

# We can give all our students an equal chance

A few years ago a friend of mine, then an Oxford don, told me how the last of the eight applicants to study a highly competitive subject had been selected. The choice was between a state school and a public school candidate. Academically there was little between them.

The don had gone to a state school and was sympathetic to the drive to encourage more state school pupils to study at Oxford. But the public school candidate was very, very pretty.

I won't reveal the way the dice fell — but it is on such issues that judgments sometimes turned. If you have thousands of candidates predicted to get three straight As at A-level and you are meeting them only for an hour or so at interview, how do you call it on the line?

In recent years complaints about the fairness of university admissions procedures have reached record levels. State school pupils have long complained that the odds at top universities are stacked against them — Gordon Brown famously disparaged the “old boy network” when the brilliant Tyne-side comprehensive pupil Laura Spence was turned down by Magdalen College — but now private schools are also unhappy. They claim that some of their best candidates are being rejected as universities try to meet government “benchmarks” for increasing the numbers of working-class students that they accept.

Admissions tutors are being urged to use different selection measures — ones that identify a student's “potential”. They are not only looking at A-level grades, but are setting tests and in some cases considering sympathetically children who have attended poor state schools or whose parents are not graduates. Meanwhile Oxford and Cambridge continue to rely on interviews to select between the thousands of students who apply.

The result of all these different admissions criteria, as Sir Kevin Satchwell, head of Thomas Telford school in Telford, one of the best state schools in the country,

Steven Schwartz, the government's university admissions tsar, tells

Sian Griffiths how a fair and transparent system can be implemented

says, is confusion. “I cannot explain to parents why their child, who seems to have perfect grades, has been rejected, because I have no idea,” says Satchwell.

Enter Steven Schwartz, a tall New Yorker whose academic career has taken him through American universities to Australia — where as dean of a medical school he recruited the school's first aboriginal doctor — and now to the UK.

Schwartz, vice-chancellor of Brunel University, is the man charged by ministers with drawing up a set of “fair and transparent” admissions rules for use by universities — principles that he has already hinted will recommend that universities ought to consider each individual student's background as well as their exam marks.

Schwartz makes no secret of the fact that he supports the government's aim of boosting the numbers of clever working-class students at university. Numbers, he says, are going up anyway. A decade ago 10% of children from the lowest three social classes went to university, in 2001 it was 19%. About 270,000 students a year start at British universities; it might be nice, he thinks, if they reflected, at least approximately, the social mix of the country. A psychologist by training, he believes that if you have a good brain you should be given the chance to use it.

“A good social policy is giving as many people as possible in a country the freedom to live their lives in any way they wish and make their own choices — if they have the ability they should have the opportunity,” he says.

But he also believes that universities must be able to explain why they have chosen one student and rejected another; he thinks subjective interviews are a poor way of gauging a student's ability and universities should offer students places after they know their A-level results rather than before.

“You can't justify making a decision on guesses when you could make it on certainty,” he says.

Moreover, if universities are going to start making students jump extra hurdles to gauge their potential for studying a subject, they may be better off agreeing to use one single national test rather than a multitude of little local ones, which put extra strain and expense on unfortunate applicants. Last week Oxford announced that sixth formers wanting to study English or history would have to sit new entrance tests from September. Oxford, Cambridge and London already have special tests for law and medicine.

But once you start considering anything other than exam marks aren't you throwing the system into confusion? It may seem fair for a pupil with two As and one B at A-level from an inner-city comprehensive and a single-parent family to be offered a place at Cambridge — but what about the wealthy public school candidate with three As who doesn't get in as a result? Is the same system fair for him?

Schwartz says that his inquiry threw up two extremes of what a fair system would look like. On the one hand there were those who argued that only exam marks should be counted. On the other hand, some argued that you had to look at what “students go through to get those marks”.

“For most people, he says, it is never that black and white. What about a girl who has always done very well, her dad dies and her last marks are not good? Everyone we consulted agreed that ignoring that would be unfair. Using your judgment is important.”

And if you could agree on that clear-cut example, he went on, you had a foot in the door of the camp

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**Access for all: Steven Schwartz wants fairer admissions procedures that allow more working-class students to go to top universities**

that argued that only objective marks should count. Anyway, with thousands of straight-A students being turned away by both Oxford and Cambridge every year — it was clear that already judgments are being made not on marks alone.

OK, so how can universities make those judgments transparent, I ask. Will they have a points system and give extra points if you come from a bad school or nobody in your family has ever been to university — or indeed, your dad dies when you are doing your GCSEs?

Wait until April 5 when my report is published, he keeps saying — but he's willing to talk about the general principles and his own views of what universities need to do differently.

Reading between the lines and if Schwartz's own views bear fruit,

things won't be hugely different. Universities will still use GCSE grades and predicted A-level grades as a main plank of their admissions criteria. Those that interview students will carry on doing so — but they will be urged to make the interviews fairer, by asking everyone the same questions for instance, or using panels of interviewers rather than just one or two.

Students will get feedback on why they were turned down — if it is because of the interview they will be told. If a national test — possibly the US-style aptitude test SATS — is introduced for any university that wants to use it, that would be a big change but universities would have to organise it themselves.

What universities are doing is not social engineering, he says firmly. Some are trying to uncover

hidden talent fairly and in a way that everyone can understand.

"Someone has to make the rules to ensure that everyone has an equal chance but that does not mean we are going to determine the outcome. That would be social engineering. You can advocate a fair system and then the outcome is whatever the outcome is. That is not social engineering. I am for fair systems."

And, he says, if the rules are applied and Oxford and Cambridge still don't end up with more working-class kids then that will be a fair outcome and everyone will have to accept it.

Britain, he adds, is the only country in the world trying to get more working-class students into university. "In the US, even after 30 years of affirmative action, the number of people from the lowest quartile

(measured by income rather than by occupational class as, in Britain) is still very small. What we are trying to do has never been done. I think it is important to try."

Part of his own effort will be to set up a school at Brunel for children from across London whose parents never went to university. The aim would be to give those pupils a good education so that they can get into university on their own merits. He'd like the school to open in 2006 — but is still waiting for ministers to tell him whether it's got the go-ahead.

So, five years from now, will universities have a very different admissions system? "No, I don't think so, though some people may disagree." Will we have more working-class graduates in five years' time? "I hope so."

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LANGUES ETRANGERES APPLIQUEES

LEA 11C

LANGUE ECRITE

DECEMBRE 2005

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1. Why have state school pupils complained in the past about the university admissions procedures?
2. What is the reason for teachers from private schools not being happy with these admissions procedures ?
3. What do you know about Laura Spence?
4. What are admissions tutors being encouraged to do?
5. How do Oxbridge select their students?
6. Give as much information about Steven Schwartz`'s career (past and present)?
7. Why does he support the government`'s desire to increase the number of bright working –class children at university?
8. What important points do you think will be mentioned in his university admissions report?
9. Explain the meaning of the following words and phrases:
  - three straight As
  - the odds at top-universities are stacked against them
  - “the old boy network”
  - “fair and transparent
  - social engineering
10. Find the words in the text which correspond to the following meanings
  - a high standard with which other things can be compared to
  - to judge
  - to suggest in an indirect way
  - a university lecturer
  - increasing