



Non-academic indicators and the Higher Education admissions process: a case study of the Personal Statement

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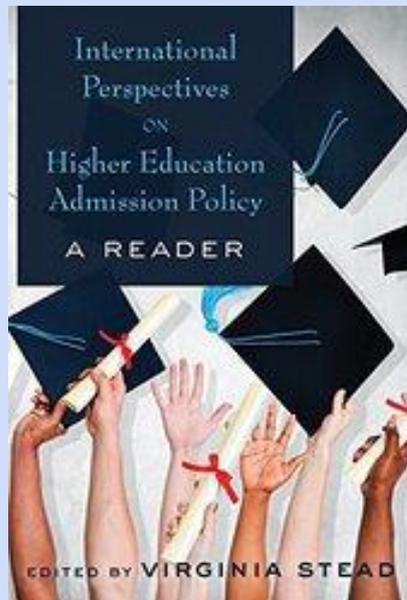
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Introduction

Many nations require university applicants to submit some a free response self-appraisal as part of the Higher Education (HE) admissions process. This text, most commonly known as a *personal statement* (PS), contributes towards decisions about whether applicants are accepted or rejected by their chosen universities. However, despite concerns about fairness being expressed for some time (Baird,

1985), it remains “a genre virtually ignored” (Brown, 2004, p. 242), and a process “mystified and occluded” (Ding 2007, p. 387). The few empirical studies that are conducted tend to involve medical or social work applicants only (Hawkins, 2004; Lumb & Vail, 2004) and to consider how accurately the PS predicts future performance, not on how it is influenced by an applicant’s schooling or social background. In other words, the question asked has been “will this indicator identify the very best students?” rather than “is this indicator equitable?” In answer to the former question, the emerging consensus is that the PS is a limited indicator of potential and therefore a “highly dubious” (Norman, 2004, p. 81) method of selection. This chapter now considers the latter question, examining the extent to which the PS is shaped by the socioeconomic context in which it was created.

Later in the chapter, a case study is presented from the UK, where attention is increasingly being placed on the role of non-academic indicators. This is partly because recent investigations have suggested that applicants from lower-performing school types out-perform their identically qualified peers once they reach university (e.g. Ogg et al., 2009; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). As a result, the UK’s Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, has urged admissions tutors to examine applicants’ “potential” as well as their “headline” grades (Dearing Lecture, 17/2/11). Among the non-academic indicators of potential listed by Willetts is the PS (*The Telegraph*, 22/08/10).

This chapter reviews practice, policy and research from around the globe to assess whether greater fairness in the admissions process can be achieved by focusing on applicants’ PSs. The case study (Jones 2013) examines statements submitted by 309 identically-qualified applicants to one department of a major UK University for 2010 entry, with the aim of discovering whether applicants from fee-paying schools are advantaged because they are able to access and exchange more privileged forms of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 2000). The chapter concludes by outlining three criteria against which the efficacy of non-academic indicators might be gauged.

What Are Personal Statements and How Are They Used in HE Admissions Processes Around the Globe?

For the purpose of this analysis, a PS describes as any opportunity provided by a HE admissions agency for applicants to write about themselves and their compatibility for university entrance. In the UK, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) allows each applicant 4,000 characters in which to compose a PS, and the following definition is offered:

The personal statement is your opportunity to tell universities and colleges about your suitability for the course(s) that you hope to study. You need to demonstrate your enthusiasm and commitment, and above all, ensure that you stand out from the crowd. (www.ucas.com)

Elsewhere, the PS is known by different names, including *admissions essay*, *personal competencies statement*, *application essay*, *statement of purpose*, *autobiographical letter*, and so on. Rather than invite a free response, many agencies require applicants to discuss specific aspects of their contribution to date. In the US, the Common Application, an undergraduate admissions form used by applicants to almost 500 member colleges and universities, asks for an essay of up to 650 words based on one of five ‘prompts’, including the following:

- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn? (www.commonapp.org)

Admissions practices differ from nation to nation, and sometimes vary within individual countries. Examples of PS-like submissions being permitted or required can be found in Hong Kong, where the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) invites applicants to submit a “self-recommendation portfolio” of up to 300 words, and in Australia, where the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) allows a ‘personal competencies statement’ of approximately five pages to

be submitted. However, it should be noted that not all nations' admissions agencies endorse the practice. Indeed, the UK and the US appear to be unusual in placing so much emphasis on the PS. Of the countries that prefer to make judgements based on academic attainment alone, some devolve decision-making processes to individual universities (e.g. Iceland, Canada), while others have more centralised admissions systems (e.g. Norway, China). China operates the 'Gaokao', a standardised national university entrance exam, in which special consideration is given to certain groups, including overseas applicants and those from areas traditionally lacking education resources (e.g. the Tibet Autonomous Region). In terms of fairness, such measures are considered necessary because not all applicants will have received identical schooling opportunities. However, as subsequent sections demonstrate, the risk of incorporating *non-academic* indicators is that, rather than correct for such unfairness, they further enshrine the advantages of more educationally-privileged applicants.

It is interesting to note that some admissions agencies not only shun indicators such as the PS, but even go so far as disregarding academic attainment once a certain level of proficiency has been established. For example, in the Netherlands, places on 'numerous fixus' programmes are allocated on the basis of a lottery administered by the Dutch admissions agency, Studielink. The 'numerous fixus' differs from the 'numerous clausus', which is used by some European agencies and universities when the number of applicants exceeds the number of available places (Karabel 2005). In Greece, a lottery is used to decide entrance to the Hellenic Open University.

Admissions policy can therefore be seen as a spectrum with de-individualised ballots at one end (for nations that do not believe qualified applicants should be further selected against auxiliary criteria) and the PS at the other end (for nations that actively encourage applicants to distinguish themselves through non-academic means).

In the US, many of the colleges and universities that do not make use of the Common Application ask applicants to respond to customised questions as part of their

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institutional selection process. For example, the University of California invites two essays (1,000 words maximum) and offers the following advice:

Your personal statement should be exactly that — personal. This is your opportunity to tell us about yourself — your hopes, ambitions, life experiences, inspirations. We encourage you to take your time on this assignment. Be open. Be reflective. Find your individual voice and express it honestly.

(<http://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/personal-statement/>)

Such overtures point towards careful selection processes and a genuine desire for universities to learn as much as they can about their applicants before making entry decisions. However, even among applicants of identical academic attainment, the PSs produced can be very different. Entreaties to “find your individual voice” or “stand out from the crowd” prove more difficult to enact for some applicants than others. However, Paley (1996) notes that applicants are fully persuaded by this discourse when composing their PS. Among the comments collected from students were “I want mine to stand out”, “it’s best to be really unique”, and “I don’t want to make myself the same as everyone else” (1996, 95). The problem is that if PSs vary along socio-economic lines, they may not be the instrument of fairness that they are often assumed to be, even by applicants themselves.

Is the Personal Statement a Fair Way to Assess Applicants?

The primary reason that academic indicators are sometimes considered unfair is that advantages of school type can distort the picture and result in high-potential applicants being rejected on attainment grounds. As Ogg et al. (2009) note of the UK HE system, applicants from less privileged educational background, on average, out-perform their privately-schooled peers once at university. However, as Boliver (2013) shows, such students are less likely to be admitted by top UK universities even when they have identical grades. As this difference in admissions success is not explicable

by academic indicators, it could be partly the result of non-academic indicators, the most prominent of which in the UK system is the PS.

To investigate this hypothesis, Jones (2013) examined all applications made to one department within one UK university for 2010 entry. The department offered about ten single honours undergraduate programmes and various combinations of those subjects, all within the humanities and leaning towards social sciences rather than arts. In total, 5,276 applications were received. PSs from overseas applicants and mature students were disregarded and, to control for academic attainment, only those written by applicants who subsequently achieved the same attainment scores (A-level grades of BBB) were compared. This reduced the database to 327 applications, which compares favourably to sample sizes for previous studies of the personal statement, ranging from 30 (Ding, 2007) to 176 (Kirkland and Hansen, 2010). PSs were tagged according to the school type of the applicant: Comprehensive School (88), Sixth Form College (83), Grammar School (45); Private School (93). The remaining 18 applications were disregarded because the school type was unknown. Anonymity was preserved by not disclosing details of the host university or department, and by deleting applicants' names at source. The approach taken was not dissimilar to that reported in *The State Nobility* (1996), Bourdieu's examination of prize-winners in competitive examinations for French students. Following Pelech et al. (1999), GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) and Brown (2004), the PSs were analysed in terms of writing, work-related activity, commitment, goals and awareness.

To begin with writing, Jones (2013) gauged fluency of expression by the avoidance of six clear mistakes, including apostrophe misuse ("I am re-sitting two modulars"); typing or spelling mistakes ("The Financial Times is one of my favorite newspaper"); and sentence boundary errors ("I spend my leisure time doing a wide range of sport, I regularly play football, and swim"). Similar counts were undertaken by Paley (1996) but she examined four PSs only and passed more subjective comments about the text ("gaudy prose", etc.). When all individual errors were counted, Jones (2013) found that applicants from the least advantaged school type, the sixth form college, made

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three times as many language errors per 1,000 words of text than applicants from the most advantaged educational background, the private school. This cannot be explained by ability because all applicants subsequently received identical grades; it is rather the consequence of the input received: “middle- and upper-class parents resort to anything they think will get their child an edge, including essay coaching or even writing their child’s essay themselves” (Kirkland and Hansen 2010, 118). Clearly, some applicants have access to more accurate information, advice and guidance than others. The more privileged the educational background, the more sophisticated, accurate and fluent the applicant’s written English was found to be. The danger is that a lack of fluency detracts from the substance of the PS. When Paley observed admissions tutors at work, she noted that upon encountering mechanically incorrect language, their focus was “directed away from content to usage” (1996, p. 97). Because UCAS advises applicants to “include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work,” Jones (2013) also analyzed the PSs according to the quantity and quality of work-related activity undertaken. Here, school type differences were even more pronounced. Where state-educated applicants talked of Saturday jobs and school trips, applicants from private schools drew on more privileged forms of social and cultural capital, often listing many high-prestige placements:

As an 18 year old, I have had a variety of short periods of experience in the workings of businesses in today's financial world. I worked on the trading floor of a London brokers firm, [company name] ... I first became aware of the workings of businesses when, to supplement my savings, I worked for [company name], a designer in London, as a model. ... My other work experience thus far includes work with my local BBC radio station, events planning with a corporate 5 star country hotel, and working in the marketing team of a leading City law firm. I have since had a variety of jobs, most recently managing a small gastro pub. (HE applicant from a private school, cited in Jones 2013)

As Hatcher and Le Gallais found, more privileged students are able to “utilise family contacts to access work placements in professional workplaces” (2008, 74). Jones

(2013) noted similar family networks helping some applicants to secure more prestigious experience than others. For example, one private school applicant boasted work experience at his uncle's "aircraft brokerage and marketing company" (Jones 2013). Meanwhile, for applicants with less social capital, work experience mostly involved low-skill, paid work: "I also have a part time job as a drinks waitress working at the [*local sports stadium*]. Even though it's my job I look forward to my shifts."

In terms of commitment, goals and awareness, Jones (2013) noted a familiar pattern emerging, with applicants using their PS to express very different forms of cultural capital. For state school applicants, hobbies included "spending time with friends, watching films, going to the gym, reading up on the latest fashion and attending gigs. I attend a lot of gigs and the experience and thrill of the atmosphere puts me on a complete high" (Jones, 2013, p. 18). On the other hand, private school applicants were able to cite more sophisticated leisure pursuits: "I did a Cordon Bleu cookery course at the Tante Marie School, in London" (Jones, 2013, p. 19).

The degree to which admissions tutors are influenced by such claims is unclear (though see Burke 2012). However, the PS provides a platform for more economically and educationally advantaged applicants to further advertise their credentials. Studies have shown that private school applicants receive better information, advice and guidance (Raey et al. 2005; Burke 2012) and benefit most from the symbolic effects of capital (Bourdieu 2000). Despite being identically qualified, the private school applicants in Jones's (2013) study were almost twice as likely to enter a top university as those from state schools.

The rise of the College Admissions Consultant

The importance of applicants receiving high quality information, advice and guidance has led to an increase in the number of private consultancy companies

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supplying such services, especially in the US. This growth industry often involves offering clients tailored help with their PS:

Our Senior College Admissions Consultant has read literally tens of thousands of applications to Ivy League universities in her prior capacity as Dean of Admissions at two Ivy institutions. She knows what makes for successful essays and applies her vast experience to guide students to write first-rate, personal statements.

(www.ivyselect.com)

Such consultancy companies, an inevitable consequence of neo-liberal policies in the field, exacerbate concerns about fairness. Though emphasising that their contribution does not extend to direct help (“IvySelect does not write essays for students”), many companies boast that they “refuse to let students submit essays that don't answer the question or that don't provide the strongest case.” One IvySelect testimony notes that “if it weren't for [*my consultant*], my chances of getting into Wharton would have been hazardously slim.”

(<http://www.ivyselect.com/testimonials.html>).

Fees for consultancy services are beyond the financial means of many applicants. If the advice offered allows entry to top universities for students whose chances were otherwise “hazardously slim”, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that other students, academically better suited but financially worse off, are losing out.

Can Personal Statements Be Used in a Less Discriminatory Way?

Evidence from the UK admissions system, as outlined above, suggests that the PS inherently favours those applicants with the most privileged and compatible forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2000). However, it should be noted that other nations' agencies use the PS in more sensitive ways, paying greater attention to the background conditions that influence its creation. Many agencies and universities ask students to reflect not on their own individual achievement, but on the broader

attributes they might bring to university life. For example, Brown University justify their use of non-academic indicators in terms of a “long history of encouraging diversity”. Note also how they place emphasis on the careful consideration of all applications with the goal of creating a suitably-mixed cohort.

The truth is that while the majority of our applicants are qualified for admission to Brown, we can only accept a very small percentage. This leaves us with the humbling task of piecing together an entering class one delightful applicant at a time. If you are drawn to Brown’s special blend of rigorous academics and engaging culture, then we strongly encourage you to apply.

(<http://www.brown.edu/admission/undergraduate/apply-brown>)

Of course, even if admissions practices do focus on “one delightful applicant at a time”, the problem raised by Jones (2013) still lurks - some applicants are better equipped to delight than others. This is why explicit reassurances are needed for students whose economic and school backgrounds have not allowed for a wide range of extra-curricular experience. In this respect, Yale University is very clear. They prompt applicants by asking whether their schools offer Advance Placement courses or an International Baccalaureate, but also ensure that the offer itself does not become the criterion: “We only expect you to take advantage of such courses if your high school provides them” (<http://admissions.yale.edu/what-yale-looks-for>).

The issue of work-related activity, another area of potential unfairness noted by Jones, was addressed directly in Hout’s review of Berkeley’s admissions processes (2005, p. 35). Although he acknowledged that “having a job that combines academic content, responsibility, and/ or special skill improved the odds of gaining a good read score,” he also noted that so too did “working because the family needed money.” In a comparable vein, Harvard ask whether the applicant has “taken full advantage of opportunities,” but add a supplementary question too: “if a candidate has not had much time in high school for extracurricular pursuits due to familial, work, or other obligations, what does she hope to explore at Harvard with her additional free time?”

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(<http://www.admissions.college.harvard.edu/apply/tips/decisions.html>). Princeton similarly talks about placing achievements “in their true context” (<http://www.princeton.edu/admission/applyingforadmission/requirements/>). Such assurances help to counter-balance structural advantages that might otherwise result in unfairness.

As well as accomplishment contextualisation, equity can be improved by the provision of clear guidance on how the PS will be scored. For example, the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) not only supplies guidelines for writing a ‘personal competencies statement’, but also spells out the cost of non-compliance:

You must systematically address each of the criteria outlined below. The criteria are designed to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate that you have developed, through your life experiences, the skills and abilities to be successful in a tertiary course. If you do not address the criteria you will receive a poor personal competencies rank. (www.satac.edu.au)

Such stringent instruction may be off-putting to some applicants, but it sets out the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu 2000) for all applicants. SATAC also provide scoring criteria that emphasise ‘maturity’ (e.g. understanding of the current social and ethical issues facing our society) rather than experience (no mention is made of work-related activity).

Of course, regardless of how insightful agencies and universities are about the ways in which PSs will be read by admissions tutors, the problem remains that some applicants will benefit from advice, information and guidance that enable their submission to look more ‘polished’, as private consultants like to say, than equally qualified peers from less fortunate backgrounds. The final section summarises the problems identified, and proposes new criteria against which non-academic indicators of scholarly potential might be judged.

Three Criteria for Non-academic Indicators: Functionality, Fairness, Transparency

This chapter has shown that agencies around differ greatly in terms of how they use PSs in the admissions process. For some (e.g. the UK), the emphasis is on ‘free response’; applicants are given an unrestricted opportunity to characterise themselves, being offered no more than a word limit and some basic guidance on the qualities for which universities may be looking. At the other end of the scale, other nations (e.g. Ireland) allow applicants no space at all to explain why would make suitable recruits, with admissions decisions being based on academic indicators alone. In between these two extremes, many nations invite applicants to say more about themselves but do so in a restrictive fashion, either by setting ‘essay’ titles or by requiring particular aspects of applicants’ suitability to be outlined. In the absence of any available principles for judging the efficacy of an admissions practice, this chapter now suggests three key criteria: functionality (does it work?), fairness (does it discriminate?) and transparency (is it understood?). These will now be discussed in turn.

In terms of functionality, research consistently questions whether the PS is a reliable indicator of future performance (Hawkins 2004; Lumb and Vail 2004; Brown 2004), and Powers and Fowles’ (1997) research casts “some rather serious doubt” on the PS as an indicator of writing quality (in contrast to Willingham and Breland, 1982). Many universities take great efforts to underline how important the PS is to admissions decisions. However, further evidence would be needed to support claims that a good PS translates to a good student; the majority of published research currently points in the opposite direction.

In terms of fairness, research shows that the PS can be a counter-productive indicator in that identically-qualified applicants from different school type backgrounds may create PSs that misrepresent their potential to excel at university. Powers and Fowles (1997, p. 82) refer to “uncertainty of authorship”, with 59 per cent of their invited

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participants receiving either 'moderate' or 'substantial' help. Similarly, Schwartz warns that "some staff and parents advise to the extent that the personal statement cannot be seen as the applicant's own work" (2004, p. 26). As reported early, business for College Application Consultants appears healthy in the US. If the PSs submitted reflect collaboration between family members, paid advisors and other contributors, it is difficult to see how they can do justice to the ability and potential of each individual applicant.

In terms of transparency, relatively little research has been conducted into the process by which PS are assessed when they reach a university and "expectations are assumed rather than explicitly stated" (Ding 2007, p. 387). Paley talks about the "unknown audience with hidden criteria" (1996, p. 87) and notes that applicant "must do what s/he is told whether or not it feels right" (1996, p. 87). Messages from within universities can be very mixed. For example, Yale claims to "read essays very carefully and try to get a full sense of the human being behind them" (admissions.yale.edu/instructions) and Ding (2007) argues that they are a "vital" part of the process. However, the Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Oxford University expresses cynicism towards "second-rate historians who happen to play the flute," (Mike Nicholson, quoted in *The Telegraph*, 27/07/10), and the Director of Admissions for Cambridge University acknowledges that "with the profusion of companies and websites offering to help applicants' personal statements for a fee, no admissions tutor believes [the PS] to be the sole work of the applicant any more" (Geoff Parks, quoted in *The Guardian*, 19/05/09). Very few institutions inform applicants exactly what happens to the non-academic information that they supply. Will it be read? If so, by whom? And against which criteria will it be judged? Though fairness and transparency are not the same thing (see Burke 2012), clear overlaps arise in the context of HE admissions. If universities are transparent in terms of how decisions are reached, this can contribute towards greater fairness in the process. There are ways in which a PS can be used to enhance equity, but as extra-curricular activity is often a product of school type, it must be made clear to applicants that the PS should do more than list opportunities afforded by socio-

economic status. Those nations that invite applicants to consider how they might contribute to an institution's diversity are less discriminatory because advantage of school type cannot be so readily exchanged for sought-after forms of cultural capital.

Conclusion

Ding (2007) characterises the PS, unproblematically, in terms of “its allowance for creativity and individuality, its space for narratives and stories, and its goal both to inform and to persuade” (2007, p. 370). In practice, these ‘opportunities’ cause difficulties for those applicants unable to access high quality input, and advantage applicants able to draw on greater school-based and familial resources. Symbolic capital is not equally distributed (Bourdieu 2000).

Commentators and politicians who feel that non-academic indicators such as the PS are an effective way to widen participation may instead wish to consider more direct initiatives to address unfairness in the admissions process. For example, in Brazil, more than 70% of public universities operate race-based quotas (Htun 2004), and, in Ireland, the Higher Education Access Route (www.accesscollege.ie/hear) offers places at reduced points to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. German universities are also partly controlled in terms of admissions. For example, at least 2 per cent of students admitted must be “Härtefälle” (disadvantaged applicants, including carers and those with disabilities) and 20 per cent must have graduated with a GPA that put them in the top 20 percent of their class.

Powers and Fowles (1997, p. 77) argue that, in terms of making admissions choices that predict future success, “the more sources of information available ... the better the decisions”. However, subsequent studies suggest that less may actually be more (Brown 2004; Jones 2013). The PS, in particular, does not appear to be a sound predictor of future performance, and may even distort applicants’ true potential (Hawkins 2004; Lumb and Vail 2004). Furthermore, concerns have been expressed

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about the risks of asking applicant to self-disclose personal information if they can subsequently be rejected without explanation: “omnipotent admissions committees are providing [applicants with] just enough rope for a hanging” (Paley 1996, p. 86).

In the absence of a clearly-explained rationale that is understood and interpreted by admissions tutors and applicants alike, and that aims expressly to counter-balance previous educational advantage, the PS is often an unhelpful indicator. The goal for admissions agencies around the globe is to design a format that allows relevant information to be gleaned without benefiting some candidates over others (see recommendations by Schwartz 2004). If this cannot be achieved, the next best option may be join those nations that rely on appropriately-contextualised attainment evidence alone.

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