

Notes and Comments

Notes et Commentaires

CONTRASTS IN ADMISSIONS AND EXAMINATIONS ADMINISTRATION

Among the most visible administrative operations students encounter are those concerned with admissions and examinations.

A study of the higher education institutions in one Canadian province (British Columbia) in 1977 made me realize that the policies and processes of admitting and examining students showed different administrative features from the British system. These were not the only aspects of higher education administration in which the roles of the principal parties differed: the roles of academic administrators in the government of higher education institutions also differed and have been commented upon already (*Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, VII-2, 1977).

Differences in operation are easy to observe; it is less easy to analyse why the differences exist. This article attempts to give some ideas on why British admissions and examinations systems are appropriate there and why the Canadian procedures fit its style of higher education. Although my investigations were focussed on one province I take the liberty of assuming that the same analysis is appropriate throughout Canada.

Admission

A decision to admit an applicant rests with 'the institution' in both countries but the type of person embodied in 'the institution' differs. In crude terms the difference is between an academic in Britain and an administrator in Canada. The difference is crude because some subjects and levels of study in Canada use a quasi-British system. However, the basic difference is there if one considers admission to undergraduate degrees in traditional academic subjects such as science and humanities where special aptitude is not required.

In both countries policy on admissions is the responsibility of the university senate or polytechnic academic board. The extent to which the senate/academic board actually involves itself in detail varies from one institution to another but in general that level of policy making is of a very broad nature. Although the senate/academic board may have authority to control admissions, real power lies elsewhere. In British Columbia the power of determining admissions policy is at faculty level; in Britain it lies at faculty or departmental level with some control, for polytechnics, from the Council for National Academic Awards (which validates degree courses in non-university institutions).

In Canada an applicant is admissible to a faculty or a particular programme of study on possession of specified grades at high school graduation. This equates with the minimum entrance qualifications for British degrees. The significant difference, however, is in the use of the word 'minimum'. In Canada the entry requirement is fixed and in only a few cases is interviewing of applicants used to supplement information on documents. These are normally those subjects such as music or nursing where performing ability or personal aptitude are vital. For purely academic programmes admission is conducted on the basis

of strict adherence to rules laid down by senate (or faculty if the matter has been so delegated). It is the registrar's staff, not academics, to whom the task falls of checking the equivalence of the applicant's qualifications with the programme's stated entry requirements. If a match exists the applicant is admitted. Selection to restricted places on individual course occurs at enrolment.

This matching task is only the start of the admission process in Britain. It may be performed by clerical staff but it can only result in information being provided for the use of academic staff with whom admissions decisions lie. There is an assumption that a student should not only be qualified to undertake the course but should have the aptitude and motivation to see the whole programme through. The programme of study is more clearly defined from the start in Britain than in Canada so it is possible for the admissions tutor and the applicant to work out the applicant's likely interest and competence for all aspects and levels of the course with some likelihood of knowing at the start what the whole programme's requirements will be.

With the growth in the number of higher education institutions and students in the past ten years interviewing of applicants has diminished a little but nevertheless interviews are quite normal in Britain. They serve the dual purpose of counselling and testing the applicant. Although there are professional student counsellors in Britain as in Canada, and they are members of non-teaching staff in both, counselling is regarded as primarily a function of academic staff in Britain.

An important difference of procedure and attitude between the two countries is that selection of applicants is the norm in Britain. The Robbins Committee stated in 1963 that higher education should be available for all those who were qualified by ability and attainment and who wished to do so. However, it was assumed that the institutions would determine what its qualifications were and who was best qualified for specific courses. The normal minimum entry requirement to a degree course in Britain is two subjects at GCE Advanced level and three at Ordinary level. However, not all who are technically admissible will be offered a place because the entry qualifications are minima only. It is open to departments to raise the grade of A level required without reference to anyone else. Indeed, there is no rule to say that all applicants will be required to have attained the same level of competence prior to entry. The subjects taken at A level by any group of students may cover a very wide range. The A level grades required, and in which of the subjects the applicants are offering, are academic judgements made on an individual basis for each applicant. In other words, in Canada the academic judgment extends to fixing the entry requirement for each faculty or programme; in Britain it extends to each applicant.

Each institution may require different levels of competence for apparently similar courses. Application to university undergraduate degrees is centralized initially so that a single application is made for admission to up to five courses, normally one in each of five universities. The applicant lists them in order of preference. The academics in one of the institutions may offer a place there on conditions which another institution regards as too low or too high. The university to which the applicant is eventually admitted will depend on a combination of the applicant's preference and the academics' conditions.

As the conditions form part of the computerized record of the candidate produced by the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) it is possible for staff in one university to know the conditions set by others as well as itself. To a certain extent it is

possible for academics to 'play the student numbers market' by fixing their entry conditions according to supply and demand.

This is not so easy in polytechnics where no centralized system exists. Application may be made to any or all polytechnics as well as five universities. Polytechnic staff know neither the state of the offers made through UCCA nor those made by other polytechnics.

After offers of places have been made conditional upon certain grades of A level subjects the administrators can fulfil the same type of matching task as they do in Canada. Once A level results are available it is possible for conditional offers to be confirmed by administrators. It remains, however, the prerogative of the academics to delegate that task to admissions officers.

In Canada administrators play another important admissions role when entry into the second or third year of a four-year course is considered. Transfer may occur from another programme or from another institution. It is a process which is extremely difficult in Britain because, traditionally, courses are designed to be followed through complete.

The system in British Columbia includes a provincial body, the Post-Secondary Education Co-ordinating Committee, being consulted by institutions on the equivalence of courses available in different institutions. Transfer guides are published which enable applicants to work out and registrar's staff to check the equivalence of the applicant's credits to those obtainable at the admitting institution. The documents state which courses in colleges in the province are deemed to be equivalent to which first and second year courses at each university. The basic decisions are arrived at by academic staff (principally the associate dean of the faculty in consultation with departments) with preliminary assistance from admissions officers. Hence, once the guide is drawn up admissions officers can work from it in determining admissibility of transfer students.

In Britain transfer into a course part-way through, whether from the same institution or another, goes through the same sort of process as initial admission. It is not unusual for students who have completed a two year Higher National Diploma (a course with a one A level requirement) to enter the second year of a degree course in a related subject. Transfer from one institution to another, even for a degree in the same subject is quite difficult and requires considerable investigation by academic staff to ensure that study undertaken so far provides sufficient foundation for later parts of the course.

Before attempting to explain why these differences exist it is worth while looking at the contrasts in the process by which the results of a student's progress are determined.

Examination

The assessment methods used in higher education have undergone considerable changes in the last ten years or so. The series of three-hour unseen written examinations which determined the result of many British students' three years of study has, in many cases, been altered to include continuous assessment through the course as well as different forms of final examination. These changes have brought some detailed changes in operation for staff and students but they have not changed the fundamental differences in approach between the British and Canadian style of examining decision.

To understand differences in examining it is necessary to recognize the difference in the structure of courses and the terminology used. Essentially it is the student's perfor-

mance in the 'course' which is being examined but the 'course' in Britain refers to a whole programme of study whereas the Canadian 'course' is one section of the programme.

Within each Canadian university each course is standard in length and has a standard credit value (although some may be half or twice the standard length with similar revisions to their credit value). A programme comprises a certain number of courses for which successful completion will result in the award of credit which must be accumulated up to the required total. In other words, each course is of equal merit from the point of view of the final classification. That classification is a strictly arithmetical product of grades assigned to each course.

British courses are also composed of separate sections of study but many of these sections of the degree have the purpose of providing foundation for further study. They have no independent value. A credit system does not exist: there is no credit attached, say, to the successful completion of three out of five subjects taken in the first year. Even completion of all the first year's work would not necessarily enable a student to be admitted to the second year of another programme.

Normally final classification of a British degree is based on a two part final examination, the first part of which is taken in the first or second year. The second part, which normally has more weight, is taken at the end of the three years. As stated earlier, there are many methods of assessment in use. It may be possible for a student to progress to the following year without having passed every assessment. The actual requirements vary from course to course and are enshrined in the examination regulations.

In Canada it is usual for five courses to be studied in each of the four years and all must be passed. Credit may only be given for a course which has been passed; there is no means by which failure can be condoned as each individual course has the same merit as each other. They do not form a package for the year.

In Britain it is not possible to take an examination again in order to improve a mark in a subject which the student has passed. In Canada it is normal to write 'supplemental' examinations for that purpose as well as to retake, as in Britain, failed subjects.

The most important contrast between the two countries relates to the responsibility for determining the result of examinations. Associated with results is the setting of the examinations.

In Canada assessment is the responsibility of the individual teacher. Although there may be some faculty policy on the timing and nature of assessments there is neither the control by examining boards nor by detailed examination regulations for that programme which is traditional in Britain. The teacher decides the detailed form of the assessment, administers and marks it. Marks are issued to the students who may exercise a right to appeal against them. This requires a review of the marks which are often then changed. This individual responsibility for examining, with its acceptance of fallibility, is quite different from the British system. There fallibility is recognized but measures are taken to minimize it.

The byword is fairness which is shown in five ways:

- a) detailed examination regulations are available so that students and staff know and must abide by the rules governing the nature, timing and value of assessments.
- b) papers are normally marked by two people to reduce unevenness or bias
- c) all examining decisions relate to all the assessments, not just the individual paper

- d) examining decisions are made collectively by an examining board on which, normally, all examiners sit
- e) for examinations whose marks contribute to the final award there is at least one external examiner from another institution, with no connexion with the teaching of the course.

The existence of the examining board, and particularly the presence of external examiners, is the most fundamental way in which fairness is ensured. The examining board approves the question papers as well as the marks. Degree programmes in Britain are designed as an integrated coherent whole which are divided for convenience into recognizable sections. The question for the examiners is not so much how many marks to award but whether the candidate has satisfied them collectively. Marks are an aid to answering that question not an end in themselves. Although they may be used to assist the examining board in making its final recommendation for degree classification they are a guide to the exercise of discretion not a rigid arithmetical rule. Consequently marks have no permanent meaning.

In Britain it is not usually possible to appeal against the marks assigned. (Indeed, in many institutions the detailed marks are not released to the students.) The operation of examining boards is such that the case of students whose marks show them to be at the margin of failure or between two final classes are discussed exhaustively. The board has discretion to take into account many matters other than marks when making its decision but the decision is a matter of academic judgement and is not open to challenge. Appeals may therefore only be made on grounds of procedural irregularity and are rare.

The function of external examiners is essentially to examine the quality of examining. It is sometimes said, slightly cynically, that they are examining the staff while the latter are examining the students. It is perhaps the same spirit which underlies the jury system which led to the creation of the external examiner system, although the external examiner has the expertise of the judge. He must not be associated with the course but he must have experience of examining similar subjects elsewhere. It is a principle fundamental to British higher education that the standard of a degree should be the same irrespective of the institution awarding it. The charter of the CNAAB expressly states that its degrees shall be 'comparable with those of universities in the United Kingdom'. One method of achieving is through the involvement of external examiners in examining boards. The network of academic staff throughout Britain who give and receive external examining service provides a method of ensuring that fairness, good practice and parity of standard is achieved so far as is possible in a world of unequal talent.

A possible explanation of the differences

The preceding sections have analysed different processes for the admission and examination of students on undergraduate courses. Processes reflect the needs of the system but are the higher education systems so different as to warrant such substantial differences?

British higher education is based on courses which are designed as a progression from elements in the foundation years to a point where the elements are intended to fuse to form a coherent integrated study in depth. The secondary education system reflects this to the extent that students gradually specialize with a culmination of two or three A level subjects. Many criticisms can be levelled at this early specialization but one effect in higher education is to attempt some synthesis of ideas from one area of study to another. Degree

courses are designed with a view to the subjects studied at one time having a bearing on later learning.

The entry qualifications for courses are set so that they meet the minimum standards required of all degrees (2 A levels) and the specific requirements, if any, of that particular programme. The requirements are therefore set for each course but the individual conditions for each applicant are set by academics.

This contrasts with the lower degree of specialization in Canadian secondary schools and the later freedom (or requirement) to experience several subjects at higher education before choosing a final one on which to focus.

The selection of applicants by academics in Britain, compared with their admission by administrators in Canada, highlights an essential difference in approach to higher education. In Britain higher education has developed from a social system in which a small minority of young people attended university. Although access increased it has nevertheless remained an opportunity rather than a normal expectation. Some would describe it as a privilege rather than a right. The British participation rate is less than half that of Canadians. In the ten years 1960-69 the Canadian proportion of 20-24 year olds in post-secondary education almost doubled while the British increase of 50% was regarded as high in that country. Not all those students were on degree courses but nevertheless, there appears to be a difference in perception of the value of higher education. It could be that in a young country education is seen as the way to national maturity and it could be that the very high participation rate in the USA has an impact on thinking in its northern neighbour.

Whatever the reasons for the differences in participation rate the fact is that Canada has an emphasis on easily accessible higher education for longer than Britain. (The first university in Britain without a theological entrance conditions was University College, London which is the same age as McGill University — not by any means the oldest Canadian university.)

In Britain it is geographically feasible for a student to aspire to attending any higher education institution in the country; in Canada this is not realistic. Consequently the emphasis on selection of students in Britain may have a geographical element to it.

Although selection could be done by academics or administrators the criteria to be used would be different. In the tradition of the community of scholars it is logical that it is the academics who choose their students. It is also logical that they make their decisions on the basis of information and views not solely connected with previous academic performance.

In Canada, where the sampling process by students persists until the end of second year study, there is no community to select nor group to be selected. Students who attend a particular course in the first year may never find themselves learning with the same group again. There is no way in which any member of staff can identify in the first year the group who will graduate four years later in a particular subject. Admission is necessarily a primarily mechanical process in the course credit system.

Similarly the difference between the examining procedures highlight the differences in course structure. The accumulation of credits, with permanent standing, is possible when each course is of equal and unrelated merit. It is also possible to have a system whereby each course is examined quite separately. There is, however, no attempt to ensure parity of standard at the time of conclusion of examining. Perhaps this explains why review

of standards is so beloved of Canadian faculty committees, but as a British observer, I wonder whether the students are as likely to benefit from a *post hoc* review as their British counterparts.

It would be churlish to try to pass judgement on any set of processes without much more fundamental investigation. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that where British institutions have adopted modular course structures similar to the North American style, they have retained both the admissions system and the examining board which fit the needs of the traditional British course. It may be that Canadian academics would find it interesting to experiment with examining boards, at least for programmes with a tightly controlled prerequisite system.

The admission of students by academics has an effect on the identity of staff and students as a group which may be lacking in Canada. British students identify with their course and their department in a way which is difficult in Canada. It is people they know who determine their progress whereas Canadian students' progress appears to depend on the 'administration's' collation of a set of unrelated results.

The role of administrators in determining progress and final results in Britain is virtually non-existent — or, at least, not visible outside the examining board meeting where advice on interpretation of examination regulations is offered.

It appears that from the design of a course of study, through the admission stage to the final graduation of the students the systems are more integrated in Britain than in Canada.

Could it be that the whole structure of higher education institutions is built on a more integrated approach? Such, at least, appeared to be the case of academic government already reported and the processes of admission and examination seem to support such a contention.

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STATISTICS FOR POLICY AND PLANNING: A RESPONSE

The article "Statistics for Policy and Planning" by B. Trotter and M. Creet offers a provocative point of view on a topic which would benefit greatly by more discussion. Their shrill attack on the Ontario data policy, however, does not accurately inform the reader as to the policies and practices of the Ministry. The authors suggest, for example, that the province has obliterated the distinction between full-time and part-time students. In fact, however, institutions continue to report students to Statistics Canada and the Ministry as full-time or part-time on the same time-honoured basis as before, namely the criterion used by the institution. (The fact that institutions change their definitions from time to time means that while this method may be time-honoured and may make historical series possible, it does not enjoy the pristine purity that the authors perhaps think it does.) Because both the full-time/part-time breakdown and the (Fiscal Full-Time Equivalent) for each student is in USIS reports, it is also possible to breakdown aggregate FTE data by the full-time/part-time distinction.