

Minutes of Extraordinary Meeting of Maths Directors of Studies

Friday 16 October 2015, 2pm MR5

Meeting requested by STC of all subjects to discuss options including testing to deal with the loss of UMS. Meeting was jointly chaired by Nigel Peake (as chair of MUAC) and Nathanael Berestycki (convenor of Directors of Studies in Mathematics for 2015-16). Andy Jeffries was present as the chair of the STC's working group.

Before meeting began Andy Jeffries made the point that transparency of admissions process to candidates is important and that it is important that there is fair and objective admissions in all subjects

1) Deselection:

General points of discussion by group at large on deselection:

- Preinterview test would generate as much or more work than adding extra interviews
 - Anecdotal discussion of Oxford's tests – would be interested in more concrete information on potential biases and changes in the years on and a few after introduction.
 - We are comfortable with the idea of doing additional interviews even if that means sharing interviewers.
 - The subset A/S may not be compatible with full A levels and there was worry that schools would discourage students from taking them since it would take away from learning time, generally dismissed as a replacement tool
 - Data on number of applicants and deselection by college requested: overall percentage deselected (18%) seems to be more than any individual college has mentioned, so must be some imbalance
 - Discussion of pre-interview pool for deselected, consensus is that this would be unlikely to be workable.
 - The proportion deselected is low at the moment, and likely to remain so in the future. In addition, consensus was that those deselected were very weak and considered to not be of interest to any college, so pre-pool unlikely to be of use
- Claim that many current deselecteds in maths are quintile Z, so loss of UMS unlikely to change these (this will be checked).
- Discussion about willingness and benefits of sharing interviewers between colleges, both to balance the load and also for training and consistency

Four main points summarised at end of this discussion by Nigel

- Carry on without dramatic intervention at preinterview stage
- Happy to do more interviewing
- Keep the amount of deselection low (deselect only if sure not of interest to any college)
- More cooperative sharing of interviewers between colleges

2) Choosing who to pool:

- Discussion on threshold for pooling
- Wish to have a more objective metric for scoring candidates than the rather odd interview score scale at the moment.
- Information on who from the pool was given an offer and how successful they were with STEP should be communicated back to original DoS. It is noted that each college's admissions office should have some of this already, but DoS may not be told who was fished. However, that information will help guide threshold to pool in future.
- Discussion about outcomes of those who were not offered but sat STEP: very few would have made their offers. On the one hand, that suggests the right set were offered and few missed, but on the other, some of those are applicant who were rejected and not pooled, so these may warrant further attention. However this is hard to judge as those without offers may not enter or put time into preparing for STEP, so lack of cases is not fully informative.
- Online sharing of information from pooling colleges is useful and should continue
- It would help if individual colleges pooling could add more about their lower and upper interview score ranges used.

3) Fishing from the pools

- Strong agreement that we would like a guidance document, which would include an agreed statement on what we are looking for when selecting applicants. Suggestions to be sent to MUAC.
- Discussion that the comments on why a candidate is pooled should be utilised more, and general summary statements on overall impression of candidates is very much appreciated.
- Discussion on interview form, and how it might be tweaked to better record the information that we are interested in and in a comparable way (e.g. the scale is essentially 4-8). Interview forms could be changed to reflect the criterion in the guidelines
- We would like readable forms in the pool, and a summary statement on each candidate is very helpful perhaps including reason for pooling (needs reassessment, or near miss, or would take in other years)
- Further discussion on interview format, including importance of interviewing in pairs and suggested that interviewers shared among colleges especially new interviewers - sharing interviewers will mean more consistency of approach and easier to compare information in the pool
- We would like to pilot organising pool files by college and then alphabetically – it will help people searching pool to get a rhythm going using the files/spreadsheets available from each college, and a feel for what notes mean, interview format and scoring range of that college, handwriting deciphering and so on

Clearer statement about what questions were covered in interview requested

4) **Transparency – information to candidates on choice of college We do not have to be uniform (and there is strength in diversity), but we should aim for consistency and also honesty and transparency in what we tell potential applicants.**

- Would like guidelines drawn up about what characteristics are looked for in a candidate. We have a sense we are broadly looking for the same things, even if our precise interview format differs between colleges. Wording is not easy though – to be considered by MUAC.
- This could be made completely public, so that potential applicants have a clear idea what we are looking for, and can see that our approaches are to address these characteristics/criteria
- The nature of the interview that is appropriate for each student is different and it was generally thought that the different types of interview provided by various colleges allowed the candidate to choose the format they would be most comfortable with or works logistically for that college
- General agreement that the format of interview for each individual college needs to be transparent
- Some colleges have “tests”, which in some cases are actually marked and some have “tests” which are just preparation for the interview and are not formally marked, but makes the short available time for interview more informative as the interviewee already started on problem. However, in all cases, meeting had a sense that all of these are contributing towards decisions based on same set of criteria as other colleges.
- If there are shared criteria, then should be possible to output comments/scores on criteria that are universal, despite interview/test format (see above about forms). This might mean putting test scores in some context, or summarising application
- Offer generally agreed to be 11 at STEP papers 2 and 3 although requested that this advertised as typical rather than standard for semantic purposes - importance of leaving flexibility for different offers stressed. Reasons for differences could be both individual circumstances of the applicant (e.g. syllabus covered in school) and performance in interviews (more or less confident that they should be admitted). Needs carefully worded and added to guidance document.
- Discussion that we agree that we usually want to take the 12 or 21 grades, but some DoS face a problem where the AT/ST views near misses as serious risks. This can drive DoS to make MORE offers in the Winter as they know they will not be given flexibility in the summer, or to make lower offers to start with, to reduce competition for space with other subjects for applicants they are more certain about.
- It might be helpful if we can give some statistical information on how risky a STEP near miss is, and for example look at Part II outcome.
- Document requested that faculty position is to accept 12 or 21 STEP scores
- Stated that those who miss offers are often access candidates who might not be as well prepared but still do very well in program whereas some well-trained STEP candidates may perform poorly. This reinforces importance of interview and discretion when making STEP offers and when accepting misses.
- Discussed about telling candidates earlier if they made their offer, generally agreed that would make little difference as accommodation etc already given to 1st choice applicants (at the candidates second choice school)

Overall it was agreed that the pool system works very well and that Julia has been doing an excellent job with it.

Summary and follow-up work:

To-do for everyone:

Online sharing of information from pooling colleges is useful and should continue

It would help if individual colleges pooling could add more about their lower and upper interview score ranges used (and if interviewers could use a wider range of scores). General summary statements on overall impression of candidates is very much appreciated.

In all cases we urge all interviewers to make their interview forms more readable for use in the pool. In particular clearer statements about what questions were covered in interview are requested. A summary statement on each candidate is very helpful perhaps including reason for pooling (needs reassessment, or near miss, or would take in other years)

Send suggestions to MUAC for wording of guidance document on what we are looking for when selecting applicants.

Specific actions that need to be followed up on:

Regarding Oxford pre-interview test, more concrete information needed on potential biases and changes in the years on and a few after introduction.

Data on number of applicants and deselection needed.

Check claim that many current deselecteds in maths are quintile Z

We need data on how risky a STEP near miss is, for example looking at Part II outcome. Related to this we need a document produced outlining faculty position that goal is to admit 12 and 21 STEP candidates.

Can we devise a more objective metric for scoring candidates compared to the current interview scale, which takes into account diversity of college admission procedure yet commonality of targets?

Information on performance of pooled candidates at STEP and exams should be communicated back to original DoS.

A guidance document, which would include an agreed statement on what we are looking for in selecting applicants. This will be made public, and information on individual admissions process by college will also be made more transparent. This will also include a statement about typical (as opposed to standard) STEP conditions in offer.