

IMPERIAL

Admissions tests: efficient or exclusionary

Insights from doctoral study

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Admissions tests

Efficient or exclusionary?

How do participants challenge admissions tests?

What is the cost of efficiency?

What should we do differently?

Researching elite admissions

Why needed?

Distinctiveness of elite admissions

- Tests and sometimes interviews
- Bespoke ideas of ability (not just A Levels)

What impact do elite admissions systems have on patterns of participation?

My study

Discourses of ability and access to elite mathematics

Context

- Mathematics
- Four elite institutions
- England

Focus

- Ability discourses

How

- Websites and interviews
- Students, teachers, lecturers, stakeholders
- 45 in depth-interviews in 2024
- Multi-dimensional perspective

Admissions tests

Influencing student choices

Tests were the primary influence on student choice after university rankings

“I applied for [university X] because [university Y] had the [admissions test Y]”

“I chose [university X] rather than [university Y] because I felt like the [admissions test X] was easier”

“I wasn’t very good at them [admissions test X questions] so I applied to [university Y]”

Accessibility

“a different kind of mathematics”

School

Routine

Exam focused

Process oriented

Familiar

Easy to identify questions

Fluent

(Elite) university

Not routine

Problem focused

Unfamiliar

Not clear where to start

Being stuck

Requires persistence

Multi-level **enculturation**

Accessibility

Myth of individual preparation

Knowledge outside of A Level

Various types of know-how

Support/guidance needed

Educational setting influential

”I didn’t know the tricks at the time”

“it was clear my teacher couldn’t help”

Accessibility – ways of behaving

Challenged as inauthentic

Resilience to:

Risk/time/stress

Competition

High stakes

**“I didn’t want to risk my
A Level results”**

**“I know that I’m a good
mathematician, but not
at Olympiads”**

Other challenges

Bias	“girls don’t tend to do as well”
Validity	“apparently it’s been [measured] but I haven’t seen it”
Contextualisation	“how that’s done is not public information”

Admissions fairness

Principles applied to tests

Principle

Transparent

Accessible

Unbiased

Authentic

Valid

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Fair-Admissions-Code-of-Practice-2025.pdf>

Efficiency

At what cost?

- Tests are efficient selection mechanisms that can be outsourced
- Responsibility for ensuring fairness rests elsewhere
- Risk of insufficient scrutiny of tests and resulting patterns against fairness principles
- Risk that new forms of disadvantage are produced
- Risk that contextual admissions definitions of disadvantage do not 'match'
- Risk that ability concepts underlying tests produce (and reflect) non-inclusive course cultures that foster competition and individualism

Four elite universities for mathematics

Variations in participation and culture

	All courses	A	B	C	D
Test foregrounded	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Website foregrounds collegiate, supportive, social		Yes	Yes	No	No
Participants describe competitive culture		No	No	Yes	Yes

Conceptualising elite admissions

Rejecting the idea of neutrality



Admissions systems function as a form of communication through which institutions signal the values, norms, and cultures that shape who applies and who is recognised as able.

Recommendations?

Critical interrogation of policies and practices

Ongoing scrutiny of test and other admissions practices in relation to **principles of fairness** and in the context of widening participation challenges and cultural inclusivity.

Sharing of knowledge, perspectives and initiatives with other departments.

Questions

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