

Widening Participation and Admissions to Higher Education (0275)

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Keywords

Widening Participation, Admissions, Interviews

Abstract

“Education. Education. Education.”

The UK government is committed to the principle of providing a significant proportion of the UK population with a University level education. Included in this principle is the notion of inclusivity and access to Higher Education Institutions from all social and economic groups. The Higher Education Funding Council for England noted in 2006 a good response to this agenda from universities. *“The commitment to Widening Participation in the culture, mission, and management of institutions is growing and should be carefully reinforced and nurtured.”* (HEFCE, 2006). Whilst the intention and response to widening participation is good, the evidence of its success however is more limited. Some data has been generated by the Aim Higher programme, but on the whole *“evidence for the impact of WP interventions on raising attainment and on access to institutions is weak.”* (HEFCE, 2006).

There are practical issues in amassing relevant evidential data but there are theoretical difficulties too, particularly in establishing firm and causal connections between widening participation interventions and the way learners subsequently develop. The Product Design courses at the University of Brighton have chosen to operate a philosophy of widening participation through an applicant interview programme. In providing a sample of the results of the interview process and subsequent student performance, this paper aims to contribute to the body of evidence.

A Rationale for Interviews

Admissions guidelines by the Higher Education Steering Group state that *“prior educational attainment data remains the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level”* (Schwartz, 2004). In fact, in the case of the Product Design courses at the University of Brighton this is not shown by the statistics. Figure 1 shows the performance of 61 Design students taken from random samples over three years against the associated students average university score:-

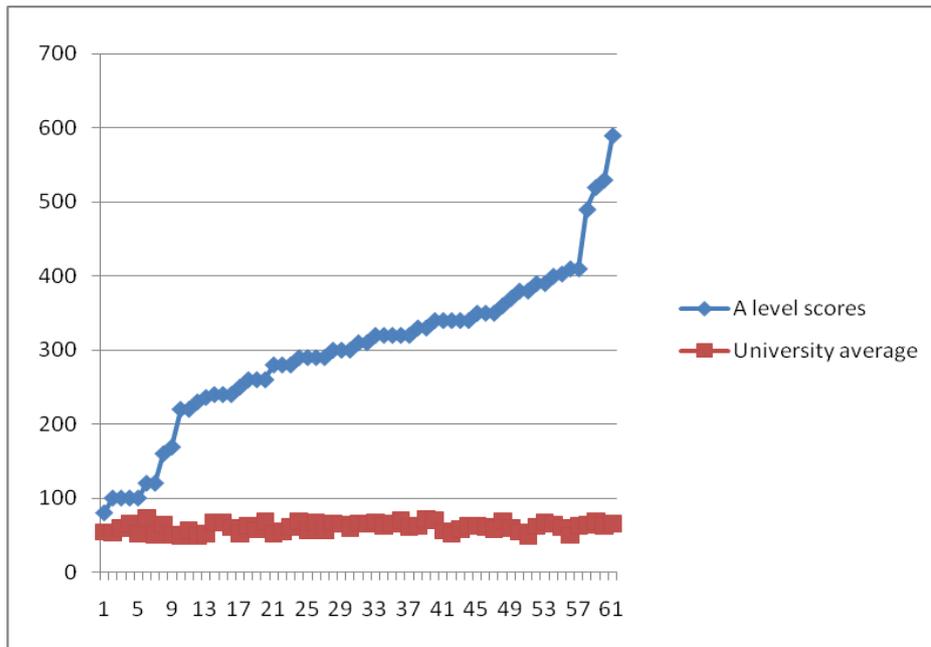


Figure 1

There are good reasons in this data alone for the course team to consider applicant suitability based not just on prior educational achievement but on an additional interview process. Medical, top college, popular courses and art based courses have traditionally interviewed applicants, partly because of the popularity of such courses, but significantly because the nature of students that suit these courses are determined by a number of factors outside of education qualifications.

There are other good reasons for conducting interviews. Grade inflation and the difficulty in separating out students is also a reason, with Imperial College developing entrance examinations for all students in 2008, the first university to do so in 13 years.

Interviews however may also show the potential of applicants which A levels may not and this can be relevant to the agenda of Widening Participation. Vocational courses for example are considered to be more accessible to applicants from working class backgrounds (Iamelli, 2007). Here the HESG Admissions Guidelines suggest that *“equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. The effect of social background on attainment begins to appear by the age of two. Many applicants have responsibilities at home or at work, or interrupted schooling, that can affect their educational achievement. And recent research shows that, all other things being equal, students from state schools and colleges tend to perform better at undergraduate level than students from independent schools and colleges.”* In other words, admissions should consider contextual factors as well as educational achievement, and consider the potential contribution to the learning environment. The course team therefore include interviews as part of a growing trend for affirmative action in Widening Participation (Glancy & Goastellec, 2007).

Interview Method

The HESG guidelines recommend five principles that should apply to the interview, or any admissions process:-

- Transparency

- Judgement based on achievement and potential
- Reliable and valid assessment methods
- Minimal barriers
- A professional approach supported by institutional structures.

Interviews therefore included assessment criteria beyond traditional educational qualifications. The assessment criteria in the design course interview therefore included the four course learning objectives along with personal attributes that the course team felt were important for successfully completing the course; Dynamism, Organisation and Motivation. Dynamism was chosen because the course is hands on using problem based learning. Organisation was chosen because of the overarching use of course works requiring scheduling and prioritisation. Motivation was used because design is hard, wide ranging and competitive.

Interviews were conducted over the same periods of time, using a number of course staff with subsequent cross referencing for uniform validity.

Results

The graphs below show the performance of a sample of students at their university admissions interview, their A level score and their average university grade for two different cohorts, one at level 3 (Figure 2) and one at level 2 (Figure 3).

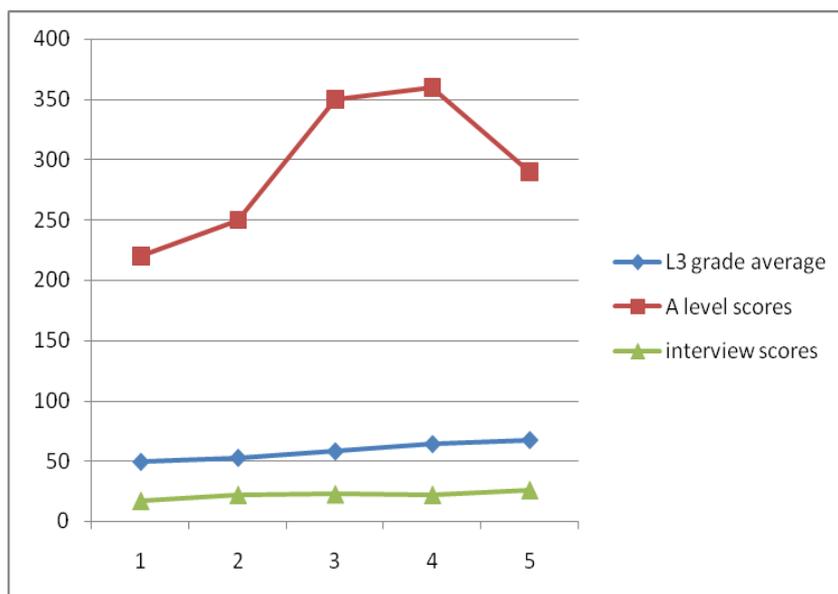


Figure 2

Figure 2 relates to final year

students. The sample size is clearly limited and this is in itself a direct consequence of a range of candidates with a wide variety of backgrounds, many excluding benchmark A-level results, from mature or overseas applicants for example. There is however perhaps just enough data to suggest some correlation between interview scores and subsequent student performance at university. There is also a general trend showing that the better the A level score a student has then the better they are likely to perform at University.

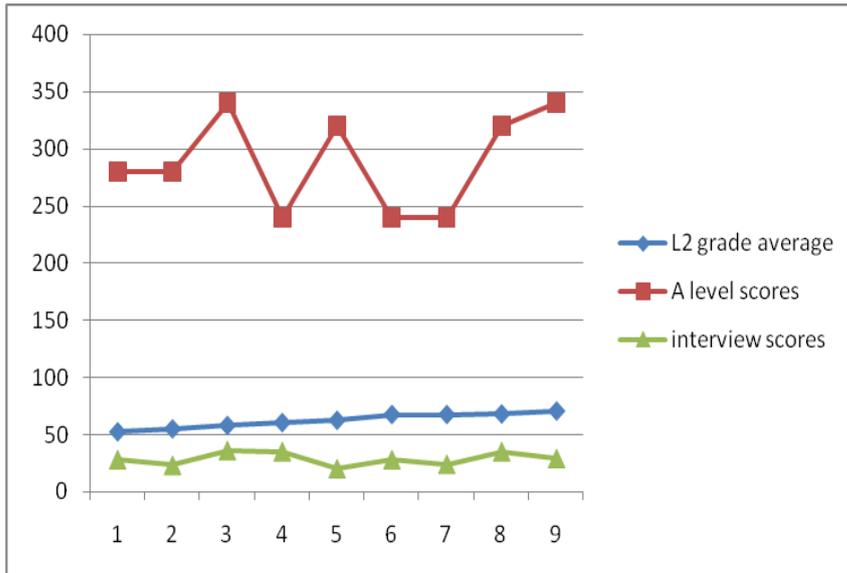


Figure 3

For level 2 students shown in

figure 3, the correlation between university performance, interview and A-level attainment is less clear. There are some correlations:-

- The student (9) with the joint best A-level score scored third highest in the interview, and proceeded to produce the best university average.
- The student (2) with the second lowest A-level score, had the second lowest interview score and came second from bottom.

However,

- The student (3) with the joint best A-level also scored the best interview score, but subsequently performed third worst in this group.
- Two students with joint lowest A-level scores (6 and 7) achieved similar low interview scores but achieved third and fourth university scores. A third student (4) with the same low A-level score achieved the second highest interview score – but came only sixth in the university list.

These anomalies might be attributed random effects as a result of the small data set. However there is a clear correlation between the performances of these students at level 1 and level 2 as figure 4 indicates which is what we would expect. Whilst anomalies might therefore be students under or over performing at university, it might also be that there is a causal rather than random effect in the differences between university performance, and the interview and A-level scores.

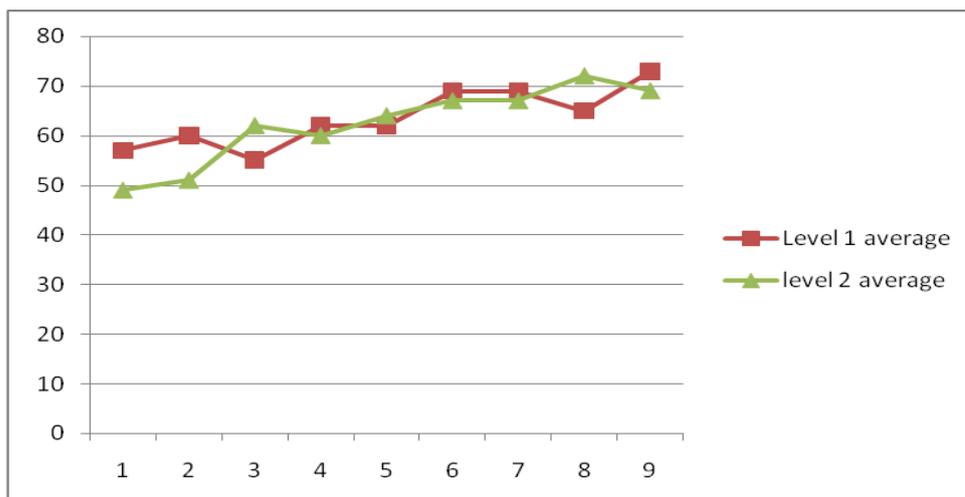


Figure 4

What makes this more pronounced is that once the figures for the level 2 cohort are normalised, it's possible to show a greater correlation between A-level scores and interview scores that with subsequent university performance, particularly in the mid range (figure 5). The statistics might together suggest that there is an alternative process at work once the students commence studies at university that is independent of prior performance.

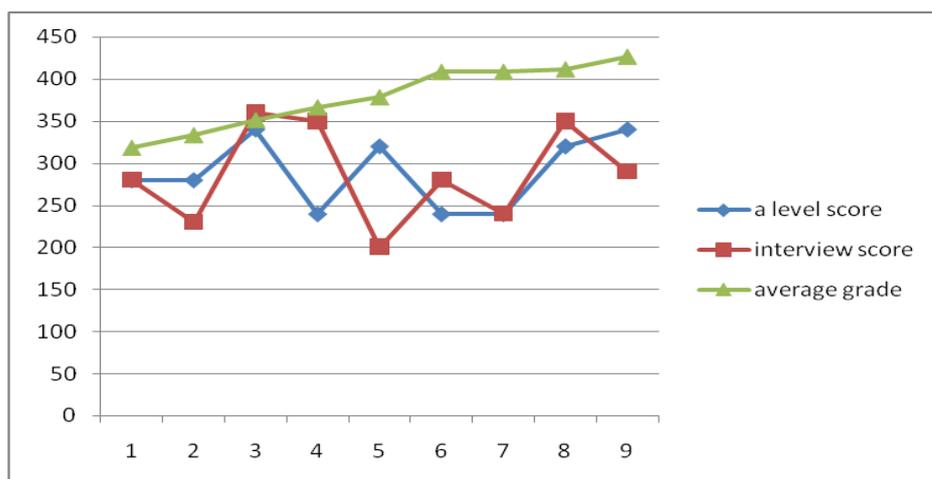


Figure 5

Conclusions

The scarcity of data makes definitive conclusions problematic, and there is clearly a need to consider a longitudinal study of a much larger data set.

There is however enough of doubt generated by the data for the course team to challenge the validity of their own admissions procedure. The team are looking at potential weaknesses in the interview process such as a falsity of criteria used in the assessment or a lack of experience and preparation by interviewees or interviewers. The issue of mid range anomalies might for example suggest that interviewers are good at picking out obvious high or low performers but not sophisticated enough to determine the potential of those in the mid ground. It might be that interviews are simply of greater value to applicants than to the interviewers (Komives, 1984).

Perhaps there is also enough information here to at least question the HESG statement that "*prior educational attainment data remains the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level, and continues to be central to the admissions process*" particularly where it confronts the government principle of Widening Participation. Supportive research after all suggests that the use of interviews in a widening participation manner should start with sectors of society who have not been able to apply, rather than those who are already in the system (Fuller, Paton. 2007) and this would include those who may not have any qualifications at all.

It should also be noted that simply marrying 'potential' and educational qualifications as part of an admissions process is not straightforward. In attempting to widen participation, there must be a balance against any positive discrimination against other students who have better marks but who may not gain a university place. This concern is voiced particularly private education which feels its higher performing students would be discriminated against.

If the government is therefore keen to pursue widening participation as a matter of policy, then more sophisticated guidance than the five HESG principle may be required both for governmental financial prudence and to fulfil the requirements of the HESG own guidelines in being fair, reliable and professional in the admissions process. It is something the Government consultation on Improving the Higher Education Applications Process (DES, 2006) seems to have overlooked completely. It is something also overlooked in the National Council for Educational Excellence 2008 report, accepted by the Government, that further authorised universities to target applicants based on potential. What might help to inform the debate, and what is currently missing, is the advice of how to identify potential.

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