UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

UK Undergraduate Admissions to Cambridge: Setting an Additional Target to Widen Participation

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Background

In recent discussions a view has emerged that the University of Cambridge should consider setting a target for UK undergraduate admissions additional to the one that we have already proposed (i.e. that we should seek to admit 61-63% of our UK undergraduates from state schools and colleges). The argument for setting an additional target centres on the possibility that our existing target could theoretically be met by our admitting a higher proportion of middle-class students from grammar schools, which, on the face of it, would do relatively little to widen participation in Cambridge. We have absolutely no intention of hitting our UK state-sector admissions target in this way, but the argument stands nonetheless. Setting a supplementary target would arguably counteract this.[1]

Possibilities

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) currently provides two performance indicators (PIs) for universities that could serve in this regard – if appropriately adjusted to take into account Cambridge's particular circumstances.[2]

The first relates to socio-economic background and is expressed as an admissions target for students from classes 4-7 in the National Statistics age-adjusted Socio-Economic Classification system (henceforth NS-SEC). NS-SEC essentially divides people into classes described in terms of parental or family occupation, e.g. Higher Managerial and Professional Occupations (Class 1), Lower Supervisory and Technical Occupations (Class 5) and Semi-Routine Occupations (Class 6).

The second relates to students' residency in areas where progression-rates to Higher Education are low – so-called Low Participation Neighbourhoods (henceforth LPN). This PI is based upon POLAR2 analysis, which sorts the UK's electoral wards into five tiers of HE participation. Tier 1 wards have the lowest proportion of HE-qualified residents and Tier 5 wards the highest.

Adjustment

While HESA's PI benchmarks for Cambridge seek to take into account Cambridge's entry requirements, the extent to which they do this is limited. This is partly because HESA do not incorporate the A* grade at A Level into their calculations and partly because they do not take into account factors at entry relating to A Level subject-combinations. The situation is exacerbated by the gap between Cambridge's nominal entry requirement (grades A*AA at A Level) and the practical reality of entry given the level of competition (in 2010 entrants achieved an average of 2.5 A*s at A Level). This means that HESA overestimates the number of suitably qualified

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[1] I am grateful to Mr Jon Beard, Dr Geoff Parks, Dr Patricia Fara, Dr Paul Hartle and Dr Mike Sewell for their advice and comments on this paper.
[2] HESA provides both standard PI benchmarks and location-adjusted PI benchmarks. The latter seek to take into account the effect of a university's location on its capacity to recruit. OFFA believes that the standard benchmarks are more appropriate to Cambridge because we seek to recruit nationally, not locally. While our capacity to recruit declines with distance (as is the case with other universities), we understand OFFA's perspective and accordingly this paper uses the standard benchmarks.

students from widening-participation backgrounds who could potentially be admitted to Cambridge, and consequently its benchmarks for Cambridge need to be adjusted.

When we established our target for UK state-sector undergraduate admissions (61-63%), we were able to make a detailed estimation of what was appropriate and achievable in this regard, taking into account the pattern of academic performance in UK schools and colleges, and the realities of Cambridge's entry requirements. In the absence of similarly detailed data on the patterns of academic performance among students from NS-SEC classes 4-7 and/or LPNs, it is proposed that we apply a scaling adjustment to the relevant HESA PI benchmarks. If we compare the HESA PI for Cambridge relating to UK state-sector admissions (70.4%) with our own target (62%), we can establish a scaling factor that can duly be applied to the other HESA PIs. This scaling factor is 62 divided by 70.4, or 0.88.

Applying this scaling factor to HESA's current NS-SEC 4-7 and LPN benchmarks for Cambridge produces the following outcomes:

> HESA NS-SEC 4-7 Cambridge benchmark = 15.7%
> Adjusted (15.7% $\times$ 0.88) benchmark = 13.8%
>
> HESA LPN Cambridge benchmark = 4.5%
> Adjusted (4.5% $\times$ 0.88) benchmark = 4.0%

If either (adjusted) benchmark is used, it would be advisable to allow for yearly fluctuation around it. (This was the reason why we opted to set a UK state-sector admissions target in the *range* 61-63%.) It seems to me that it would be appropriate to set a target $\pm$ a given variation.

Recommendation

After discussion with colleagues, I recommend that, should we set an additional target, it should be an adjusted one based on HESA's LPN benchmark. Why LPN as opposed to NS-SEC 4-7? Several reasons:

1. If we seek, as we do, to widen participation,[3] then it seems sensible to put in place a target that relates directly to HE participation-rates. LPN does this.

2. POLAR2, upon which LPN is based, certainly has its limitations (being centred on electoral ward rather than individual postcode, and being based on data from 2000-06), but it is carefully constructed and, most importantly, is available to us, on an applicant-by-applicant basis, via UCAS. This means that it could be added to the contextual data that informs our decision-making process, which ought to increase the likelihood that we will meet a POLAR2-based LPN target.

3. Conversely, within the Cambridge and UCAS admissions processes we have no consistent or verifiable information about applicants' parental or family occupations. Therefore, if we set ourselves a target based on NS-SEC 4-7, we are committing ourselves to something that we have no reasonable means of progressing towards at any level beyond crude guesswork. I do not believe this is compatible with fair and valid admissions.

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[3] Within the context of our admissions policy, which is to admit students of the greatest merit and potential by fair and valid means.

4. The LPN figure for our current intake, which is 3.4% on a three-year average, is reasonably close to the 4% LPN target we might set ourselves. The proposed LPN target therefore feels about 'right', given that our current UK state-sector intake (59.3%) is also quite close to our new OFFA target (61-63%). The gap between our current NS-SEC 4-7 figure (11.3% on a three-year average) and an appropriately adjusted NS-SEC 4-7 target (13.8%) is larger – though there is not a lot in it.

I therefore recommend that, should we set an additional OFFA target, it should be to admit **4% (±0.5%)** of our UK undergraduates from LPN backgrounds.

I further recommend that we talk to OFFA and other bodies in order to obtain much better and more useable socio-economic data on which future targets in relation to UK undergraduate admissions might be soundly based.

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