Selling Themselves Short: How Inclusive is the UCAS Application Process to Non-traditional Students?

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Discussions around inclusive admissions traditionally concern widening access and enabling students from underrepresented groups to enter university. However, the actual process of applying via UCAS is rarely considered. In this study, we address the question, 'how inclusive is a UCAS personal statement?' We consider the challenges of applying to university and writing a personal statement from the perspective of mature, former foundation students. By drawing on existing literature, personal statements and student experiences, we highlight the lack of inclusivity. The primary thesis is that the current incarnation of the personal statement needs adjustment as it is not equitable and can marginalise applicants. The study makes suggestions for improving the system and increased information, advice and guidance for applicants.

Introduction

When we consider inclusive admissions, we traditionally think about widening access and enabling students from underrepresented groups to enter university. However, one thing that is often ignored in terms of inclusive admissions, is how inclusive or accessible the current application process is to foundation students. Foundation students include non-traditional students and, increasingly, those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) for whom going to university is not seen as the traditional 'next step'. Many applicants do not have the support of schools and colleges to guide their application. As we note, a lack of social or cultural capital can also impact the composition of a personal statement. Guidance that is provided is primarily focused on young, traditional students and not those aiming for foundation year study. In this paper we consider the challenges of applying to university and writing a personal statement. Drawing on existing literature and experiences of mature former foundation students, we address the question, 'how inclusive is a UCAS personal statement?'

Assessment of the personal statement remains part of the selection process at most UK institutions. This offers applicants an opportunity to highlight their non-academic achievements, but the highly competitive nature of the process may tempt them to exaggerate their accomplishments and experiences. One challenge is whether selectors can discern exaggerated claims made by applicants from genuine accounts and the system risks preferentially selecting dishonest applicants (Kumwenda 2013: 599). To address student attitudes towards deception in personal statements, we included questions in a short survey conducted alongside interviews.

The primary thesis is that the current incarnation of the personal statement needs adjustment as it is not inclusive and can marginalise applicants. There needs to be a targeted approach, possibly via a series of structured questions, to draw out relevant information, merit and potential from non-traditional applicants, who often lack confidence, guidance and social capital to demonstrate this in the current 4,000-character limit. We investigate the inclusivity of applying to university via student interviews, an online survey and examination of personal statements. Our study is based on previous research carried out on the nature and form of personal statements by Jones (2012), Kumwenda et al. (2013) and Houghton (2019).

Background to the Study

In the UK, the process through which applicants apply for university via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) puts them in direct competition with others. A competitive admissions process is not always perceived to treat non-traditional candidates fairly.[1] Applicants who do not conform to traditional expectations may be disadvantaged due to a lack of understanding by admissions selectors regarding the ways in which their social and educational background may have impacted their success or timely application. The Schwartz Report (2004) identified the need for transparency in admissions, so it is important that processes used for selecting students are clear to applicants. It is not always clear how applications are considered, however, especially in terms of 'soft data' such as applicants' personal statements and references.

The personal statement is an important extra-curricular indicator that forms an integral part of admissions processes. It offers applicants an opportunity to promote themselves, highlight their achievements and identify why they want to study the course they have applied for alongside potential career goals.[2] UCAS itself advises applicants to "Ensure you stand out from the crowd" when they compose their personal statement.[3] Even among applicants with identical A-level results, some are much better equipped to do this than others (Jones 2012); this is also true of those applying without A-levels. Rather than being a fair and inclusive tool for making a judgement, the personal statement appears to be a blunt instrument and can serve to highlight inequalities within the current application system.

Support for applicants varies. Those studying A-levels or equivalent can take advantage of guidance on applying to university from their school or college. Equally, those studying Access courses receive similar guidance and many Access Diplomas have modules (units) which support their research and application to university.[4] This same support is not there for mature, standalone applicants, which includes many applying for foundation years. As Schwartz noted,

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[1] Several studies have examined the university application system and its perceived lack of fairness, for example, Boliver (2013) identified issues with fair access to more 'prestigious' universities.

[2] Houghton (2019) noted that all university applicants have to promote themselves in this way.

[3] http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/

[4] For example, the unit 'Researching and Understanding Opportunities for Higher Education' is offered by some FE colleges as part of an Access to HE Diploma accredited by One Awards.

> Anecdotal evidence suggests that some staff and parents advise to the extent that the personal statement cannot be seen as the applicant's own work. At the other extreme, mature applicants not enrolled at a school or college may rely entirely on their own judgement (2004: 26).

These problems may be amplified for applicants for part-time study or for a foundation year, where there is often little official guidance on how to write a personal statement focused on a less mainstream entry route. A scan of university websites demonstrated some examples of support for foundation year applicants, including clear guidance on writing an application, with some, especially for courses aimed at mature students.[5] However, this is not universal and websites can be difficult to navigate for unfamiliar visitors. It is likely, then, that many foundation applicants, especially those who are the first generation in their families to apply to university, would not know where to start with a UCAS statement, and may have nobody to ask. As a result, statements from such applicants are often very different in structure and style to those from traditional backgrounds.

The adage, "It'll look good on your personal statement" points at the practice of 'selling yourself' through the content of a UCAS application.[6] Reviewing the literature concerning personal statements, the emphasis is on applicants to medicine and dentistry, and there are few studies relating to other disciplines, and none examining foundation admissions. A focus for our research here has been 'self-marketing' and several studies have noted that 'selling yourself' through personal statements and interviews is now a standard practice for university applicants (Shuker 2014). Drawing on findings from a research project by Shuker (2014) that examined self-marketing orientations of students in 16-19 institutions, our study identifies differences in approach and self-marketing in those applying to foundation years in the UK.

Shuker argued that how an applicant approaches the application process is related to the resources and support available to them and the pedagogic identities fostered by their current institution (2014: 224). As a result, the preparedness of students might contribute to, rather than challenge, the social stratification of the education system. So, are non-traditional students disadvantaged? Based on existing evidence and the outcome of our small research study, the answer to this question is yes. This relates to opportunity, a lack of cultural and social capital, and, in some cases confidence. Consequently, as practitioners, we need to ensure any lack of preparedness prior to university is addressed and overcome as far as possible during the foundation year, to enable the non-traditional students we teach to progress without detriment compared to their peers.

Writing after the introduction of increased tuition fees in England in 2012, Shuker noted, "the value of universities is likely to be seen increasingly in terms of their impact on student employability" (2014: 225). This is something that the UK government has affirmed recently in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.[7] 'Self-promotion' was identified as a crucial part of the development of such employability (Harvey, Locke and Morey 2002; Shuker 2014). This self-marketing is an increasingly important skill for effective transitions within education and work.

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[5] An example of good practice was the University of Sheffield: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/dll/how-apply (Accessed 10 July 2020).

[6] Shuker investigated the practice of 'selling yourself' and self-marketing within education through case studies of different education institutions focusing on young (under 19) students. Houghton (2019) conducted a small-scale study of personal statements from younger applicants and noted how the application process could affect students' views of university.

[7] See the Briefing Note from the Office for Students dated 18th June 2020 and the Department for Education publication *Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to Covid-19* (July 2020).

The concept of 'selling yourself' associated with personal statements and university interviews echoes the curriculum vitae and the job interview. Self-marketing is less relevant where university places are plentiful, or where institutions rely solely on grades to distinguish between applicants. The practice may become "more ubiquitous as the need to access work and educational opportunities in an economic downturn increases" (Shuker 2014: 240).

Shuker's study reinforced the notion that teachers and advisors encourage students to participate in activities such as Duke of Edinburgh Awards, being a form representative, or carrying out voluntary work, as it "will look good on your personal statement" (2014: 237). These activities are worthwhile and beneficial for developing skills (for later life and study) but also useful for highlighting differences between two similar candidates. This instrumentalism is often encouraged by tutors when supporting students in writing their personal statements. While younger students and those studying Access courses in FE colleges recognise the 'added value' of clubs or volunteering in that they develop desired characteristics, e.g. teamwork, non-traditional applicants might not recognise these, or their own employment and life experience as valuable, and not 'sell' themselves sufficiently. For any "would-be student", Hurst suggests that:

> For any would-be student, the personal statement on their application form is torture: an exercise in trying to convince a faceless admissions tutor of their passion for a subject while cramming in as many references as possible to charity work, skills, character and awards (2013: 8).

However, not all applications to study on foundation years are considered by a 'faceless admissions tutor'. While some institutions might make direct offers based on meeting specific entry requirements, others also have a personal interview, information advice and guidance session, or assessments, with those leading and teaching on the foundation programme. This ensures applicants are given the most appropriate advice and support for their situation and enables admissions staff to make informed decisions. This personal interaction during the application and interview process was noted as a positive by students questioned in our study, who recalled being put at (relative) ease by foundation staff, and who felt they then had a point of contact rather than the impersonal UCAS Track.[8] However, some did agree that, at times, writing the statement was tantamount to torture. Understanding what is required in the personal statement and selling themselves through self-marketing is problematic and can lead to self-doubt and an ineffective composition.

A study conducted by Steven Jones on behalf of the Sutton Trust in 2012 collected new evidence about the personal statement.[9] Jones' study focused on the educational background of applicants studying A-levels, but excluded mature students, so it did not include many who apply for foundation programmes. However, his work formed the basis of our study and we examined personal statements from this group. Jones surveyed three key indicators in personal statements: Fluency of Expression, Work-Related Activity and Extra-Curricular Activity. In our analysis (see Discussion) we used these criteria to assess statements.

UCAS advises applicants to include work-related activity such as employment, placements and voluntary work. Many non-traditional applicants have employment history to draw on, but it is frequently unrelated to their prospective degree. Jones acknowledged that work-related activity was a major area of difference in personal statements between applicants from different

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[8] Student interviews.
[9] Steven Jones (2012), Manchester University, for the Sutton Trust: *The Personal Statement: A fair way to assess university applicants?*

backgrounds. Those from independent schools had more prestigious experiences to draw on, compared to others who "were left describing school outings and part-time jobs" (Jones 2012: 13).

Extra-curricular activities vary significantly in nature and in the way in which they are expressed. Many of the activities described by state school applicants carry little weight in the admissions process, and some reflect a lack of ambition as well as inappropriate forms of cultural capital (Jones 2012: 16). Personal statements have been described as "indicator[s] of disciplinary socialisation" (Brown 2004: 242) and more socially aware candidates characterise themselves in ways that explicitly demonstrate their suitability for academic life (Jones 2012: 17). Non-traditional applicants frequently follow UCAS guidance more literally and tend towards unsubstantiated, personalised claims. This suggests that personal statements in their current form are not inclusive, nor, potentially, fit for purpose.

Part of our initial thesis was that non-traditional applicants to university did not overly embellish their UCAS personal statements. Despite the centrality of personal statements to the admissions process, there are concerns that they are biased towards certain groups of applicants and a poor indicator of future performance (Kumwenda et al. 2013; Parry et al. 2006; Wright & Bradley 2010). To attempt to counter attempts of plagiarism, UCAS operates a ''verification unit'' and scans all statements for similarity. However, this does not address exaggerated or dishonest claims which are often included when applicants attempt to embellish their statements to stand out from the crowd (Kumwenda et al. 2013).

Another issue for non-traditional students might be their lack of access to suitably qualified referees for their application (Moreton 2016: 94). If applicants are outside of the educational system and so cannot ask a teacher or a personal tutor, who do they turn to in order to support their application? UCAS suggests, "If you left education years ago, ask an employer, volunteering supervisor or trainer."[10] It is helpful that UCAS suggests alternatives, but not all applicants have these options. For example, one student questioned for this study noted that finding a reference was "the worst and most difficult part of the application process." Applicants that are self-employed, unemployed, or have little contact with others struggle to find a reference, with one effect being that this section is frequently left blank and there is a risk that the application will be rejected due to being incomplete.

One question that needs to be addressed is whether personal statements are read by admissions selectors. No doubt practice varies between institutions and, as with increasing numbers of applicants, many institutions now employ 'professional selectors' to do the job for them. As a result, although some universities do scrutinise personal statements carefully, many statements do not make it through to be read by academic staff following an initial paper sift (Reidy 2018). As Jones put it, "My instinct is that they're probably not being read by teaching staff and I suspect they are being read less and less" (quoted in Reidy 2018). As participation has gone up and many universities have become less selective, Jones surmised the attention paid to personal statements has reduced further and it has been suggested that personal statements will eventually not be used in medicine as they are too unreliable (Reidy 2018).

Within foundation teaching, however, personal statements can provide an important part of the application. In an informal discussion during a session of the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference in July 2020, participants from various institutions noted the significance of personal statements and the way in which they can provide indicators of interest and work ethic, which is helpful when considering non-traditional students.[11] This echoes a UCAS survey of 118 universities which found that 89% used personal statements in their initial decision-making

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Various (2020) 'Personal statements', forum message to FYNAC session 'Selling themselves short: How inclusive is the UCAS application process to non-traditional students?', 20 July.

(Reidy 2018). So it seems that the personal statement is here to stay, but the format, as we note, could be amended.

Despite the focus on the lack of inclusivity relating to personal statements, the above recognises similar issues with providing a suitable reference. It appears that these two qualitative aspects of the admissions process, which are open to interpretation by both applicant and prospective institution, are impacted by an applicant's situation and social and cultural capital. It remains difficult, however, to gauge the impact of this 'soft data' on an applicant's chances of being made an offer, as taking such factors into account presents significant difficulties for admissions staff. As Moreton (2016) noted, even experienced admissions tutors who are skilled at identifying merit and potential outside of school grades in reading between the lines of a personal statement, have difficulty articulating the process they use. Nevertheless, any process where an admissions tutor cannot quantify or explain the 'feeling' that leads them to look further at an application is open to a charge of a lack of transparency, consistency and fairness.

Research Context and Method

The method behind this study was multi-faceted, as we interviewed former foundation students, analysed personal statements and conducted a short survey.[12] Our initial investigation involved narrative interviews with ten former foundation students and examination of their personal statements in line with Jones' aforementioned work and Houghton's 2019 study. Houghton conducted interviews and examined UCAS statements in order to call for greater critique of how the process of applying to university shapes students' conceptions of the purpose of HE. She noted how students present themselves as competitive subjects within their personal statements. While Houghton discussed how the neoliberal narrative within HE has influenced the personal statement's development, we focus on the process and its potential lack of inclusivity. In her small-scale study Houghton interviewed twenty first-year students and analysed the personal statements from fifteen of them. The participants were from either a Russell Group university or a Post-92 university so our study is similar in scope to Houghton's, although, like Jones, she did not examine those applying to foundation years.

Interview questions centred around (i) the application process and (ii) personal statements. Questions were generic, with additional questions asked for clarification. It was beneficial to ask open-ended questions where possible to enable students to explain their answers. A list of the initial questions is included in the Appendices below. The opening question (How did you find the application process?) was formulated in such a way to avoid inferring either ease or difficulty with the process, unlike the second question which specifically asked about the facility of finding a referee. The questions were trialled on random foundation students who did not otherwise participate in this research. As a result the question asking whether students would have changed their statement was added, as many said they would have done so if possible.

The data collected was qualitative and, like all qualitative research does not set out to be generalisable and only involves a small number of participants. Narrative interviews were deemed appropriate for this study, as students are the focus and the researchers were

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[12] Ethical approval was granted for the research and followed on from previous studies into the foundation student experience. Participants understood the nature of the research study, completed a consent form and agreed to participate in the project. They were free to withdraw at any time. They also completed an acknowledgement of participation via the online survey platform. All participants and their comments were anonymised.

interested in collecting information about their personal experiences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick 2015). Research was hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, limiting the number of students available and meaning that students were only questioned from one institution.

In addition, further personal statements were analysed, bringing the sample to twenty. This is still a very small study in comparison to that of Jones (2012), but there is capacity to expand the analysis in the future, so this could serve as a pilot study. In the absence of an established methodology for analysing personal statements this study borrows the criteria used by Jones. Three key indicators: Fluency of Expression, Work-Related Activity and Extra-Curricular Activity, were used to analyse each personal statement. Writing fluency was judged on the avoidance of clear errors, such as spelling mistakes and misuse of capital letters and apostrophes. Analysis was non-judgemental, identifying meaning-impairing errors only. Following Jones' example, we did not rigorously note errors relating to the prescriptive rules of grammar, but acknowledge that some admissions tutors might pay close attention to these.

To supplement the above research, we also conducted a short online questionnaire with former foundation students to gather data on attitudes to applying to university and honesty within UCAS personal statements. The latter issue addressed the suggestion that not all applicants are entirely honest in their applications, with previous studies suggesting some embellishment of the truth. The questionnaire took the form of six statements evaluated against a Likert scale. Questionnaire items were classified into two categories involving: (i) their attitude towards the application process, and (ii) their attitude towards deceptive acts. The statements in questions four, five and six were based on questions posed in an online study by Kumwenda et al. (2013) on accepted practice in applications to medicine and dentistry. The questions concerned deceptive acts and the accuracy of personal statements. We chose these statements as they were pertinent to our research and been effective in the earlier study.

The survey was conducted in summer 2020 with students who had completed a foundation year. Participants were volunteers and were former foundation students from two universities in the UK, one a member of the Russell Group in the north east of England, and the second, a Post-92 institution in the south east. All participants were mature (over 21 years of age), and no further demographic information was collected. This was a short pilot study carried out late in the research process with the aim of supporting previous analysis into accepted practice in UCAS applications carried out by Kumwenda et al. (2013). Fifteen former students agreed to participate, and of these, eleven completed the questionnaire in full (73% completion rate). The questionnaire was administered anonymously online via the free Survey Monkey website (http://www.surveymonkey.com).

Results and Discussion

Results from Interviews and Personal Statements

Responses to interview questions were mixed. Most students were confident it was the right time for them to apply to university and were happy to have found out about foundation years as a "way in" for them. Some interviewees (70%) noted the concerns they had over applying to university in the first instance, feeling that they were not "worthy", and expressed anxiety over applying to a Russell Group university. This echoed results from our online survey, where 63.7% noted apprehension. Writing their personal statement was a struggle for some, as it was the first time they had to compose a piece of self-marketing prose; common concerns related to tone, length and whether information they included was relevant. A lack of support or guidance was mentioned, and not having anyone to proofread it other than a partner or family member

was a concern. However, one participant did note they had a friend who was a student read through it and who noted it was "good". Houghton found that while some of the participants attended outreach events and received help from parents when writing their statements, the main reference points were their teachers and the UCAS website. This is in contrast to those in our study where they relied primarily on information available online, with only occasional intervention from friends or relatives. Participants in Houghton's study reported feeling stressed by the process of writing their personal statement (2019: 286). Our findings echo this, suggesting that the process is stressful for all, and, as a result could affect the resultant statement.

The majority of mature applicants involved in this study were employed in very different sectors and were using their application to university to change direction and fulfil their academic and vocational dreams. The only relevant work or voluntary experience put forward by applicants was for those interested in studying Archaeology where the personal statements included references to dig experience and work in the heritage sector.

Our examination of a small sample (n = 20) of personal statements from successful, mature, foundation year applicants looked at three key indicators: Fluency of Expression, Work-Related Activity and Extra-Curricular Activity. We found that these areas do vary depending on whether an applicant is coming directly from school or college (including Access programmes) or if they are a mature student applying on their own.[13] Fluency of expression and reasoning was the starkest difference, with more developed, fluid statements written by those currently in education. The outcome of this research is analysed further in the Discussion section.

Being interested in a subject can have an impact on success. Examining the style and content of foundation applicants' personal statements highlighted passion and motivation for their chosen degree course. Often this was stated directly, "My passion for physics," "I am now looking to fulfil my passions [sic] for history," "…take my passion further," or "…develop my knowledge in a field I have a passion for." It also comes across indirectly through passionate and emotive language. The tone and content of non-traditional students' personal statements can be quite different to those for whom university is seen as a natural 'next step'. These differences were also identified by Jones (2012) in relation to applicants from different types of schools. Jones found that state school applicants struggled to maintain an appropriate tone in their personal statements, varying between inappropriately over-formal and under-formal (2012: 12). A similar outcome was seen in statements from non-traditional, mature applicants to foundation years.

Houghton highlighted how much was left unwritten in students' personal statements; this was particularly evident for those who came from backgrounds where participation in HE was not the norm (2019: 292-3). Our study concurred with this, as students omitted, for example, contextual information, wider life experiences and issues that had impacted their learning.

In line with Houghton, we framed the personal statement as a means for applicants to 'sell' themselves. Houghton (2019: 294) found that following advice, many applicants produce impersonal statements. They lack reflection and exclude information that could have added weight or context to their application. The present study found a similar lack of personal reflection in applicants to foundation; interviewees noted this lack of depth in personal writing was because they did not want to "go into detail" or felt embarrassed about what they perceived as previous 'failures'.[14]

One thread that came through indirectly in many interviews was that of imposter syndrome; it is linked to apprehension (Question 2 in the survey). Several students noted that they did not feel they were sufficiently qualified for their institution and felt out of place

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[13] Applying independently implies the students did not have support from personal tutors, other advisors (e.g. Connexions), or school or college staff.
[14] Student interviews, summer 2020.

amongst their peers in the wider university and in their halls of residence. The consensus was that they felt comfortable and safe within foundation but were concerned how they would be perceived when they moved up to first year. Examples of feeling out of place during first year seminars were given, alongside comments that they were the only students who had put in the effort. When prompted to expand on why they felt like an imposter, one commented that they had applied almost as a "joke" – not expecting to get an interview, nor later be offered a place. This feeling of being an imposter may point to a lack of inclusivity towards mature students in HE in general.

Results from Survey

A five-point Likert scale rating was used to evaluate each response from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). Table 1 in the Appendices shows detailed response statistics for each survey question.

(i)   Attitude towards the application process

Most (90.9%) of the respondents said that when they completed their UCAS application they felt it was the right time to apply to university (Question 1). This exemplifies the consideration mature students put into timing and financial security when applying to university. Conversely, 9.1% noted they were unsure, though it is possible that this reflects the way their circumstances had changed since application, with such changes perhaps more likely among non-traditional students.

63.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that they were apprehensive applying to a foundation year (Question 2). This corroborated data from interviews. Students noted apprehension due to a combination of imposter syndrome, uncertainty over the contents of their personal statement and whether they were 'doing the right thing'. We suggest that if greater support was available to mature applicants this anxiety could be reduced.

In terms of writing their UCAS personal statement, 72.8% either agreed or strongly agreed that they found it easy (Question 3); only 9.1% strongly disagreed. All students agreed or strongly agreed that their personal statement was accurate (Question 4).

(ii)   Attitude towards deceptive acts

18.2% of respondents agreed that is does not really matter what you write on your UCAS statement as no one will check to see whether it is accurate (Question 5). Most (81.8%) strongly agreed that lying on your UCAS statement is just as bad as copying someone else's work in an exam. 9.1% were unsure over this question, which was unexpected given the integrity exhibited in interviews and in earlier answers.

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Institutions have various initiatives aimed at widening access and increasing participation from non-traditional students.[15] Very few initiatives target mature students or those going on to foundation years, particularly in the current climate. This is an area for development, either in

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[15] For example, Durham University offers a Supported Progression programme and operates a Sutton Trust summer school. London South Bank University aims to provide targeted support that suits student needs. University staff can visit colleges to talk to staff or meet with students to discuss the details of applying to university. A marketing statement aims to provide a reassuring voice: "We're with you all the way!"

terms of reinvigorating taster programmes, summer schools, or via improved pre-application information and guidance sessions. The Schwartz Report recognised that there is a wide variation in the support provided to applicants in preparing their personal statements. We concur with this, as supported by interviews with students and personal experience of the admissions process.

Our examination of personal statements from successful, mature, foundation year applicants looked at three key indicators: Fluency of Expression, Work-Related Activity and Extra-Curricular Activity. We found that these areas do vary depending on whether an applicant is coming directly from school or college (including Access programmes) or if they are a mature student applying independently. Fluency of expression and reasoning was the starkest difference, with more developed, fluid statements written by those currently in education. Errors with punctuation (primarily capital letters) and spelling were seen in approximately one quarter of statements, although such issues did not affect meaning. Work-related activities were noted by all students, although in line with Jones' analysis of state school applicants, mature students described their employment (e.g. working in a local shop) even if it was not relevant to their degree course. This was echoed with extra-curricular activities, with the majority potentially holding little weight with admissions tutors, for example, watching football and collecting records.

Regarding writing personal statements, some interviewees agreed that they did have to 'market' themselves in order to be noticed and taken seriously, e.g.

> I did feel I had to 'sell' my persona to the university because naturally, although we pay to go university, the university likewise invests one of a limited number of places and resources in you as a student, so it pays dividends to show that you are what they want in mentality as well as aptitude.

Our research suggests that Foundation applicants do not consistently 'push' themselves forward during the application process; nor do they not highlight their achievements in the most attractive way, or capitalise on work experience or skills in way that would help them to stand out amongst other candidates. This may be due to mindset, harking back to a prior negative educational experience or rejection, because they are unaware of how to 'market' themselves, or perhaps a concern that the statement will not be read, linked to imposter syndrome.

Perhaps the use of UCAS personal statements should be phased out. The Schwartz Report suggested redesigning the UCAS application form to include prompts that elicit relevant information more directly. This could potentially help to create a more balanced field for non-traditional applicants and those who do not 'sell' themselves - in contrast to those applicants with the social and cultural capital to secure the best work experience and highest prestige extra-curricular experience who are able to cash in on their good fortune in the current system.

Although the anonymous survey was limited in scope and respondents, it did identify attitudes towards the UCAS application process and personal statements from the perspective of foundation applicants. It was reassuring to see that the majority felt they applied at the right time for them. This reflects both the limited demographic of mature students returning to education, but also the value of foundation years in providing an entry route to university outside of the traditional journey directly from A-levels. Timing, for foundation applicants, is crucial as many juggle additional commitments such as paid employment and caring responsibilities. However, the majority were, to some degree, apprehensive about applying for a foundation year. This echoes anecdotal evidence from admissions staff about how applicants feel when they first contact an institution regarding the course or making an application. Mature students can lack confidence during the application process, as was evident through our

interviews, with one participant noting a "natural anxiety" about selling themselves in their statement and others highlighting how "stressful" the experience had been.

Our findings on the ease of writing a personal statement align with existing research and with responses gained from interview. While the majority agreed that they found it easy, 18.2% were not sure, placing their response in the centre of agree and disagree. One candidate strongly disagreed, suggesting that they found the process extremely challenging. It is clear applicants have high integrity as the majority strongly agreed that their personal statement was accurate with respect to their academic qualifications, extra-curricular achievements and work experience. Similarly, the integrity of the system was respected as attitudes towards deceptive acts suggested the majority of students believe lying is just as bad as copying in an exam and that it does matter what you write in the statement. However, two participants agreed with the statement in Question 5 that it does not really matter what you write as no one would check it. Although this correlates with other studies (Kumwenda et al. 2013), it is perhaps surprising if it is presumed that mature students will have a higher degree of honesty and integrity. Conversely, students were considering a general statement and it was not a reflection of their own intent or actions, so could reflect issues with the UCAS process itself and concerns identified in the literature with the accuracy of personal statements.

The study was limited by a small sample population across all three research strands. Similarly, there was a limited demographic for the interviews and personal statement analysis, meaning that only one institution was sampled. However, this reflects the population of Jones' study which focused on one university department. As previously noted, this could serve as a pilot study and form the basis of a wider research project across the Network.

Conclusions

How fair or inclusive is the personal statement? This study identifies potential inequalities in the system, especially the challenges its qualitative nature presents for recognising contextual factors and in how non-traditional, mature students engage with it. Our research has confirmed previous studies, that "the UCAS personal statement is academically irrelevant and biased against poorer students" (Jones 2013) and, as we argue, mature, non-traditional applicants. The primary area identified as contributing to a lack of inclusivity and fairness concerns the fact that not every applicant has access to the same information and guidance, and importantly, equitable opportunities for extra-curricular experiences and work-based activity. There are differences in the personal statements of applicants depending on educational background and current circumstances. Jones (2012) found this was true in relation to young applicants and suggested that applicants from fee-paying schools have an advantage over state school applicants. The current study suggests that those in education when applying (regardless of institution or age) have an advantage over independent candidates; those who are mature, especially those who are first generation, are at a disadvantage compared to more traditional applicants.

Moving forward, it would be useful to compare a larger sample of personal statements to examine further the relationship between educational background and social and cultural capital in applications to foundation years, particularly in light of increasing numbers of younger candidates from low participation neighbourhoods accessing university in this way. In agreement with Kumwenda et al. (2013) it was clear that students recognised that including fraudulent information or exaggerating their experience in their personal statement was dishonest. From the survey and interviews, students did not include exaggerated or incorrect

information in their applications, which supports the idea that mature students do not embellish their experiences in the way that younger applicants might (McClaren 2008).

This study has identified inclusivity issues with the system identified and improvements have been suggested. In the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, might the potential reduction in experiences, summer schools and volunteering opportunities open to traditional students (the 'it will look good on your personal statement' fodder) serve in some way redress the balance? Might the nature of the personal statement, or the emphasis on it be changed in some way? Perhaps this will be one way in which the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will drive positive changes in relation to recruitment in the HE sector.

Acknowledgments

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questions from Interviews

(i)   The application process
How did you find the application process?
How easy was it to find a referee?
What job or role did the person who wrote your reference have?

(ii)   Personal statements
          How did you approach writing your personal statement?
          Was it difficult? Explain your reasoning.
          Did you feel you had to 'sell' yourself?
          Is there anything you would have written differently if you knew more about the
          process?
          Did you have any help writing it, if so, what?
          What personal or work experiences, if any, did you include and why?

Appendix 2: Results from Survey

Q.		Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
1	I felt the time was right for me to apply to university.	0	0	9.1	0	90.9
2	I was apprehensive applying to a foundation year.	0	36.4	0	36.4	27.3
3	I found writing my UCAS personal statement easy.	9.1	0	18.2	45.5	27.3
4	My UCAS statement was accurate with respect to my academic qualifications, non-academic achievements and work experience.	0	0	0	9.1	90.9
5	It does not really matter what you write on the UCAS statement, because no one will check to see whether it is accurate.	45.5	36.4	0	18.2	0
6	Lying on your UCAS statement is just as bad as copying someone else's work on an exam.	0	0	9.1	9.1	81.8

Table 1: Questions and summary responses to the Survey Monkey survey.