Selling themselves short: How inclusive is the UCAS application process to non-traditional students?

This is part of a wider study into admissions, but the focus of the discussion here, and hopefully a journal article, is the inclusivity of the UCAS process and personal statements in particular.

When we consider inclusive admissions in Higher Education (HE), we traditionally think about widening access and enabling students from underrepresented groups to enter university. Research has shown that institutions have various initiatives aimed at widening access and increasing participation from non-traditional students, including supported progression programmes, work with the Sutton Trust and outreach schemes targeting specific groups of applicants or subjects.[1] Many of these initiatives are aimed at young, school-age applicants, and can lead to applicants being eligible for a guaranteed, conditional offer from universities as well as developing academic skills and support for students writing their personal statements. Indeed, participation in these schemes, e.g. a summer school, also gives the applicants something to write about in their personal statement, so on several levels, they are beneficial to non-traditional, under-represented applicants.

Our wider study examines how inclusive and accessible the current application process is to potential foundation students. As many applicants to foundation programmes include non-traditional students and, increasingly, those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) for whom going to university is not seen as the traditional 'next step', several do not have the support available to school leavers to guide their application. Taking this forward, we question how inclusive are university websites to navigate to find out about Foundation Programmes or Extended Degrees, essentially, are the courses advertised to the people who would benefit most from them? An underlying concern is whether applicants who are applying in isolation, independent from a school or college, know what to do to and how to go about applying to university?

Questions that have emerged during this project include: Is applying for a foundation programme any different to applying for direct entry to year one of an undergraduate programme? How inclusive is a university interview or assessment day to non-traditional students? Aside from the quality of the personal statement, how (or) does the source and depth of a reference influence our decisions (remembering that an independent, mature student might be getting an employer who is unfamiliar with the process to write them a supporting statement)? We'd be interested to hear from colleagues who have conducted similar surveys at their institutions and how you feel the current process benefits or disadvantages different groups of applicants.

The discussion here (and in the future journal article) focuses on answering the question, 'how inclusive is a UCAS personal statement?' The UCAS personal statement is an important non-academic indicator that many UK universities use as an integral part of their admissions

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[1] For example, Durham offers a Supported Progression programme and operates a Sutton Trust summer school. LSBU aims to provide targeted support that suits student needs. University staff can visit colleges to talk to staff or meet with students to discuss the details of applying to university. A marketing statement aims to provide a reassuring voice: *"We're with you all the way!"*

processes. Up to half a million personal statements are written every year.[2] However, it is a blunt instrument and an element of the application process that does highlight the inequalities within the current system. Applicants studying A-levels or equivalent get guidance on applying to university from their school or college. Equally, those studying Access courses receive similar guidance and many Access Diplomas have modules (units) which support their research and application to university.[3] This support is not there for mature, standalone applicants like many applying for foundation years.

We considered the challenges of writing a statement and involved input from former foundation year students. Many traditional foundation students do not know where to start with a UCAS statement; this is particularly problematic if they are first generation, do not come direct from school or college, and have nobody to ask, or even to proofread it. Even if they find guidance online, UCAS itself suggests applicants "… get your teachers, advisers, and family to check" their application. If you are an independent, mature, or non-traditional student, this might be impossible. As a result, statements from such applicants are often very different in structure and style to those from traditional backgrounds. So, is it fair to judge statements from non-traditional students the same as those from school leavers and non-LPN backgrounds? Is the comment that "the UCAS personal statement is academically irrelevant and biased against poorer students" a true reflection of student experiences?[4]

The adage, "It'll look good on your personal statement", told to many university applicants points at the practice of 'selling yourself' through the content of a UCAS application.[5] A literature review surrounding personal statements found that a lot of existing articles focus on applicants to medicine and dentistry, there are not many in other disciplines, nor are there any that examine foundation admissions, so we hope to examine this in detail at a later date and add to the body of literature. A focus for our research has been 'self-marketing' and several studies (and articles in the press) have noted that 'selling yourself' through personal statements and interviews is now a standard practice for university applicants (Shuker 2014). Drawing on findings from a research project by Shuker (2014) that examined self-marketing orientations of students in 16-19 institutions, our study identifies differences in approach and self-marketing in those applying to foundation years in the UK.

Shuker argued that how an applicant approaches the application process is related to the resources and support available to them and the pedagogic identities fostered by their current institution.[6] As a result, the preparedness of students might contribute to, rather than challenge, the socially stratifying work of the education system. So, are non-traditional

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[2] http://www.suttontrust.com/public/documents/icof-report-ucas-analysis-final.pdf
[3] For example, the unit 'Researching and Understanding Opportunities for Higher Education (RUOSH)' is offered by some FE colleges as part of an Access to HE Diploma accredited by One Awards.
[4] http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2013/10/revisiting-debates-about-the-ucas-personal-statement/

[5] Shuker investigated the practice of 'selling yourself' and self-marketing within education through case studies of different education institutions focusing on young (under 19) students. Lucie Shuker (2014) 'It'll look good on your personal statement': self-marketing amongst university applicants in the United Kingdom, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 35:2, pp. 224-243.

[6] Shuker (2014) p. 224

students disadvantaged? As practitioners, we need to ensure any lack of preparedness prior to university is addressed and overcome (as far as possible) during the foundation year.

This links back to opportunity and, in some cases, a lack of cultural capital and confidence. Writing at the introduction of increased tuition fees in England in 2012, Shuker noted, "the value of universities is likely to be seen increasingly in terms of their impact on student employability."[7] This is something that in recent weeks the UK government has reaffirmed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.[8] 'Self-promotion' was identified as a crucial part of the development of such employability (Harvey, Locke and Morey 2002; Shuker 2014). This self-marketing is an increasingly important skill for effective transitions within education and work.

Shuker's study reinforced the commonly held notion that teachers and advisors encourage students to participate in activities such as Duke of Edinburgh Awards, or be a form representative, or carry out voluntary work, as it "will look good on your personal statement."[9] These activities are worthwhile and beneficial for developing skills (for later life and study) but also useful for highlighting differences between two similar candidates. This instrumentalism is often encouraged by school and college tutors when supporting students in writing their personal statements. While younger students and those studying Access courses in FE colleges recognise the 'added value' of clubs, volunteering in that they suggest target characteristics, e.g. teamwork, non- traditional and lone students might not recognise these, or their own employment and life experience as valuable, and not 'sell' themselves sufficiently.

The methodology behind this study involved narrative interviews with former FY students and examination of their personal statements. The data collected was qualitative and, like all qualitative research does not set out to be generalisable and only involves a small number of participants. "Narrative interviews place the people being interviewed at the heart of a research study" so were deemed appropriate for this study, as students are the focus and the researchers were interested in collecting information about their personal experiences.[10] Research is still ongoing, but responses were mixed. Some students noted the concerns they had over applying to university in the first instance, and then anxiety over applying to Durham. One commented that they had applied to Durham almost as a "joke" – not expecting to get an interview, nor later be offered a place.

"For any would-be student, the personal statement on their application form is torture: an exercise in trying to convince a faceless admissions tutor of their passion for a subject while cramming in as many references as possible to charity work, skills, character and awards."[11]

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[7] Shuker (2014) p. 225

[8] See the Briefing Note from the Office for Students dated 18th June 2020 and the Department for Education publication *Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to COVID-19* published July 2020.

[9] Shuker (2014) p. 237

[10] Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2015) p. 631

[11] Hurst (2013) p. 8

One thing to note here is that the majority of applications to study on foundation years are not considered by a 'faceless admissions tutor' as Hurst suggested. While some institutions might make direct offers based on meeting specific entry requirements, many also have a personal interview, information advice and guidance session, or assessments, with those leading and teaching on the foundation programme. This ensures applicants are given the most appropriate advice and support for their situation and enables admissions staff to make informed decisions that will be beneficial for both the student and the institution. This personal interaction during the application and interview process was noted as a positive by students, who recalled being put at (relative) ease by foundation staff, and who felt they then had a point of contact rather than the impersonal UCAS Track. Some did agree that at times writing the statement was tantamount to torture!

A study conducted by Steven Jones on behalf of the Sutton Trust in 2012 collected new evidence about the personal statement.[12] Jones' study focused on the educational background of applicants studying A-levels, but excluded mature students, so it did not include many groups who apply for foundation programmes. However, his study helped us to frame our examination of personal statements, looking at three key indicators: Fluency of Expression, Work-Related Activity and Extra-Curricular Activity. In the current study, we have conducted a brief examination of personal statements and found that these areas do vary depending on whether an applicant is coming directly from school or college (including Access programmes) or if they are a mature student applying on their own. Fluency of expression and reasoning was the starkest difference, with more developed, fluid statements written by those currently in education.

So, to move forward, we note that a study conducted on behalf of education business Pearson in in 2013 recommended that "the use of personal statements should be ended." Bold. But maybe there is reason in that. Going back to the Schwartz Report, it suggested redesigning the UCAS application form to include prompts that elicit more directly relevant information.[13] Those applicants with the social and cultural capital to secure the best work experience and highest prestige extra-curricular experience would then have less opportunity to cash in on their good fortune; this would hopefully aid non-traditional applicants and those who do not 'sell' themselves.

We hope that this introduction to our study will lead to discussion around the inclusivity of the application process, particularly in terms of how independent applicants, especially mature students, can be disadvantaged by the current system.

Ultimately how can this inform our admissions processes and the information, advice and guidance we give to applicants. Should we be offering more support in the application process (September to January) akin to that for supported progression? How could we link activities such as taster sessions to writing a statement to improve a non-traditional student's chances? So, what do FYN colleagues think about the personal statement and its use in modern admissions? Should it stay, as 'it is what has always happened?' or should we address the lack

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[12] Steven Jones, Manchester University for The Sutton Trust: *The Personal Statement: A fair way to assess university applicants?*

[13] The Schwartz Report (2004).

of inclusivity associated with it, and reduce our reliance on it, and perhaps join the lobby to have it changed or removed?

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has implications for the way the HE sector recruits students. Could the emphasis on an applicant's personal statement change? Might the potential reduction in experiences, summer schools and volunteering opportunities open to traditional students (the 'it will look good on your personal statement' fodder) redress the balance?

Throughout this we have probably raised more questions than we have answered, but the process has highlighted some important inclusivity issues with the current system, and how we, as admissions selectors, operate within it.

Rachel Dunn (Durham University) & Steve Faulkner (London South Bank University)