

The Hertford Scheme

Once upon a time, and that not much more than a century ago, Oxford was a closed club for male Anglicans with substantial financial means (plus a few Scholars). The religious qualification was finally abandoned in 1872, women were admitted to the University at the turn of the century, and the financial barrier was flattened by the grants provided for in the 1944 Education Act. Nominally the University was open to all.

Notwithstanding all this liberality the (then) grammar school-masters, not a chronically discontented lot, were very unhappy about the Oxbridge prospects of their favourite pupils. They argued that they could neither staff an Oxbridge coaching organization nor persuade their pupils to stay for a seventh term in the VI-form, and for these reasons were at a disadvantage relative to the independent and direct grant schools. It certainly looked very odd that the great majority of Oxbridge places were secured by candidates from schools educating about 20% of the VI-formers, and that a large number of schools had never put forward an Oxbridge candidate at all. Such a concentration of academic talent seemed quite improbable. The Franks' Commission of 1963 duly pondered the question of admissions as part of its general survey of the University, blessed the doctrine that the places should be offered to the most able and agreed with the school-masters. The Tutors for Admissions pondered the Franks' Report, made some minor changes to the Entrance Examination and issued pious statements of good will. The school-masters went silently away.

At the time Hertford was not the most affluent of colleges academically speaking and with more than its fair share of angry young Fellows was in the rare state, for an Oxford college, of being ready for change. It was clear that the grammar schools could not compete in the Entrance Examination on even terms with the independent schools generously staffed with dedicated teachers, and the only possible conclusion was to abandon the Entrance Examination, at least in part. Selection by A-level grades (since invoked as Conditional Offers) was considered and rejected for a number of reasons: A-levels are necessarily a mass production job lacking in discrimination (there are about ten times more awards of A B B or better than there are Oxford places), and the uncertainty of specified grades

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actually being obtained would have created impossible problems with accommodation. On the other hand school-masters know much more about their pupils than the A-level examiners can determine and furthermore can predict the A-level grades that should be obtained with considerable confidence. Selection by school report and interview looked like a much more satisfactory way of supplementing the Entrance Examination with a system of entry which would be less critically dependent on preparation.

After a few trial years of the system Hertford declared its intention to go public in 1968, whereupon there descended upon the College's collective heads all things mentionable and unmentionable. The sacred cow of "uniformity-of-practice" was threatened, meaning that other colleges thought Hertford might gain an advantage. The Tutors for Admission individually and collectively lost their cool, angry words were spoken, and Hertford was condemned by a massive majority. However the doctrine of "independent-rights-of-colleges" triumphed over "uniformity-of-practice" and the scheme went ahead with the restriction that not more than a quarter of the places could be offered unconditionally outside of the Entrance Examination.

During the years since 1968 grammar schools have become comprehensive, colleges have become mixed, the proportion of places secured by candidates from maintained schools has increased to 50%, and Hertford has risen from the bottom to the top of the academic league. Whether there is any real connection between these changes and/or the unconditional offers is not known. Statistically undergraduates from maintained schools fare significantly better in Finals than those from independent schools, and similarly pre-A-level undergraduates do better than post-A-level. This is just about the only objective justification for continuing with an admissions scheme which has not been universally loved in Oxford, although no-one has yet proposed that Hertford should move to Cambridge.

The operation of the scheme is not at all complicated: Pre-A-level candidates for Hertford College, whether from maintained or independent schools, are invited to come for interview about the last week of September, on dates advertised to schools well in advance. On the basis of these interviews and the school reports about a third of the places (25% in previous years) are offered with no conditions apart from the formal requirements for matriculation (two E's). Those

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who receive an offer of a place are free to attempt the Entrance Examination in pursuit of the great honour and small financial reward associated with a Scholarship or an Exhibition. Those who do not receive an offer are also free to compete via the Entrance Examination: some are vigorously encouraged to do so, others are advised to look to their UCCA choices, but no one is excluded by a College decision before the Examination. Generally the policy is that a candidate can either talk or write his or her way into a place, in both cases the reckoning being on promise rather than achievement.

Securing a place at Hertford, or worse not securing a place, may very well entail two separate visits to Oxford for interviews. Hertford absorbs the cost of accommodation for the first visit but the fares may be a non-negligible consideration unless the local authority is very generous. On the other hand it is easier to cope with an interview in December having seen the place and met the interviewers in September.

There should be no delusion that the Hertford unconditional offers represent an easy way into Oxford. About a third of those who have entered thus have obtained Firsts c.f. 10% for the University as a whole. However for would-be Oxbridge candidates who have ability but not the training for or willingness to take on the Entrance Examination it is either Hertford or an offer conditional on A-level grades. The snag with a conditional offer is that A-level grades are not altogether reliable and the acceptance of an offer excludes the candidate from the Entrance Examination and hence from consideration by any other college. In practice about half the conditional offer candidates fail to meet their conditions but colleges in fact accept many of the near miss failures. Colleges like to fill their places as, notwithstanding the notorious wealth of some colleges, fee income is not negligible. With a typical intake of 100 per year per college, definitely not transferable between colleges, conditional offers are an administrative misery and for this reason alone are very unlikely to become very popular; at present the average is about 7 conditional offers per college per year.

/For Scottish

For Scottish candidates, or more exactly those who have recently taken Scottish Highers, there exists a special scheme which is identical with the Hertford scheme for pre-A-level candidates except that a number of colleges participate. There are also several small schemes restricted to particular areas but these seem to be as inequitable as the now (largely) defunct closed awards.

There will certainly be a need for an entry procedure other than the Entrance Examination even if, as seems likely, the seventh term VI form fades away. Schools and circumstances differ and it would appear that the only way that colleges can create some approximation to equality of opportunity is to partially decouple from examinations and to rely more heavily on school reports and interviews.