

Student Selection: An International Overview

Germany, US, Australia, UK

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This short paper will look into how student selection is administered in four countries. The aim of the document is to give an idea of issues surrounding the selection of students for higher education and how they may relate to access. Two European countries were chosen (Germany and the United Kingdom) as well as the United States and Australia)

In most European countries there are differences in rules for European Union (EU) vs. non-EU students. While, generally, institutions have little influence on the selection of their students, they have a greater say when it comes to foreign (particularly non-EU) students. In the United Kingdom (U.K.) universities decide which applicants to accept. This is also true for Australia and the United States (U.S.).

How selection is organised in different countries

The 2008 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report “Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society” (vol. 2, p. 51 ff.), gives a good overview of student entrance procedures and selection in certain countries. The reader is referred to that document for some additional information on more countries than those presented here. This section will look in some detail at the cases of Australia, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. (not all of which are covered in the OECD report).

Germany

In Germany the main access requirement for undergraduates is the necessary secondary school leaving certificate. Proof of particular aptitude (aptitude tests) might be required for subjects such as art, design, music and sport. Moreover, some universities are now requiring applicants to sit general academic or scholastic aptitude tests (*Eignungsfeststellungsprüfungen*) for other subjects in strong demand (DAAD Website, 2010)¹. Some subjects have admissions restrictions (*numerus clausus*) based on the grade point average of the school leaving certificate. Restrictions can be nationwide or “local”. There are subjects for which there are many more applicants than study places. In such cases, a nationwide admissions restriction applies for all the universities that offer these subjects (which currently include biology, medicine, pharmacy, psychology and dentistry). Some of these study places are awarded by the so-called Central University Admissions Service (*Zentralstelle für die Vergabe von Studienplätzen*), while others are awarded directly by the universities (*Ibid.*). Besides nationwide admissions restrictions, there are also subjects with local admissions restrictions, i.e. where the admissions restriction only applies to individual higher education institutions and not to all institutions. These study places are awarded directly by the respective university.

Since 2000 there has been a shift in Germany in the sense of granting universities more autonomy in how they accept their students (Trost, 2006). In his presentation at the 2006 *Black Sea Conference on University Admission and Testing*, Trost explained:

- ❑ 20% of places are given to applicants with the best high school grades
- ❑ 20% of places are given to applicants based on how long they have been in the waiting list (“queuing principle”)
- ❑ 60% is in the realm of greater university autonomy (“university selection procedure”) but must follow certain guidelines, including the following:
 - Average grade on the school-leaving certificate has to have “substantial influence” on the admission decision
 - Weighted individual grades on the school-leaving certificate which provide information on the applicant’s aptitude for the specific study-programme
 - Result of the study-programme-specific scholastic aptitude test
 - Vocational / work experience must play a role

¹ Foreign students might incur in additional requirements such as proof of having passed a university entrance exam and/or proof of any academic years of study successfully completed in the home country, as well as German language proficiency (*Ibid.*)

- Result of a selection interview
- ❑ There are nation-wide restrictions for certain programmes (e.g. medicine)
- ❑ States play a crucial role in Germany in the selection procedure (e.g. in Baden-Württemberg 90% of places is to be awarded through selection by universities, in North-Rhine Westphalia no university quote at all.
- ❑ Private universities have more liberty and can do what they want when it comes to selection, but very few students (3%) go to private universities. Private universities use a lot Scholastic Aptitude tests
- ❑ Public universities have a lot of freedom when it comes to non-EU applicants. Mostly, they use general Scholastic Aptitude tests and language plays an important role
- ❑ Scholastic Aptitude tests are becoming more widespread (also) in Germany
- ❑ As of 2007 Scholastic Aptitude tests are used in at certain programmes (e.g. medicine and economics)

Finally, some German universities have a selection process which not only considers the purely formal requirements (higher education entrance qualification, language skills), but also special academic subject-specific qualifications or letters of motivation. A growing number of universities are also using academic or general selection tests.

Australia

In **Australia** each state and territory has prerequisites and minimum entrance requirements for entrance to university. However, *entrance into an Australian higher education provider is determined by the entrance requirements set by individual providers*. Providers make offers to high school graduates, predominantly on their higher education ranking achieved after standardisation of “Year 12 scores”. Each State has different higher education scores, but these are standardised so the ranking can be compared². Thus, institutions are responsible for their selection criteria, although there is a centralised system of coordination. For example at the University of Melbourne the minimum ENTER scores are (*inter alia*) 90 for Arts, and 95 for Bio-medicine (University of Melbourne Website, 2010). At Deakin University ENTER scores are (*inter alia*, and at Geelong Campuses) 50 for Arts and 50 for Bio-medicine (Deakin University Website, 2010).

² Ranks are different for different states, and include: the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER), Overall position (OP) Rank the University Admission Index (UAI) and the Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER)

Some students may have a further opportunity to demonstrate their ability by undertaking student aptitude tests. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is currently trialling this system (see: <http://www.goingtouni.gov.au>, 2010). However, the report “Selection for Tertiary Education Places in Victoria” mentions that “[...] School achievement, as measured by ENTER [see fn. 2, LC], is not the only criterion for tertiary selection in Victoria, but it is clearly the dominant one. While it is difficult to categorise and to quantify the nature and extent of the use of alternative criteria, VTAC [*the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, LC*] estimates 75 per cent of offers are based predominantly on ENTER [...]”.

Hence, most universities rely heavily on achievement of tertiary entry scores to select students. Some institutions have proposed the use of aptitude tests as a means of admitting more disadvantaged students, but whether this would help is under discussion.

United Kingdom

In the U.K. universities decide which applicants to accept. There is also a centralised system of admission (UCAS), and selection depends on grades as well as other factors (e.g. interviews). The government is insisting on more diversity, ascertained for instance by the secondary school attended.

United States

Finally, in the U.S. higher education is the responsibility of the states rather than of the federal government. Thus, with some exceptions (such as the military service academies) public higher education is owned and controlled by the federate states. Higher education offers a variety of opportunities to prospective students³ and there is no one nation- or state-wide standard⁴. In general, in the U.S. higher education is accessible to students with the required entry qualification and grades but institutions are free to set their own admission

³ For example a high school senior might choose for a two-year junior College degree offered by a Community Colleges, leading to an associate degree of Arts or of Science (an “AA” or “AS”). The community college transfer function also allows moving on to a full degree programme at a college or university. Finally, there is vocational (technical / professional) higher training.

⁴ Thus, a key debate in the United States is how to align the preparation of students graduating from high school and the requirements to attend college rather than changing admission rules tout court (Belyakov, Cremonini, Mfusi and Rippner, 2009)

requirements within boundaries set by the states (for public universities). For example, in California in-state applicants in the top one-eighth (12.5%) of their high school graduating classes must be offered a place in the University of California system, while in-state applicants in the top one-third (33.3%) of their high school graduating classes must be offered a place in the California State University system (Community Colleges admit any student capable of benefiting from instruction)⁵. In New York State There are no specific admission requirements for the different systems.

Thus, in the U.S. admission requirements differ from institution to institution. Typically, Community Colleges have neither subject requirements nor additional testing whilst universities do. For example, at the University of California (University of California Website, 2009) freshmen can pursue three “paths to admission”. In the “state-wide context” applicants must have completed at least 15 year-long high-school courses in the so-called “a-g” subjects⁶, have a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.0 or more, and take additional tests⁷ (American College Testing (ACT) and/or Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)). Eligibility in the Local Context “[...] recognizes students' individual accomplishments in light of the opportunities offered by their particular high schools” (*Ibid.*). Applicants must rank in the top 4% of their school’s graduating class, complete the equivalent of 11 year-long courses of the “Subject Requirement”⁸, and have a GPA of 3.0 or more. Students may also qualify for admission to UC solely on the basis of high ACT / SAT scores. The CSU (CSU Website, 2009) uses similar criteria for admission. The university’s eligibility index is computed based on the GPA, SAT or the ACT test scores. Test scores are not required if the GPA is above 3.0. At the State University of New York “[...] Each SUNY campus evaluates

⁵ See the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education. The California Master Plan for Higher Education is a major effort to plan the future of the state’s system of public higher education. It was passed in 1960 and is embodied in a series of documents, including a study completed by the Master Plan Survey Team in early 1960, and approved by the State Board of Education and the University of California Board of Regents, the Donahoe Act placing in statute a number of key components of the proposed plan, and a constitutional amendment allowing for the establishment of the California State Colleges Board of Trustees (what was renamed the California State University by 1974) (The history of the Plan, 2009)

⁶ History and social science, English, mathematics, laboratory science, foreign language, visual and performing arts, and college-preparatory electives

⁷ Specifically, students must take the ACT, the writing or the SAT reasoning test, and two SAT subject tests chosen from English, history and social studies, mathematics science or foreign language

⁸ History and social science, English, mathematics, laboratory science, foreign language, and visual and performing arts or electives

students individually for admission [...]” (SUNY, 2009b). For instance at SUNY University at Albany no minimum SAT or ACT score is imposed, but the application is looked at in its entirety (University at Albany, 2009). Similarly, SUNY University at Buffalo does not impose minimum SAT or ACT scores, but usually requires mid-term scores from high school seniors who have scores lower than 3.1 (on a 4.0 grading scale) and an 1100 math and reading SAT score or a 24 ACT composite (*Ibid.*)

“Best practices”

It is hard to find “best practices” when it comes to selection because each country differs in its higher education on many aspects, including fees, (early) tracking (which is itself a form of selection) etc. Moreover, practices are assessed on the degree to which certain desired outcomes are related to the issue at hand (in this case, selection procedures). Our earlier contribution to the report “Selective admission in higher education: Risks and limiting conditions” showed that more selective systems do not necessarily yield higher graduation rates than less selective systems and that selection might reduce the chances of entry into tertiary education (see earlier report).

Still, selection is a hot topic and many governments are discussing possible changes. In Australia, for example, there is discussion of changing the system. The report “Improving Selection for Tertiary Education Places in Victoria” (2009) mentions pros and cons of Victoria’s centrally coordinated tertiary application process administered by VTAC. The report states that “[...] it has numerous advantages, including the preservation of institutional autonomy over selection decisions. ENTER has the advantage of being relatively transparent and has face validity as an objective and fair measure of school achievement, and thus preparedness for university. Some of these benefits are somewhat illusory, however, and ENTER is attributed a precision that is not deserved. There are further problems with ENTER that have been identified by this study, as well as by previous analyses [...]”. Next (pp. 25 ff.), the report suggests principles for improving tertiary selection practices in Victoria (which could be of interest to other states), including:

- ❑ Centralised coordination of applications and data should continue
- ❑ Less emphasis should be placed on school achievement as a selection criterion across the tertiary sector as a whole, though it will remain an important consideration for certain courses and institutions

- ☐ A tertiary selection framework should be developed that defines the available selection criteria and articulates agreed protocols for the use of each
- ☐ A generic state-wide aptitude test should be introduced
- ☐ A single composite index or rank should not be calculated by VTAC from the available quantitative measures
- ☐ Admissions testing on an individual institutional basis are to be avoided
- ☐ Institutions should be explicit regarding the ways in which, and the extent to which, various criteria are factored into selection decisions for particular courses

The conundrum of Selection and access

In the U.S., as mentioned above, institutions are free to set their own admission criteria. States might impose limitations to institutional discretion for particularly bright secondary-school leavers (see quotas mentioned earlier), but the so-called “Community College transfer function” is probably the most common way to maximise access. The Community College transfer function is meant for students who opted for community college education, which is open to all applicants with the relevant secondary diploma (i.e. it is not selective). These students may transfer to full degree programmes. For example, under California’s Master Plan, UC and CSU set aside upper division places for and give priority in the admissions process to eligible California Community College transfer students.

Overall, the U.S. is a good showcase on the effects of full institutional autonomy in selection. Taking again California as an example, it is apparent that the level of selectivity plays a role in participation rates. In 2007, Californian Community Colleges enrolled 300,000 full-time students and UC less than 200,000 (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009).

In the U.K. and in Germany the issue of access is mainly related to financial assistance for under-represented and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. For example, in England an important role is played by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). OFFA is an independent, non-departmental public body created to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-07 (OFFA, 2009). Such aid does not affect directly on the selection procedures because it is intended for students who are accepted. However, it does *indirectly* impinge on institutions’ selection processes because universities charging tuition fees above the basic level must have an access agreement approved by OFFA in place.

In Germany a relevant issue (aside financial assistance) is that of a student’s qualification’s alignment with his or her desired field of study. German universities with the support of the DAAD recently developed the “Test for Academic Studies” (TestAS) to help assessing qualifications for certain fields of academic study and thus improve the likelihood of being granted the permission of enrolling to certain institutions (see also <http://testas.de>).

Australia, too, has the goal of increasing access (particularly for under-represented sectors of society e.g. the indigenous population, see the “Bradley

Report"). Mostly, the suggestions refer to easing the financial burden (i.e. improving student financing). Drastic reforms of selection procedures are not deemed a very relevant way to increase access. In fact, to ensure access there exist Commonwealth supported places, which are offered on the basis of academic merit. The so-called "Clearly-in Rank" may be above the minimum ENTER (or other Year-12 scores, see fn. 2). For example at Melbourne University the "Clearly-in Rank" is 88.30 for the Arts and 95.00 for Bio-medicine; at Deakin (Geelong Campuses) it is 62.60 for the arts and 80.35 for Bio-medicine.

Moreover, it is believed that a key reason for low access of certain groups is "low previous educational attainment" (*Ibid.*, p.27 and pp.41-42). Previous educational attainment is pivotal in current selection procedures. Hence, it is not the selection process *per se* that is disputed but rather how students can meet selection thresholds.

Finally, the report mentions (p.21) that "[...] in some cases, an effective way to improve access for people from under-represented groups is to streamline movement from VET [*Vocational Education and Training, LC*] to higher education", which appears similar to the U.S. Community College transfer (see above).

Selection and student fees

The relationship between selection procedures and fees is not necessarily straightforward. The different countries looked into here differ strongly in the way fees are set. In the U.S. fees are usually set by institutions themselves, and differ strongly among states. However, in general one notes that the more selective an institution is, the higher the fees set (Community Colleges being thus, the cheapest)

In Britain, all universities are publicly funded, with the sole exception of the University of Buckingham (Leišytė, 2007). However, since September 2006, institutions in England can charge variable tuition fees of up to GBP 3,000 per year (GBP 3,225 as of year 2009-2010, BBC, 2009) to new students beginning a course of study (students who started their course before September 2006, are exempt). In Scotland there are no student fees for Scottish students. Yet, Scottish universities are apparently more selective in their admission procedures. The 2009 Guardian Higher Education League table shows that the GPA of students enrolled in Scottish universities is on average 335 while that of students enrolled in English universities is on average 302 (The Guardian 2010). Hence, one cannot link *sic et simpliciter* fees with selectivity.

In Australia higher education providers are free to set tuition fees for each unit of study, but there are several options for student assistance, while in Germany, after years of free education, certain states now allow fees (however at low levels relatively to other countries, including those described here). In general, in very selective systems (e.g. the U.S.) higher fees are associated with more selective institutions or programmes. However, to boost student access to higher education, fee alleviation seems the prime goal rather than a reduction of institutional selectivity.

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