

University Admissions, Educational Justice and Epistemic Justice



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Health warning



This is not an elitist argument

Who should pay, who should go



- Expansion of the numbers of students going to university: from < 10% in the 1960's to >40% today (David *et al.* 2010: 8)
- “When higher education was an elite system with participation rates in single figures, maintaining a high-quality system out of taxation was not a problem. The expansion to a mass system has been a major advance. But the expansion has implications” (Barr, 2003)

Who should pay for university? Who should go to university?



- Consider how we deal with other rationed goods, e.g. children's (teeth) braces or (eye) glasses
- How – and why – we ration these goods depend on
 - Who needs braces or glasses
 - How serious a matter it is that kids have them
- It turns out that the state pays for kids' glasses, but not (for the most part) their braces
 - Glasses are essential to make sure that a small group of kids can see as well as all the others
 - Not so for braces – the benefit is mostly cosmetic

Who should pay, who should go (3)



- Extending the analogy to the university, we need to ask
 - Who should go to university
 - How important it is that people go to university
 - Why?
- I'll start with the 'who' and 'why' questions (the 'how important' question will emerge between the lines)

A hypothetical problem



You are an admissions tutor and have available a number of places to study a desirable course. In picking students for your class, you can choose from applicants showing all the variety of our population – high academic achievers, low achievers, hard-working, apathetic, black, white, rich, poor, male, female, etc.

Who ought you to take into your class?

(Forget for a while the identity of the university where you work)

Who should go: five possibilities



The answer to the hypothetical problem depends on what kind of competition you see yourself as running:

- The ‘tournament’-conception
- The ‘trials’-conception
- The ‘levelling the playing field’-conception
- The ‘remedy’-conception
- The ‘job interview’-conception

Conceptions of admissions and the role of the university



Merit cannot be understood...apart from its relationship to the basic goals and roles of the institution seeking students. By “goals” we mean the institution’s own internally defined aims; by “roles,” we refer to the part that colleges and universities play in enabling other social institutions to fulfil their goals. (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, 2004: 39)

- But what *is* the university’s goal and/or role? Is it:
 - Pure competitive (tournament)
 - Social benefits maximisation (job interview)
 - Distributive justice (levelling the playing field, remedy)

Conceptions of admissions and the role of the university (2)



- Further, who decides what the role of the university should be?
 - ...not the university itself...
 - ...nor the state...
- We need to figure out what the nature of the university is (*a la* Sandel, or, even earlier, Newman, Jaspers, Phillips-Griffiths)

Instrumental conceptions of the university and admissions



- Social benefit and distributive justice conceptions are closer than you think. They both presuppose an instrumental role for the university: they understand the university in terms of how it can enable other societal goals.
- But can we make admissions decisions just on this basis?
- No. In fact our tacit understanding of what a university is shapes and limits what we think the university can do as an instrument in others' hands.

Instrumental conceptions of the university: what's wrong with 'em



- You have no idea who to admit, unless you presuppose that universities want to admit the best potential students of their field
- Levelling-conception: what to level for?
- Remedy-conception: how far to go in remedying?
- Tournament-conception: community of what?
- Trial-conception: you want the best potential what?
- Job-interview: you want your workers to learn what?

A principled or intrinsic account of admissions



- *We should* admit those students who are going to be the best students...
- ...because the goal of the university is maintaining and furthering *knowledge*...
- ...and, as a teacher, what you want is for students to *learn* what you teach
- The trial-conception comes closest...
- But not because the purpose of the university is to turn out potential Nobel prize winners, life-changing inventions, etc. - it is *because that's what we do*.

Educational justice: the state of the field



- A maxi-view: how does the distribution of education affect the distribution of life-chances
- A problem of formal and effective justice
- This necessitates the micro-view: what goes on in individual interactions in real classrooms between students and teachers
- Do students actually learn? What do they learn?
- “Epistemic access” (Morrow) and “epistemic justice” (Fricker) are concepts that may help

Conclusion



- Those who will be the best scholars should go to university
- There is a case for lower offers to applicants from worse schools, but the *rationale* for this must be kept clearly in view – it's not that we want to change society, but that we want good students
- ‘Knowledge is good for its own sake’ – this is not an elitist position; it can ground a conception of justice (that those who are best suited for study should go)
- But those who want to maintain that knowledge is good for its own sake need a better explanation of what they mean; some of the answers are there in epistemology: value of knowledge-debate, epistemic justice-debate, but this needs to be worked out much more clearly.



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