunity for admissions offices in the more selective HEIs to take account of the broader socio-economic factors that have impeded progress towards equity in access.

Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui’s recent research demonstrates the issues very clearly. We have included a link to a short presentation that Vikki Boliver made to the OfS and also the link to the longer presentation she gave for NERUPI in January 2020.

The community of practice aspect of NERUPI really helps us to explore key issues such as admissions and these are some of the ideas that have emerged from members.

* PREDICTED GRADES

Gill Wyness’  research shows that while the vast majority of students' grades are overpredicted high ability, low SEC (socio-economic status) students receive less generous predictions than high ability, high SES. While the differences are small, taking this disparity into account when confirming places could have a significant impact on meeting Access targets and increasing the diversity of the student body.

[https://econpapers.repec.org/paper/uclcepeow/20-07.htm](about:blank)

*So admissions teams look at those offer holders again.*

* ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION PLAN TARGETS

Although the OfS, quite rightly, will not require HEIs to submit monitoring statements over this difficult period. But this should not deter more selective universities from aiming to meet their APP targets. Admissions offices already know students’ predicted grades so have more time to take broader contextual issues into account and redress some of the inequalities of previous years.

*So admissions teams look at those offer holders again.*

* SETTING STUDENTS UP TO FAIL?

Colleagues should be assured that the use of predicted grades and inclusion of broader socio-economic issues  is not setting up students to fail. As research by Vikki Boliver and colleagues has shown grades on entry do not make that much difference to degree outcomes

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076](about:blank))

*So Lecturers be confident that your 2020 entrants will be able to meet the challenge.*

* ENTRANCE EXAMS

There has been some talk of HEIs setting their own entrance exams. With lecturers already working hard to support their current students, additional work and marking would be counterproductive.

*Managers encouraging and supporting staff to develop formative assessments on entry would be more productive for students and lecturers.*

* TRANSITION

All students will have experienced significant disruption in their education this year, regardless of socio-economic background. It is essential to connect with the new cohort as soon as possible and build learning communities as possible to focus on confidence-building, supported transitions, cultural acclimatization and building social networks. Teachers are also having to adapt and develop new work for their post-16 students to keep them engaged. Some subject teachers are setting small projects which they could potentially submit to their university tutors, which would motivate the students and provide the tutor with an insight into the students’ strengths and weaknesses. One very practical suggestion was that existing online apps like Seneca or Quizlet could be set up for lecturers to set basic knowledge learning, without any marking required.

*Outreach teams, support links between lecturers and teachers to develop extended transitions*.

One final point

* ADMISSIONS CYCLE

The current timing of the admissions cycle and clearing is more likely to avoid universities filling courses inappropriately so should not be changed.

There’s been enough disruption this year already – changes at this point would put additional strain on a finely balanced system.

Annette Hayton, NERUPI convenor

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