

University Admissions: Practices and Procedures Worldwide

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Tertiary education—more than the capstone of the traditional education pyramid—is a key pillar of human development worldwide. In today's lifelong—learning sector, tertiary education provides not only advanced skills to meet the demands of knowledge-based labor markets but also the training for teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, and other personnel. These trained individuals are essential in developing the capacity and analytical skills that drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions that affect entire societies.

University admissions procedures play a critical role in determining who has access to such training, and therefore, to the many opportunities and benefits. Procedures and priorities of the process vary widely from country to country. Some admissions practices are comparatively objective and look at a single entrance examination score. Other procedures are quite subjective and consider a portfolio of examination scores, academic performance, references, and extracurricular work of a prospective student. Multiple admissions systems may also be used within a particular country; such systems sometimes vary between public and private institutions.

This study, sponsored by the World Bank, examined one piece of the tertiary admissions puzzle: undergraduate university admissions policies and procedures worldwide. The scope was limited to undergraduate admissions in the public university sector, the specific activities undertaken to admit students, and the primary or dominant system used in each country. This article presents the admissions typology that resulted from the study. Readers who would like more information, including an analysis of key considerations and challenges associated with each model, are referred to the full paper.

TYPE 1: SECONDARY LEAVING EXAMINATIONS

Type 1 admissions systems rely on candidates' scores on one or more secondary-school leaving examinations. These exams are generally nationally or regionally administered by the government, achievement oriented, and may cover a range of subjects. Alternatively, students may select subject exams, either based on their secondary-school program or intended university program of study. A candidate's score may be the only factor considered in the admissions process, or it may be combined

with other factors—such as a secondary-school grade-point average. The process may be centrally coordinated, with cutoff (minimum) scores determined by a government or another entity, or institutions may manage the process and set their own selection criteria. Representative models of Type 1 admissions systems include Ireland and Tanzania.

Ireland. Students in Ireland take national Leaving Certificate examinations at the end of secondary school, which are administered by the State Examinations Commission of the national government. Institutions determine the number of places available in each of their programs, but the admissions process is centrally coordinated by the Central Admissions Office, an independent organization owned by the institutions. Candidates submit their preferences to the commission and are automatically matched by computer to a program and institution, based on their preferences and examination scores.

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Tanzania. Control and coordination of the admissions process in Tanzania for both public and private institutions are shared by the Tanzania Commission on Universities and individual institutions. Candidates apply directly to the institutions of their choice (they may apply to a total of three). In addition to submitting their applications to individual institutions, candidates are required to submit an application to the commission, indicating the institutions to which they are applying. Assignment is based on a variety of factors—including gender, other demographic considerations (e.g., disability status), demands of the labor market, and other national economic and social needs.

TYPE 2: ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS

Like secondary-school leaving examinations, university entrance examinations are often administered nationally or regionally by the government in the countries where they are used; in these cases, admissions procedures are also often centrally coordinated. However, in a number of systems entrance examinations are administered by individual institutions, which determine the required cutoff score and other admissions criteria. Like secondary-school leaving exams, entrance examinations generally measure the knowledge candidates acquired in subjects studied in high school and may be considered alone or in combination with other factors in the admissions process. Representative models of Type 2 systems include China and Serbia.

China. Candidates take a national entrance exam in one of two categories: humanities or sciences and engineering. The university system is centrally planned and admission is cen-

trally coordinated by the national government, which determines the number of spaces available in each institution and program. Candidates specify the institutions and departments they wish to enter in order of preference and are assigned by the government to an institution and program, based on their exam performance and preferences.

Serbia. The number of spaces available in each university are set by the national government, which also determines how many of these spaces will be government funded and how many will be allocated to tuition-paying students. However, individual institutions administer their own entrance examinations and oversee their own admissions processes. Institutions weigh applicants' average grade achieved over four years of secondary education with scores on their entrance exams.

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TYPE 3: STANDARDIZED APTITUDE TESTS

Standardized aptitude tests are designed to measure general cognitive abilities, rather than achievement, of candidate students. When used in the admissions process, they are usually combined with other factors that measure previously acquired knowledge and academic achievement (with the notable exception of Sweden). Representative models of Type 3 admissions systems include Sweden and the United States.

Sweden. University candidates take the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test, which is administered by the National Agency for Higher Education, a government entity. Admission may be based on a candidate's score on the aptitude test or on his or her high school grades; at least one-third of the places in any university program must be allocated based on scores and at least one-third, on high school grades.

The United States. Contents of the required dossier and the relative weight applied to each application element are determined by each institution in the United States. Most institutions consider the candidate's performance on a standardized aptitude test such as the SAT Reasoning Test or the American College Testing Program. Secondary-school performance is a key factor, and many institutions, particularly in the elite sector, require a considerable number of application materials, including essays, recommendation letters, interviews, and in some cases auditions and/or portfolios.

TYPE 4: MULTIPLE EXAMINATIONS

In this admissions system, performance on a national secondary-school leaving or entrance exam is considered, along with performance on one or more additional exams, which may be administered by the government, the education institution in question, or independent organizations. Representative Type 4

models include Israel and India.

Israel. A government-determined minimum level of performance on national secondary-school leaving exams (the Bagrut examinations) is required to access the university system in Israel. In addition, candidates are required to take the Psychometric Entrance Test, a standardized aptitude exam administered by the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation, a nonprofit, nongovernment organization.

India. Candidates are admitted to university in India based on their scores on one or more secondary-school leaving or entrance exams. These exams are conducted by many different entities, including the national government, provincial governments, individual institutions, and groups of institutions. Institutions set their own requirements regarding which examinations candidates must take, how much weight each exam carries, and what scores are required for admission.

TYPE 5: NO EXAMINATIONS

As noted previously, a majority of university systems worldwide use examinations of one kind or another in the admissions process. Nonetheless, certain systems do not require examinations; these systems generally rely heavily on secondary-school academic performance in selecting students. Non-exam-based admissions procedures are also beginning to appear in the private sector in various countries, most notably the United States. Type 5 models include Norway and some US institutions.

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Norway. The university admissions process in Norway is centrally coordinated by the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service, which is a government agency. Candidates specify up to 10 programs to which they would like to apply, in order of preference. They are awarded points based primarily on their high school grades, with additional points awarded for specific courses, demographic variables, and military service experience.

Certain US institutions. Since the mid-1980s, a growing number of US institutions have adopted an "SAT optional" policy in their admissions practices due to concerns about fairness, equity, validity, and other issues related to the SAT exam.

Gaining a greater understanding of the admission models currently in use and further exploring the issues and challenges involved will help governments and institutions determine the procedures that will best meet their needs, ensure fairness, promote equity, and ultimately, realize the potential of tertiary education to improve economic and social conditions worldwide. More research is needed to understand the complexities of admission. This report is intended as a first step,

which will contribute to a robust and on-going dialogue on university admission among government and institutional leaders, development organizations, scholars, and other stakeholders in the global tertiary education enterprise.

Author's note: A longer paper on this topic is available from the author.

