



Admissions tutors: Round table April 2010

Summary of a discussion event organised by SCORE, April 2010.

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This is a report of the SCORE round table event held on 27 April 2010 at the Royal Society. Over 30 higher education admissions tutors from a range of STEM disciplines and universities attended the event to discuss the transparency of the admissions process and the recommendations from the SCORE report *Choosing the right STEM degree: Investigating the information available for prospective applicants*.

1. Background

As demand for STEM graduates increases, the Government and others have invested in a range of initiatives to raise young people's awareness of the opportunities arising through the study of STEM subjects. It is important that these initiatives are supported with clear and easily accessible information, advice and guidance at all stages of the education system, including higher education.

The SCORE report *Choosing the right STEM degree* proposes a number of recommendations to assist with the development of clear and accurate guidance for students, teachers and parents on STEM higher education, with a view to ensuring that all candidates can have access to the same information.

2. The event

Professor Peter Main, Institute of Physics, chaired the event. Talks were given by Peter Stagg, Centre for Education and Industry (CEI), on the key findings of the SCORE commissioned research on the transparency of the admissions process and by Diana Garnham, Science Council, on how SCORE plans to take forward the report's recommendations.

Admissions tutors took part in four round table discussions, rotating every 15 minutes to one of four topic areas: mathematics requirements, subject combinations and grades, multiple sources of information and university outreach. Discussions explored the issues higher education admissions tutors face and ways to improve the current system.

3. Research findings

SCORE commissioned the CEI to carry out research on the clarity and transparency of information

available for entry requirements into STEM higher education. The research aimed to collect evidence about the qualifications and combinations of subjects that enable students to progress to STEM degree courses in the UK and to assist the development of clear and accurate guidance for students, teachers and parents.

Key findings of the report highlighted:

- The sheer volume and complexity of information available to young people.
- Entry requirements often vary between departments within universities and between types of universities – often with 'caveats'.
- There are inconsistencies in the way entry requirements are displayed between the various sources of information.
- There is a large disparity between the relatively small number of subjects studied pre-university and the wide range of degrees offered by the higher education sector.

4. Discussion

4.1 Mathematical requirements

The mathematical requirements varied for different degree subjects; for physics and engineering applicants would not be expected to hold anything less than a Maths A-level; for chemistry, admissions tutors were keen to make Maths A-level a prerequisite but concerned that this would affect intake, lowering the number of applicants to their Department; and courses in the biological sciences tended to require a 'good' pass in Maths GCSE.

The SCORE report found that admissions tutors highly value mathematics as a subject and that capability in mathematics is regarded as a very important element in preparing young people for STEM degrees. However, it was acknowledged by admissions tutors that this does not always come across in the entry requirement information. For example, physics admissions tutors hinted a preference for applicants with Further Maths A-level



but were unlikely to specify the requirement as it could drive down numbers. Representatives from biology departments also stated that applicants with Maths A-level might receive lower point offers. It is important this type of information is made available to young people at the right stage to help inform their A-level choices.

Admissions tutors also expressed concern on the mathematical ability of incoming students and some were in the opinion that the current Maths A-level did not adequately prepare students for STEM degrees. Despite this, admissions tutors were unlikely to consider an applicant holding an additional Free Standing Mathematics Qualifications (FSMQ) any differently. There was general agreement FSMQ have little relevance to the offers admissions tutors make to applicants, although this could change if more information on these qualifications was made available to admissions tutors.

4.2 Subject combinations and grades

There was consensus at the meeting that prospective STEM degree applicants were required to hold at least two STEM A-levels. But in terms of making offers, universities are changing their admissions policies in order to respond to grade inflation. With more and more students obtaining the required grades, other measures are needed to differentiate between applicants. In some cases these include increasing the requirement to three STEM related A-levels and requiring an applicant's grades to be achieved in the first sitting, with no retakes. It is important these changes are made clear to prospective students.

Widening participation objectives did factor in the offers made to prospective applicants. Admissions tutors believe that it is important to recognise the potential in applicants and there was agreement this could not be achieved through grades alone. This might mean applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds and low performing schools receive lower grade offers. However, the challenge for admissions tutors is being able to identify these applicants. Tutors would like to see more information from schools regarding widening participation and input from UCAS to assist this.

It is also becoming more difficult for admissions tutors to judge the number of conditional offers to make (first choice and insurance) particularly with the introduction of the new policy penalising universities that over or under recruit. Each year departments analyse the entry grades and subject combinations of successful applicants to assist with this judgement and it was agreed this would be useful information to share between departments and universities.

Post-qualification application was discussed in the meeting and proposed as a possible route to improving transparency. It was acknowledged that this would require a complete change in school and/or university timescales.

4.3 Multiple sources of information

In order to obtain accurate and reliable information on admissions, it was strongly recommended by the group that prospective applicants contact the admissions tutors directly. Admissions tutors will correspond with prospective applicants either face-to-face, over the phone, via email and were keen to emphasise their approachability. Some made use of other department staff, e.g. admissions secretary, to answer basic enquires and to provide a less intimidating point of contact. Offer grades are flexible and it is only through correspondence a prospective applicant can obtain a clear picture. Open days were also seen by admission tutors as an ideal opportunity to obtain clear and transparent information. Social networking sites were also used by some as a forum for existing undergraduates to connect with prospective applicants.

Publication lead times for both paper-based prospectuses and UCAS information submissions are an issue that means that department web pages tend to have the most up to date and detailed information on admissions but unfortunately operated at a department level rather than at a university level. There are often poor links between the websites of different departments at the same university as departments were often competing for students. This makes it difficult for students to navigate their way through all the information and make an informed course choice.

The variance in how universities state their grade requirements was also viewed by the admissions tutors as an issue preventing pupils making an informed choice on their university and course. It is difficult for prospective applicants to compare between different universities and departments due to the inconsistency in recorded grade requirements, i.e. as the lowest, average or highest offers. This often depends on whether the department was a selecting or a recruiting department.

Some departments make use of focus groups to provide feedback on admissions material, although this was often from those on the courses as opposed to those that hadn't gained places or applied. Those that had made use of feedback from teachers found it very valuable.

The UCAS website was identified as a further obstacle. The UCAS Course Search Facility has grown rapidly, without any significant improvements to the original website, which many tutors consider outdated. It was suggested the website should include facilities to help prospective applicants identify subject groupings that best match their subject combinations.

4.4 University Outreach

In recent years, outreach has become a key priority in STEM departments in UK universities to encourage STEM uptake at Level 3. Generally, admissions tutors feel there has been a positive shift in the motive for outreach and that it was now used more to promote a subject rather than a particular department at a particular university.

The purpose and impact of outreach depends on the targeted age group. Most university communications with schools are aimed at reaching post-16 pupils, with the focus on raising awareness to STEM courses. Admissions tutors expressed frustration that successful outreach largely depends on establishing the right contacts with schools and many find this to be a time consuming exercise. Many also couldn't see an obvious route to getting key messages, particularly on subject choice, to younger students.

The discussion identified a number of different

The SCORE partnership, working together on science education; Association for Science Education; Institute of Physics; Royal Society; Royal Society of Chemistry; Science Council; and Society of Biology.

outreach schemes at a local and national level and there was general concern on the lack of coordination between all the different schemes. Admissions tutors also agreed that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of specific outreach activity and the level of impact it has on an applicant's choice of university and course. This presented a need for greater communication and collaboration between the different universities and organisations providing outreach. The National HE STEM programme, hosted by the University of Birmingham, was identified as a possible solution to achieving this.

5 Next steps

The round table event allowed admissions tutors from a range of STEM disciplines and universities to share best practice in admissions and identify common areas of concern that need to be addressed. SCORE will be meeting with UCAS and others to discuss the issues raised.