

Holistic Admissions as a Global Phenomenon

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Abstract

Globally, standards for college selection have been historically dominated by national entrance examinations, with the U.S. an outlier in its development of holistic review for selective universities. This chapter discusses the gradual diffusion of elements of the U.S. holistic model to other admissions systems around the world, including Australia, China, England, France, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, and South Korea. There are many drivers of the move to holistic admissions, including student anxiety, stifled creativity and innovation, rote learning for examinations, shadow education, stratification and inequality, and workforce preparation. Serious concerns are raised across country contexts, however, including transparency, fairness, equity, and corruption.

Keywords

college admissions – college entrance – access – equity – selection – holistic review

1 Introduction

Globally, college admission has generally been driven largely by examinations, measuring either general aptitude or national curricula (Edwards et al., 2012; McGrath et al., 2014; Wang & Lee, 2015). A few countries, such as Greece, Portugal, and most famously, China, historically used national admissions tests exclusively to select students for university. Other countries, such as Japan, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States have used exams as a crucial supplementary credential in their admissions processes. Curriculum-based examinations, such as the A-level exams in the United Kingdom, and the *baccalauréat* and *concours* in France, are used in many other countries. Whatever the system, various forms of academic credentials are believed to be used almost exclusively to select students for university entry in countries around the world.

Selective colleges in the United States—those colleges that do not admit all of those who are qualified for admission—have been an outlier for many years. In addition to course grades and test scores, applicants to these colleges also submit extracurricular activities, essays, letters of recommendation, and personal information as part of their application. All of these factors can be incorporated into an admissions decision by individual admissions officers on each campus, and 95% of these admissions officers claim to review applications in a “holistic” manner (Bastedo et al., 2018). In its most pure form, holistic review evaluates an applicant’s credentials in light of the opportunities available to that applicant through their family, neighborhood, and high school contexts. In practice, however, American-style holistic review is a wide range of varying institutionalized practices that are constantly in flux.

What is often unrecognized is the degree to which holistic review—or at least some of its principles and practices—has diffused to many countries around the world. China, which famously uses the *gaokao* to sort and rank its college applicants once every summer, has for many years provided an alternative admissions route to its most elite colleges that accounts for an applicant’s leadership and extracurricular achievements. Since 2014, Trinity College Dublin has experimented with an alternative admissions scheme that uses contextual factors to increase the admission of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students. Many institutions in South Korea now employ admissions officers to admit students who would not otherwise qualify through the national CSAT exam. Similar innovations are in practice in Japan, South Korea, Australia, Malaysia, and France. These sorts of admissions innovations are almost entirely ignored or avoided in international comparisons of admissions policies (e.g., McGrath et al., 2014), resulting in a distorted understanding of admissions practices globally, with an overstated role for examinations.

The growth in holistic admissions practices internationally has a number of common drivers. High-stakes examinations generate high levels of anxiety and entire industries of shadow education that help students prepare, conferring clear advantages to high-SES applicants (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). Examinations are accused of feeding an educational system that fosters excessive conformity and compliance among students, and reduces creativity, entrepreneurship, and intellectual curiosity. In teaching and learning, examinations are accused of encouraging poor teacher pedagogy, reducing focus on student learning, and leaving students ill-prepared for both higher education and the workforce. Examination-based systems are often highly stratified by socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, leading to the reproduction of inequality. Finally, examination systems are less adaptable to the changing environment of higher education—the growth of adult and other nontraditional learners,

globalization and the international mobility of students, and the increased marketization of higher education, driving the need for institutions to increase enrollment and revenue.

Common among recent admissions innovations are also key concerns about the fairness, transparency, and equality fostered by holistic admissions practices. Corruption scandals have emerged most prominently in China, South Korea, and the U.S. over university staff who have used their roles in holistic review processes to privilege applicants from wealthy and powerful families. The media and the wider public have raised issues about the transparency of these holistic review processes, and the implementation of these practices is largely opaque to outside researchers and observers. Finally, and most importantly, each of these practices is implicated in the reproduction of stratification and inequality, even as they are adopted and promoted as a means by which to increase fairness for low-income and racially minoritized groups.

This chapter will define holistic review in college admissions and discuss global examples of practices and policies that are changing in countries across Asia, Europe, and the Americas. I will highlight the factors that seem to be driving this diffusion of holistic practices, as well as cross-cutting themes that occur across many country contexts. In particular, issues of corruption, transparency, and the reproduction of inequality have proved to be salient in countries around the world. Finally, I will address what is truly “holistic” about holistic review globally, and patterns we see across country contexts.

2 American Origins

Although holistic review is widely discussed in the American context, its more recent historical origins remain somewhat murky. Until the early 20th century, college students were admitted to institutions based on academic criteria, such as the ability to read and write in Greek and Latin, often through customized exams created by the institutions themselves (Broome, 1903; Karabel, 2005; Synnott, 1979; Wechsler, 1977). Even the most elite institutions did not have an excess of enrollment, and sought to admit nearly all of the qualified students who came their way. Beginning in the 1930s—but particularly in the post-war era—there was strong growth in the number of students seeking admission, which allowed the most elite institutions to be more selective.

The criteria for admission evolved not just in response to enrollment growth, but primarily due to changes in who was seeking admission, particularly Jewish and intellectual students, who were viewed as undesirable in larger numbers (Stampnitzky, 2006). More subjective measures were needed to maintain an

image of a college man who was masculine, white, and Protestant. Thus there was a development of preferences for students of particular characters, personalities, and perceived leadership capabilities. This was particularly true at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, which had both entrenched anti-Semitism and flourishing relationships with a network of feeder, private boarding schools that brought crucial resources (Karabel, 2005).

Colleges were not unaware that they were becoming bastions of privilege. One proposed solution was the creation of the College Board, and its standardized test, the SAT (Lemann, 1999). Standardized tests were seen as a means to create a new, fairer meritocracy that would allow the best students to rise to the top, and provide a consistent measure of student ability across the range of American high schools. Over time, these “objective” measures of grades and test scores ultimately were combined with the more “subjective” measures of leadership and personality to become the institutionalized version of holistic college admissions that is common among selective colleges today.

Although these practices were rooted in elite, private universities, they became crucial at public colleges in light of legal issues with respect to race-conscious admissions. A case before the U.S. Supreme Court, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), established the principle that colleges could not establish quotas for admission of particular racial groups, but they could have preferences for qualified, non-White applicants who would foster racial diversity in the university. Harvard University’s process of individualized review was very influential in the ultimate decision made by the Court, and its practices provided a legal shield for institutions that sought to use race-conscious admissions practices. “So long as the university proceeds on an individualized, case-by-case basis,” Justice Potter said, “there is no warrant for judicial interference in the academic process” (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 1978, footnote 59). Public colleges, which had previously used largely formula-driven admissions decisions, were thus strongly incentivized to move toward holistic review to avoid further litigation (Hirschman et al., 2016; Stulberg & Chen, 2014). This proved to be quite prescient. In the most recent Supreme Court decision on race-conscious admissions, *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016), holistic review is valorized as best practice in college admissions.

Today, holistic review is ostensibly used at about 95% of selective colleges in the U.S. (Bastedo et al., 2018). What this means in practice is less clear. Nearly all selective colleges ask for the same general material: course transcripts and grades, standardized tests, extracurricular activities, essays, letters of recommendation, and personal/demographic information. For about half of those colleges, holistic review simply means reading the “whole file” that

is submitted, rather than deciding based on a formula of grades and tests. Another 20% use “whole person” review, where each person is treated as a unique individual whose character, personality, and leadership can contribute substantially to the college community. About 30% of colleges use “whole context” review, which examines each applicant’s unique contribution in light of the opportunities available in their family, neighborhood, and high school. This latter type of contextualized, holistic review is treated as the ideal type by most leaders in the U.S. admissions profession, but is actually practiced by a minority of selective colleges.

3 Diffusion in the Global Context

Although American-style holistic review has gained a great deal of notoriety in recent years, it is largely unrecognized that many of its practices and components have begun to diffuse to universities around the world. Depending on the country context, this has been driven by concerns about the equity of admission by general or curriculum-based exams for low-income, low-SES, and racially minoritized students. Skepticism of the value of national exams, and their perceived tendency to foster students who are test-driven and compliant are also major concerns. In this section, I provide a brief review of the development of “holistic” admissions practices in developed countries across Oceania, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

3.1 *Australia*

Admission traditionally takes place through the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR), a scoring system which provides a percentile rank of how the applicant has compared to other students in their national cohort (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). An ATAR of 90 means that an applicant is in the 90th percentile of their 12th year class, at the state level. Each university publishes minimum ATARS for admission to various courses (majors), and students who are above the bar are admitted by the institution after their preferences are sorted by a regional Tertiary Admission Centre (TAC). The ATAR has a complex algorithm that accommodates both the grades students have earned and differences in curriculum (Blyth, 2014); it does not provide any adjustment for high school quality. It is thus somewhat similar to class rank in the U.S., but at a state rather than a school level.

The ATAR is often lauded for its transparency, but the ATAR algorithm itself is treated as a bit of a state secret. Some institutions add points to the applicant’s ATAR, which adjust for educational or socioeconomic disadvantage,

attending rural schools, first-generation college, or having an Indigenous background. Other schools award adjustment points for outstanding performance in a single subject. These adjustment factors are a type of academic-only contextualized review similar to the UK, but with a formula that eliminates the need for an admissions officer. The TAC is responsible for ensuring documentation so that adjustment points are fairly awarded.

Given that the ATAR is the “traditional” route to higher education, it is perhaps surprising that about 60% of university entrants use non-ATAR routes to university entrance (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Many universities now offer direct admissions and “early offer schemes” where students may be admitted prior to receiving their ATAR (Harvey, 2014; Harvey et al., 2016). Most universities, including highly selective universities, offer some sort of early offer scheme. The early offer schemes are highly variable, but most often are a form of contextualized review that examines secondary school achievement alongside understanding of specific educational or socioeconomic challenges. Admissions officers may also examine a candidate’s submitted portfolios, interviews, school recommendations, essays, or community service activities.

There is no central coordination of these schemes and no standardized format, and some are open only to graduates of certain secondary schools, leaving the programs criticized for a lack of transparency. “For prospective students and parents, a decentralised system of early offer schemes can be complex to navigate and time-consuming to manage” (Harvey, 2014, p. 7). In a recent survey, 60% of 11th year students were entirely unaware of these early offer schemes, and low-SES students were even more likely to be unaware (Harvey et al., 2016). Although these forms of holistic review were driven by federal policies to expand the enrollment of low-income students, they seem to remain popular due to the need to maintain and expand the enrollment of all students in a competitive higher education market.

Australian National University planned a move to full holistic review in 2020. According to ANU Vice Chancellor Brian Schmidt, students are “more than just a score” (Ross, 2018):

We know [students] are passionate. We know they have unique skills. We know they gain experience through community service, volunteering, working part time, participating in school leadership and excelling in sports, gaming, performance, competitions and more... We also know that sometimes life pans out a bit differently for some students. Some have to work to support themselves, care for their family or face other challenges. These are all important life skills and we will consider these factors alongside their ATAR marks.

The ANU holistic review will thus combine elements of early offer schemes, which provide offers before ATAR results, and direct admissions that circumvents the TACs. There is also a policy to admit all students who rank in the top 2% of their secondary school. If implemented as described, ANU's policy will most clearly echo the "whole context" form of U.S. holistic review.

3.2 *China and Hong Kong*

Admission to Chinese universities most often takes place through the infamous *gaokao*, a highly-competitive exam administered once each summer to high school seniors and graduates across the country, but varying somewhat by province. It is the primary path to enter nearly all undergraduate colleges and universities in China. Notoriously, Chinese students enroll in "cram schools" (shadow education) where they spend at least a year preparing for the *gaokao* (Kwok, 2004; Zhang & Bray, 2017). After taking the *gaokao*, students rank their university-major preferences, and universities admit students based on how their *gaokao* score ranks in quotas set by provincial ministries for that particular university, using a deferred-acceptance algorithm (Chen & Kesten, 2017; Ye, 2019). Most importantly, applicants from the university's own *hukou*, or neighborhood household registration, are far more likely to be admitted and will be admitted with lower *gaokao* scores than students from outside that neighborhood. As a result, for the most competitive universities in Beijing and Shanghai, applicants from those cities have a strong admissions preference due to their *hukou* and other provincial preferences (Qin & Buchanan, 2019).

The infamy of the *gaokao* and Chinese cram schools have obscured the fact of a significant system of alternative admissions using holistic criteria, through the Independent Freshman Admissions Program (IFAP). In 2003, there was a significant decentralization of power in the admission system, granting autonomy for more elite universities to select students outside of the *gaokao* system. In 2016, 77 universities were permitted some autonomy in admissions, nearly all members of the 211 program that promotes world-class universities (Wu et al., 2019). Although a small proportion of students nationwide, a large proportion of students in Beijing have received special consideration outside of their *gaokao* score. At 15 Beijing universities, 30% received at least some special treatment in the admissions process, 17% received extra points through affirmative action, and 11% were admitted through IFAP (Wu, 2017). At the three most elite universities in Beijing—Peking, Renmin, and Tsinghua Universities—25.5% were admitted through IFAP.

IFAP admission is complex and somewhat opaque, and the requirements are different at every university (Liu et al., 2014). All IFAP admissions require university-designed exams, interviews that assess personal character, and a

gaokao score that at least meets the minimum for first-tier universities in their home province. Tsinghua University only allows IFAP admission for those who succeed in top national and international competitions (Wu, Li, & Wang, 2019). Other universities gave preferences to those who had patents or publications in academic journals, but that was eliminated in 2019 after a number of frauds were discovered. Although IFAP was designed to provide admission for those who have special talents, some students are admitted through IFAP despite having sufficient scores for *gaokao* admission, and some applicants have the *gaokao* waived altogether.

Recently, the Ministry of Education announced that the IFAP would be replaced with a new pilot program that will be limited to 36 elite universities (Ye, 2020). Under the new plan, at least 85% of the students' eligibility for admission will be based on the *gaokao*, which could limit universities' autonomy to select applicants. However, students with outstanding performance in "related fields," which have not been defined, will be exempt from the new rules. There will also be a preference for students studying subjects linked to national strategic needs, such as high-end computer chips, software, artificial intelligence, and national security issues.

Notably, admission to selective universities in Hong Kong seems to be the closest world analog to U.S. holistic admissions. In addition to high performance on school-leaving examinations in Hong Kong (or the *gaokao* for mainland students), admissions officers look for evidence of both high character and leadership.

[Applicants] are expected to lead a talent-enriching extracurricular life on campus (e.g. creative arts, music, dance and sports). Universities place emphasis on applicants' strong motivation to study, aspirational attitude to achieve, and the ability to take care of and guide others. (Oleksiyenko et al., 2015, p. 38)

Applicants are thus required to submit letters of recommendation, personal statements, extracurricular activity awards and documents, work experiences, and a nomination from their school principal.

3.3 *England*

English students seeking admission to top universities undertake a series of formidable exams commonly called "A-levels," where the highest grade is A* (pronounced A-star). Three A-level exam results are expected at all top universities; predicted results are used to inform admissions offers, which may be withdrawn if the earned grades are less than predicted. Admission to the most

selective universities can also depend upon other academic factors, such as performance on the GCSEs or the numerical score on the A-level exams (Zimdars, 2016). Subject-specific tests may also be required in fields like medicine and law. Admissions remains highly decentralized at Oxbridge, with college faculties making admission decisions. Other admissions offices are more highly centralized, with professional admissions officers making decisions. Oxbridge also famously includes an interview, which is often the determining factor among equally well-qualified candidates; the tutorial system itself also leads many faculty to assess the potential chemistry between themselves and the applicant.

Although academic credentials remain primary, contextualized review processes have been supported by the U.K. government since the Dearing Report in 1999 (Centre for Social Mobility, 2018; Moore et al., 2013; Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016; Schwartz, 2004). In contextualized review, “flags” for various characteristics are added to the application to be considered alongside the academic credentials presented in the file. There may be flags for historically low-performing schools, students in foster care, students who are in the first generation of their family to attend university, and those from neighborhoods with low educational attainment. As in U.S. holistic admissions, the applicant’s credentials are assessed in the context of the opportunities available in the secondary school, family, and neighborhood (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020). Interviews supplement the application, which may provide additional personal information about the applicant. Extenuating circumstances may also be considered, such as health issues, a death in the family, or extensive family responsibilities. Personal statements and teacher recommendations are also considered.

These moves toward contextualized review have not been without controversy. Many view contextualized review—and the “Widening Participation” schemes of which it is a part—as spurred by the rejection of a state school student, Laura Spence, who was rejected from Oxford despite stellar grades and ultimately admitted to Harvard. The then-Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, made her case a *cause célèbre* in 1999, resulting in a vigorous national debate about elitism in top universities. On the other side, Bristol faced a boycott in 2003 led by the independent (private) schools, who claimed that the university, in seeking to diversify its student body, was biased in favor of state school students (Bibbings, 2006). Similar to famous cases around race-conscious admissions in the U.S., opponents provided examples of students with stellar grades at independent schools who had been rejected. Ultimately the independent schools backed down, saying they had been convinced that Bristol’s admissions policy was unbiased. Indeed, even today independent students fill about 40% of the seats at the most selective universities (Boliver et al., 2017).

Aspects of contextualized review remain controversial. About 33% of applicants now receive “conditional” unconditional offers, meaning that students are guaranteed enrollment regardless of their actual A-level results—but only if they identify the university as their first choice (Fazackerley, 2019). This is driven by a higher education market where competition for students has become fierce. The use of predicted grades is also under attack, as 75% of applicants have higher predicted grades than they actually achieve, yet many of the best low-SES students have lower predicted grades than they ultimately earn, disadvantaging them in the admissions process (Wyness, 2017). University regulators are currently engaged in a systematic review of admissions policies. Moreover, the cancellation of A-level and GCSE examinations in 2020 means that, in an unprecedented move, students are admitted to universities based on predicted rather than achieved grades, with potential worsening of socio-economic inequalities in acceptances to selective universities.

3.4 France

From 1968 to 2018, admission to most French universities was simple: All students who passed the *baccalauréat* were admitted by French law, and if programs were oversubscribed, a lottery decided who would be admitted (Musselin, 2004; Touraine, 1971). Admission to the most selective institutions, the *Grandes Écoles*, requires passing an additional exam called the *concours* (Buisson-Fenet & Draelants, 2013; Darchy-Kochelin, Draelants, & Tenret, 2015). To prepare for the *concours*, most students are admitted to two-year *classes préparatoires* in sciences, literature, or economics. Admission to the *classes préparatoires* are themselves competitive and based upon grades in the high school (*lycée*). The *classes préparatoires* constitute the first two years of higher education; those who are unsuccessful in the *concours* continue to a public university rather than a *grande école*. International students, who do not endure the hazing process of the *concours*, often feel systematically excluded and devalued by French students and faculty (Darchy-Kochelin & Draelants, 2010). However most *baccalauréat* holders enter a French university directly after graduation from a *lycée*.

To expand access to the *Grandes Écoles*, the French government has experimented with various forms of affirmative action that account for students' neighborhood and educational contexts (Sabbagh, 2011; Vincent-Lancrin, 2014). Low-SES neighborhoods are designated as *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire*, and schools in these areas received enhanced public funding. Any student who lives in these zones, regardless of their individual race, ethnicity, income, or socio-economic characteristics, can then be eligible for an admissions preference.

Two elite schools have built upon the Zones policy to create specific admissions tracks for underrepresented students. At Sciences Po (formally the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris), 126 students are admitted through the Convention Education Prioritaire (Darchy-Kochelin et al., 2015). Sciences Po is a *grand établissement* where admission takes place directly after completing the *baccalauréat*. In 2001, after the revelation that less than 1% of Sciences Po students came from working-class backgrounds, the government supported the creation of a special admission track for graduates of seven high schools in designated Zones (Sabbagh, 2002). Instead of the usual competitive exam, these Zones applicants wrote two essays graded by a blind jury, and then the highest scorers were invited to a campus interview. There is also special training for admission in high schools contained in the Zones. Today, the interview is conducted by a panel that includes a faculty member, a staff member, and a representative of the 20 companies that provide scholarships. In the interview, as stated by one panel member, "We are looking for personal qualities, energy, structure, originality in their way of thinking and expressing themselves" (Sciences Po, 2014).

The alternative admissions track at Sciences Po faced fierce opposition, from both the right and the left, as well as from its students. Some viewed any alternative from universal, competitive examinations as "inherently unfair and contrary to the principle of equal treatment as understood within the French republican principle of citizenship" (Sabbagh, 2002, p. 54). The program survived a 2003 court challenge filed by a right-wing group, the National Interuniversity Union (Donahoo, 2008). Others were concerned that Zones applicants would be forever stigmatized as inferior, despite having received the same education and meeting the same graduation standard as other applicants. On the left, the proposal did not go far enough, a compromise preventing a radical reformation of the entire French system of examinations—the *baccalauréat* and the *concours*—which they viewed as fundamentally unfair. The system, they argue, avoids important racial and ethnic differences in outcomes and practices in French education (Donahoo, 2008; Sabbagh, 2011).

Nonetheless, the alternative admissions track has been expanded over nearly 20 years to 106 feeder schools, and widely declared to be a success, particularly in drawing students from the impoverished *banlieues* outside Paris. In addition, Sciences Po decided to eliminate its written test for all applicants in 2020. Overall, about 10% of each entering class enters through this program, and 27% of Sciences Po students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 6% in 2000 (Mangan, 2016), and students admitted through this track are deemed equally successful (Tiberj, 2011). Acceptance of the policy may reflect more acceptance of people-based discrimination positive than

previously believed (Van Zanten, 2009), and the university has increased its racial and ethnic diversity as well.

Beginning in 2002, Arts et Métiers Paris Tech (ENSAM) created an alternative admissions scheme for students in the Zones which admits low-SES students through teacher recommendations and cognitive tests of visual-spatial skills, and ignores students' prior academic credentials (Vincent-Lancrin, 2014). In addition to boarding scholarships and reserved access to housing, there is a special admissions track reserved for 110 students enrolled in this program. Although these students must compete for a space, they are far more likely to be admitted than they would be otherwise. Thus the student body has increased SES diversity, but the admissions process remains competitive and based upon standardized testing, avoiding the taint of discrimination positive, which is considered unacceptable to much of the French public (Sabbagh, 2002; Vincent-Lancrin, 2014).

Meanwhile, the French university sector, open to all who pass the *baccalauréat*, implemented selective admissions (*parcoursup*) in competitive majors in 2018. At the behest of the Macron government, students are ranked based on high school grades, but the rankings are adjusted to ensure that the same percentage of low-SES students are admitted as those who apply (Matthews, 2019). Similar to the Australian ATAR, however, this algorithm has not been made public, leading to a lack of transparency. The result, however, is a dynamic quota for low-SES students that goes beyond what is found in the U.K. or U.S. Seen by many students as violating the spirit of *égalité* and 1968, *anti-parcoursup* protests took place across France in 2018 and 2019.

3.5 *Ireland*

At most universities, admission to Irish universities takes place through the Central Applications Office (CAO), which calculates a score for each applicant based upon their best six subjects in the Irish Leaving Certificate Examination. Each examination is taken at the Higher or Ordinary level (except maths and Irish, which can be taken at the Foundation level), and grades are assigned to each exam. A combination of the exam score and level result in a certain number of points, and students are assigned to university and subject starting with the person with the most points until all places are full, with ties adjudicated by random draw. All students must pass the exams in English and maths, and at some universities, an exam in Irish and/or a foreign language. Growing numbers of students taking the Leaving Certificate examinations, as well as increasingly high scores on those examinations, has led to stiff competition for spaces in the university sector (Clancy, 1997; Hyland, 2011). Unsurprisingly,

preparation for the examinations tends to drive all study and leads to high levels of stress and anxiety.

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) has been implemented as a form of contextualized admissions similar to that used in England. HEAR is a national program in Ireland, and all universities participate. Students apply to the CAO to be HEAR-eligible (Byrne et al., 2013; O'Sullivan et al., 2019a). Students are eligible for HEAR if they meet three of four low-SES indicators. Each university course has a reserved number of places for HEAR applicants, who compete based upon their marks on leaving certificate examinations. Thus the HEAR scheme provides a means of contextualized admission, but at a national level, unlike the decentralized system used in the U.K. Similar to the U.K., it focuses entirely on academic credentials, unlike “whole context” admission in the U.S. About 7.5% of applicants were HEAR-eligible in 2017 (O'Sullivan et al., 2019a).

In 2014, Trinity College Dublin began an experiment in college admissions, called the Trinity Feasibility Study in Admissions. In the experiment, 25 places were set aside for an alternative admissions route. Unlike all other places, assigned by the CAO alone, these 25 places were controlled by TCD. Assessment of each applicant was based not only on their Leaving Certificate results, but also on their Relative Performance Rank, an essay written by the applicant, and the applicant's “personal and contextual data.” Interviews were explicitly not included—a major component of admission to Oxbridge colleges—to prevent personal bias from interconnected networks in a smaller country (Geoghegan, 2015).

The Trinity Feasibility Study was explicitly modeled on aspects of the American system of holistic review. At the launch of the TFS in 2013, the dean of admission at Harvard University was invited to give the keynote address. He noted,

The adoption of broader criteria for college admission—using a process called holistic admissions—will send a clear message to the young people of Ireland [that] the gates of Trinity and all universities are open wider than ever before to those who bring excellence in all its forms. (Trinity College Dublin, 2019)

The use of Relative Performance Rank—the Leaving Certificate performance of the applicant compared to her school peers—is particularly reminiscent of contextualized review. It is also reminiscent in that it is impossible to tell, from the outside, how RPR is calculated, how essays are rated, how the

factors are weighted, and ultimately why certain applicants were admitted over others.

3.6 *Japan*

Japanese admissions is examination-based, but is decentralized to institutions and even faculties within those institutions, with faculty making their own decisions regarding admission policies and criteria (Ishikura & Kawashima, 2018). Japan is thus unusual—along with the Oxbridge colleges—in continuing to provide university faculty with a substantial role in the undergraduate admissions process. For the top universities, there are usually two exams: the annual general admission “National Center Test for University Admissions” (the *sentaa shiken*) and an institution-based examination, all of which are offered on the same day (Albert, 2015). With examinations playing such a large role, shadow education plays an enormous role in Japanese secondary school education, as it does in much of the developed world (Baker et al., 2001; Baker & LeTendre, 2005). The *sentaa shiken* is used by nearly all public, private, and national universities in their admissions processes.

Beginning nationally in 2001, and supported by explicit government policy, admissions policy became more diversified, with an expanded role of Japanese admissions offices to make decisions based upon broader criteria (Albert, 2015; Ishikura & Kawashima, 2018; Yonezawa & Akiyama, 2015). Holistic review, officially called the Admission Office Entrance Examination (AOEE), was inspired by an experiment at a campus of Keio University, beginning in 1992, that was explicitly based upon U.S.-style holistic review (Yonezawa & Akiyama, 2015). Holistic review through the AOEE often requires documents from individual or group interviews, presentations, essays, extracurricular activities, and arts or sports performance ratings.

There is also “the recommendation system,” used by some high school-university dyads since 1966, where a separate quota is set for specific high schools that have relationships with a partner university. In these applications, transcripts, interviews, and essays supplement the application, in addition to the school’s recommendation. (Because only specific high schools have “recommendation system” relationships with specific university faculties, this can require serious advanced planning by students and families.) Some universities even use non-academic (non-cognitive) assessments, similar to recent moves in the U.S. (Hossler et al., 2019). Feeder high schools are especially powerful in Japanese admissions (LeTendre et al., 2006), with more than a quarter of students at Tokyo University coming from ten high schools, seven of which are all-male, contributing to a severe underrepresentation of women (Rich, 2019). Overall, about 40% of the enrollment at private universities derives from the

recommendation system, and only 48% through the regular entrance examination, which is particularly significant since nearly 80% of four-year enrollment is at private universities (Yonezawa & Akiyama, 2015).

Holistic review is now widely expanded in Japanese higher education, with 532 universities using it in 2015 (41 national, 22 public, 463 private; Albert, 2015). Approximately 15% of applicants were admitted through holistic review in that year, and a goal was announced by the Japan Association of National Universities to raise that proportion to 30% by 2018 (Ishikura & Kawashima, 2018). There are also plans to conduct a systematic overhaul of the *sentaa shiken* in 2020. However, given that admissions policies and reviews are still largely decentralized to university faculties, it is questionable whether there is adequate training and professionalization in admissions work to use holistic review for such a high proportion of applicants.

3.7 South Korea

Similar to China's *gaokao*, South Korea administers a national examination each November called the College Scholastic Ability Test (the CSAT, or *Suneung*). All candidates must take Korean history, Mathematics, English, and Korean. Students from academic (non-vocational) high schools must also select two exams in the Social Sciences or Sciences, as well as a second foreign language exam. Even when the *Suneung* is used for admission, interviews and/or essay exams are often required (Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2019). On the day of the *Suneung*, the country goes quiet—banks and shops are closed, most construction work stops, even planes are grounded for the English listening examination (Diamond, 2016; Sharif, 2018). The 8-hour exam has been written by a group of about 500 teachers, taken to a secret location in the mountains, who are prevented for a month from any contact with the outside world.

Beginning in 1995, Korean universities were granted some autonomy to implement early admissions, which meant that students could be admitted prior to the *Suneung*, using a combination of interview and high school grades (Lee & Kim, 2013). In 2007, the government implemented the admissions officer policy, which provided funds for 10 pilot universities to hire admissions officers and implement a form of holistic review for 2.5% of its enrollees. In 2016, 60 institutions received \$45.9 million USD from the Korean Ministry of Education to support holistic review. In 2019, 24.3% of all students were selected through holistic review (*Susi*) instead of just the *Suneung*.

As in the U.S., there is institutional variation in how *Susi* is implemented. Both systems emphasize high school grades and transcripts, as well as extracurricular activities that show leadership, awards, and community service. Some schools continue to use *Suneung* scores as part of the holistic review,

similar to the use of the SAT or ACT in the U.S. There are also essays and interviews, although interviews are more influential in the Korean process. In Korea, teachers have significant power over outcomes, as they maintain the transcript and student life records for their homeroom students (Kim, 2019). The homeroom teacher's evaluation thus plays a stronger role than a letter of recommendation in other holistic reviews. Admissions officers do not provide any adjustment for high school quality or opportunity (Sohn & Ju, 2010), resulting in a system where both the *Suneung* and holistic review strongly favor those from wealthier families, due to access to shadow education and extracurricular options (Kim et al., 2014; Lee, 2018; Lee & Shouse, 2011).

Due to the intense pressure for admission to selective Korean universities—such as Seoul National, Korea, and Yonsei—there has been a concomitant focus on holistic review among both Korean academics and the public at large. There have been a number of scandals connected to holistic review. Most recently, it was revealed that the daughter of the Korean justice minister, Cho Kuk, was admitted to a top university based, in part presumably, upon her lead authorship of a paper published in the Korean Journal of Pathology (Choe, 2019). Her authorship emerged from a two-week internship arranged by her father, who was then a celebrity law professor at Seoul National University. The result of the revelation was weeks of protests in Seoul and his forced resignation as justice minister, and both he and his wife are currently under indictment—his wife having already been on trial for fabricating volunteer award certificates to get her daughter admitted to medical school. As a result, it was recently announced that letters of recommendation and essays will eventually be prohibited, and the Education Ministry announced plans to ensure a minimum of 40% of admissions to SKY institutions would come through “regular admissions”—requiring the *Suneung* (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019).

4 Is “Holistic” Review a Global Phenomenon?

By necessity, the case studies above are not a comprehensive review of admissions innovations around the world. Forms of holistic review are conducted at universities in Denmark, less-selective universities in Israel, and various universities in the Philippines, among others. In the Netherlands, medical schools, which once used a lottery to select students, now use both high school grades and health-related extracurricular activity participation to select students (Stegers-Jager, 2018). In Malaysia, beginning in 2007, a full 10% of places have been reserved for students with the highest extracurricular achievements, and interviews have been implemented for competitive courses like medicine and

engineering (Yunus et al., 2015). Most interestingly, there is experimentation with a non-cognitive instrument, the Malaysian University Selection Yearly Inventory (MUnSYI), which assesses career interests, personality, integrity, emotional intelligence, and “patriotism.”

But is holistic review truly a global phenomenon? If holistic review is evaluating the whole candidate in the context of the opportunities available to them, the answer is no—only the U.S., and Hong Kong seem to implement this form of holistic review, with the U.K. implementing contextualized review for academic credentials only, and other countries for a relatively small proportion of applicants. It is perhaps more accurate to say that there has been selective adoption of holistic review practices, but rarely “full context” holistic review itself. Often the use of holistic review seems to operate as more of an escape valve for selecting students outside of a rigid, examination-based system—an escape valve that allows for institutional autonomy and flexibility, but also maintains the fiction of objective, meritocratic examinations as the singular means of entrance to selective universities.

Scandals over holistic review have impeded progress and asserted the need for accountability mechanisms. In 2019, the U.S. FBI issued indictments in “Operation Varsity Blues,” which accused many prominent Americans with bribing athletic coaches and officials to admit their children through athletic preferences in holistic review. In South Korea, the former justice minister and his wife are accused of facilitating fraudulent extracurricular activities for their children to advance them to top universities, and China has eliminated the use of patents and articles in admissions due to a number of cases of fraud detected there. Once admissions officers are hired to make decisions based upon ambiguous criteria, there will be opportunities for corruption if there are inadequate cross-checks to ensure that no single person can determine admission for a particular candidate.

Nonetheless, admissions innovations, some of which may be characterized as holistic review practices, appear to be growing in prevalence and power. France, Japan, Korea, and the U.K. have all made holistic practices part of recent government policy, and are pressuring institutions to increase adoption to expand enrollment, particularly for low-SES applicants. The other main drivers of holistic review are, if anything, getting stronger: Increasing globalization of higher education, leading to increased student mobility; increased need for student enrollment and revenue; concerns about the power and prevalence of shadow education; and severe anxiety, mental health issues, and even suicide among students resulting from “exam hell.”

The patterns of diffusion of holistic admissions practices are particularly interesting from a sociological perspective. Although holistic review has American

origins, holistic practices may have longer roots in the country or may diffuse from neighboring countries. Holistic practices are most likely in a country's most elite institutions, those which have autonomy to maneuver, a large excess of qualified applicants, and have strong pressures to diversify their enrollments by race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status (Bastedo, Howard, & Flaster, 2016). Thus holistic review is strongest in the most highly selective colleges in the U.S.; at Sciences Po in France, Trinity College in Ireland, and USM in Malaysia; the SKY universities in South Korea; at the Russell Group institutions in the U.K.; and Project 211 institutions in China. Few examples seem to exist at less-selective institutions, in developing countries, or in the global south.

There is great need for further research on admissions practices, particularly direct research on admissions offices and admissions officers. Published empirical studies of admissions officers are very rare, and focus exclusively on the U.S., the U.K., and the Commonwealth (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017; Bastedo et al., 2018; Bowman & Bastedo, 2018; Goastellec, 2004; Harvey et al., 2016; Hossler et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2019a, 2019b; Zimdars, 2010, 2016). There is particular need to understand how holistic practices are translated across different country and cultural contexts, especially given their prevalence in Asia. How these holistic policies are implemented in practice is also rarely investigated, leaving unknown a key mechanism for social stratification.

Acknowledgments

Conversations with Andrew Harvey at La Trobe University, Gaële Goastellec at the University of Lausanne, Anna Mountford-Zimdars at Exeter, Shuguang Wei, associate professor at HUST, and Emma Bausch at Oxford & Michigan have been very helpful in understanding the Australian, Chinese, French, and U.K. admissions systems. I am also particularly thankful for conversations with Bo-Kyung Byun and Heeyun Kim at the University of Michigan for explaining holistic admissions in South Korea, as few of the analyses conducted to date have been translated into English. These scholars have been enormously helpful, and saved me from multiple errors, but any remaining are my own.

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