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## THE END OF FREE ENTRY ?

### Some synthetic considerations and personal reflections

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*“Can university admission tests and numerus clausus provisions make higher education more cost-efficient and more socially responsible?” It is to discuss this question that academics from all Belgian Universities gathered on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2006 within the framework of the University Foundation’s 5th Ethical Forum.*

*The text below is an edited and expanded version of the Forum’s concluding remarks, largely inspired by the presentations that provided the Forum with its substance and the discussions to which they gave rise<sup>1</sup>. A synopsis of most of the presentations is available on [www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum.php](http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum.php).*

## 1. A shocking paradox

In its 2005 edition, the Educational Policy Institute’s *Global Higher Education Rankings* compared the systems of higher education of a number of OECD countries in terms of their affordability, i.e. how little it costs students to attend higher education, and in terms of their accessibility, i.e. how little social origin affects access and success in higher education.

As regards affordability, Belgium is doing exceptionally well. For example, when affordability is measured by how cheap it is to attend university, taking both fees and living expenses into account, Belgium’s two Communities make it to the top two positions (out of sixteen), and they do so even under the extreme assumption that all students need to rent a room in the university town, i.e. ignoring the fact that in Belgium

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<sup>1</sup> Presentations were made by Freddy Brackx (UGent) and Alain De Wever (ULB) about the admission exams in engineering faculties and the numerus clausus in medicine faculties, respectively; by Raoul Van Esbroeck (VUB) about an admission test experiment for first-year students; by Michèle Belot (Essex University) about the present situation in British and Dutch universities; and by Vincent Vandenberghe (UCL) and Ides Nicaise (KuLeuven) about alternative policies. The final panel was introduced Jean-Paul Lambert (FUSL) and Bea Cantillon (UA). The dense presentations and the lively debates they triggered were obviously far richer than what could be incorporated or even simply alluded to in the present remarks. Nor do these aim to express a consensus among participants. On the contrary, I endeavoured to mobilize what I learned from, or understood thanks to, some of the interventions, in order to shape, alter or refine my own views on the issues that proved most contentious.

an exceptionally high 50% of students is reported to live at home, while this percentage is as low as 20% in some other countries.

In terms of accessibility, however, the picture is far less flattering. Among the indices provided by the report, the one that is arguably the best at capturing the socio-economic impact on access to higher education is the so-called *Educational Equity Index*. This index reaches its maximum when the average educational level is the same for parents of university students as it is for parents of other people in the same age group, and its value drops as the educational level of the parents becomes a strong predictor of whether or not the children attend university. Looking at how well the various OECD countries score in terms of this index reveals a shocking paradox. Despite their remarkable affordability, both of Belgium's higher education systems are at the very bottom of the league (out of thirteen) in terms of accessibility so measured: 50% of university students have parents with a university degree, compared to 18% for the relevant part of the general population.<sup>2</sup>

How can this paradox be explained? Might it have something to do with the fact that Belgian universities are particularly unselective at the point of admission and characterized by an extraordinarily high failure rate in the first year? Might accessibility be improved by access restriction of a sort that exists in a number of other countries that do better in this respect than Belgium's two systems? These questions were at the core of the University Foundation's fifth Ethical Forum.

## 2. An unpromising suggestion?

In order to assess the suggestion just made, it is useful to look into an interesting experiment conducted at the VUB in 1995-96 by Machteld De Metsenaere and her team, the main features and conclusions of which were presented at the Forum by Raoul Van Esbroeck. One thousand beginning first-year students were asked to take the so-called Meno test — a multiple-choice test developed by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate and meant to assess the students' capacity for problem solving and critical thinking —, and their performance on this test was compared to their actual results at the end of the academic year.

Whatever the cut-off point chosen for passing and failing the test, it turned out, there was a very high percentage of "errors": "false positives" consisting of students who passed the test but failed the exams and "false negatives" consisting of students who failed the test but passed the exams. Even with a 75% pass rate on the test, for example, the percentage of people who would have been wrongly eliminated was still nearly 20%, while the percentage of people who would have been wrongly admitted exceeded 60%.

How did the test do as regards accessibility as defined above? Not exactly well. First, the failure rate was higher among students from a lower socio-economic background. But this need not count against the test, as the existing selection procedure is plagued by a strong bias in the same direction. The key question is whether the set of false negatives — the successful students whom the test would have been prevented from entering university — is similarly biased. And it is: students with a lower socio-economic background are over-represented in it, whereas students with a higher socio-economic background are over-represented in the set of false positives — the students who pass the test but fail the year.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the authors of the study concluded that the introduction of a selection test should not be recommended. And it does indeed seem hard to see, on this basis, how the introduction of an admission test could hold the promise of improving accessibility, i.e. of weakening the impact of social origin on access to higher education and academic success. Such a negative conclusion, however, may well be too rash.

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<sup>2</sup> Fair international comparisons are hard to make: the definition of "higher education" varies from country to country, and the index is sensitive to how widely the concept is extended (for both students and parents) beyond universities in the strict sense. Drawing the boundary differently from the way it was drawn in the study may attenuate the paradox, but would not remove it.

### **3. Six qualifications**

First and most obviously, how socially selective the test can be expected to be depends on its content. Thus, Freddy Brackx reported that, in the Flemish Community at any rate, the engineering studies, where an admission test exists, are those in which the social origin of students deviates least from the general population. This might be due at least in part to the fact that skills are less class-specific in algebra than in poetry. Hence, the exact content of the Meno test and of any other conceivable test needs to be scrutinized before any firm conclusion can be drawn about the inevitability of a class bias among false negatives and hence of a damaging effect of entry tests on accessibility.

Secondly, the set up of the experiment necessarily takes for granted that the failure rate among those who pass the test, once the test is actually used as a selection device, would be the same as it is in the current situation of unrestricted access. But much of the point of the admission test is precisely to be able to concentrate more resources on those who pass it, and particularly on those who suffer from a handicap linked to their family or school background. Hence, even under the unfavorable assumption that the selection operated by the test is more socially biased the selection process currently in place, the graduation rate among people from poorer backgrounds can still be higher than is currently the case.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the set up of the experiment also assumes a fixed pool of applicants. But whether directly as a result of the screening or as a result of the greater amount of resources available per capita by virtue of the restriction of access, the probability of success once admitted will increase.<sup>4</sup> As emphasized in particular by Vincent Vandenberghe, the uncertainty plaguing investment in one or more years of study will thereby be reduced, with a positive impact on the incentive to attend university, especially for those from poorer backgrounds. Hence, even if the test has a stronger social bias than the present system among those who apply, the proportion of people from poor backgrounds may still increase, because of growing numbers of applicants from poorer backgrounds.

Fourthly and relatedly, a greater guarantee of success for every student once admitted may make it both more realistic and more legitimate to raise fees — and thereby to generate resources that could be used to reduce the failure rate —, as the deterrence effect on people from poorer backgrounds would be lessened by the safer prospect of success.

Fifthly, there is some evidence, referred to by Vincent Vandenberghe, to the effect that the presence of an admission test boosts pupils' effort at the end of secondary school, and hence the general level of education. It may also discourage effort if the threshold to be reached is set too high. This suggests that a score test, with different consequences for access depending on the score achieved, is to be preferred to a pass-or-fail test

Finally, the organization of a general admission test should help make more salient than now the huge differences between the levels of secondary education achieved in different schools. It thereby provides part of what is needed in order both to generate a political will to do something about these inequalities and to guide reforms aimed at greater educational equity by providing a way of assessing systematically school performance, taking "input" differences into account.

From these remarks, it follows that the question of whether university admission tests would make higher education more or less accessible remains to a large extent an open empirical

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<sup>3</sup> To illustrate with a simple numerical example, suppose that the success rate under present circumstances is 40% for the rich and 20% for the poor, while the test would grant entry to 60% of the rich and only 25% of the poor (thus worsening the bias). Suppose next that the more individualized tuition enables the (more toughly screened) poor to achieve a 100% success rate among those admitted, but only a 75% rate among the rich admitted. The end result would be a  $60\% \times 75\% = 45\%$  success rate among the rich, compared to a  $25\% \times 100\% = 25\%$  among the poor, and hence a smaller social bias than under current circumstances. Hence, a class bias in the set of false negatives is not sufficient to dismiss the test on grounds of accessibility.

<sup>4</sup> In the numerical example of the previous footnote, the success rate once admitted raises from 40 to 75% for the rich, and from 20% to 100% for the poor.

question, which the interesting VUB experiment cannot be regarded as having settled. Whether such tests increase or decrease accessibility will depend on their specific content and design, on the use of the resources freed, and on a number of indirect effects whose sizes will depend on all sorts of local circumstances.

#### **4. Free entry for the sake of those who will never enter ?**

Lurking behind these empirical controversies about tests and accessibility lies the question of what should be the overall aim of higher education systems, of what overarching principle should serve as a guide in assessing alternative policies, and in particular in deciding whether or not, given what we know or at any rate believe the facts are, admission tests are, all things considered, a good idea. It is not inappropriate, in the framework of an "Ethical Forum", to spend some time pondering about this question.

At some point in her very instructive presentation of the British and Dutch situation, Michèle Belot suggested that an economic analysis of the problem could by-pass any choice between "left" and "right" and simply say what is "optimal". Bringing in sound economic analysis, as she did, is clearly essential. But it does not force one to smuggle in by the same token a more or less articulate utilitarian framework. It is perfectly consistent with appealing to a plausible conception of distributive justice, as Michèle Belot herself felt she had to do, for example when denouncing the unfairness of "perverse redistribution" or when appealing to some notion of equality of opportunities.

Some efficiency-sensitive notion of equality of opportunities is indeed what I believe we need in order to frame our problem as we should. However, any plausible notion of distributive justice as equality of opportunities must be sharply distinguished from the idea of a fundamental human right of all young persons to spend some years of their lives at university studying whatever they fancy at the cost of the rest of society. However popular this idea may understandably be among students and academics alike, it must be denounced as what it is: a fallacious attempt to justify a privileged minority's claim to indulging its expensive tastes. Even when clearly distinguished from such an alleged fundamental right, it is true that the demand of equal opportunities remains closely associated with a strong presumption in favour of free access, both in the sense of unrestricted access and in the sense of costless access.

One common objection to such a presumption is that, since even in the absence of fees people from poorer families tend to go to university in far smaller proportions, the actual effect of unrestricted and costless access can be a perverse redistribution from the poor to the rich sometimes described as a "Matthew effect". More fundamentally, one may wonder why prospective university graduates, whose destiny (whatever their origins) is to become richer, on average, than the average taxpayer should be entitled to a massive gift in the form of free higher education. More fundamentally still, even if the influence of social background on university attendance were perfectly neutralized, the influence of intellectual capacities on university attendance would not be, and rightly so. But unequal intellectual capacities are no less a part of people's arbitrarily unequal chances as unequal social backgrounds. In this light, it is no longer obvious that we should care, on grounds of justice, about access to higher education.

Our guiding principle, I submit, must indeed be that the prospects of those with the worst prospects, should be as good as possible. And even in a just society, those with the worst prospects will never go to university. But it does not follow that justice as equal opportunities, or more precisely, as maximal opportunities for the worst off, has no bearing on the issue of how affordable and accessible university should be made. To the extent that a highly educated work force produces benefits that redound upon society as a whole, it is in the interest of the worst off, of those who will not and should not go to university, that universities should attract talent from all social classes, preferably without the complications and perverse trap effects of means-tested studentships and fee waivers, and that it should attract them into programmes which provide training deemed of particular value for society as a whole.

This provides a sound ethical basis for justifying significant public subsidies to higher education, possibly to the point of making it free, but also for legitimizing the regulation of access, to the extent that anticipated market rewards do not provide adequate signals for the social usefulness of the professional skills universities can provide. From the perspective of a plausible conception of distributive justice as a concern

for the opportunities of the worst off, therefore, neither costless access nor unrestricted access are untouchable taboos. Significant divergence from them can be justified, but needs to be assessed on a case by case basis.<sup>5</sup>

## **6. Abolishing the numerus clausus?**

Against this normative background, let us turn, finally, to two specific issues that were discussed with some passion at the Forum. The first one concerns the numerus clausus for medical studies. The assumption so far has been that the social demand for high skills is given. But it can also be affected by the supply of such skills, especially in the field of health care, where the asymmetric distribution of information between patient and care provider opens the possibility that idle supply might create matching demand. Hence the very specific case for imposing a numerus clausus in the area of medical training. In the context of increasing life expectancy and steady innovation in medical technology, cost containment is and will remain a permanent challenge, and a check on the number of practising specialists is arguably part of it. As the sustainability of a publicly funded high-quality health care is undoubtedly of crucial importance for the prospects of the worst off, equality of opportunities, as interpreted and sketchily defended above, can in principle quite plausibly justify a significant restriction of access to medical studies .

It does not follow that such a numerus clausus is justified under present circumstances. As explained by Alain De Wever, the total number of graduates needed tends to be systematically underestimated because of the feminization of the profession: as the number of part-timers and career interruptions is significantly larger among women than among men, the restrictions meant to ward off a plethora will end up generating shortages. More fundamentally, as the free movement of workers across EU borders gains in substance, one may wonder whether the very project of national (let alone sub-national) supply management in this area has not become obsolete.

## **7. Banning decentralized admission tests?**

A second issue that triggered some emotion is the question whether institutions of higher education should be allowed to organize their own admission tests in a decentralized way, in contrast with just applying a uniform test organized at national or Community level, whether in the spirit of the French *baccalauréat* or the English *A-level*, or along the lines of the Engineering schools' entrance exam. If admission tests are organized at each institution's discretion, Ides Nicaise argued, sharp inequality will develop between establishments, as the most attractive among them will attract the best students, thereby leading to spiralling inequality, and he therefore pleaded not only that such decentralized admission tests should not be encouraged, but that they should be banned, in higher education no less than at primary or secondary level.

Given the way in which the funding of higher education is organized in both our Communities, it is not self-evident that our Universities, if allowed to impose their own admission tests, would opt to do so. But if they were allowed to raise fees, it is safe to predict, in the light of foreign experience, that at least some of them would impose their own entry conditions. The institutions with the best reputation would sensibly reckon that the better education and alumni network they can provide by being more selective would make them sufficiently attractive, relative to their competitors, that they will recoup in fees and better students what they will lose in volume and revenues by being more selective. Inequality will then snowball, as the quality of the other institutions will suffer from the worsening of their recruitment.

Suppose something like this happens. Is it a problem? Not necessarily. A plausible egalitarian ideal is not concerned, as such, with inequalities between establishments, but with inequalities between people. At the level of primary and secondary education, great care must be taken to boost the prospects of those with the

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<sup>5</sup> Along the same lines, but specifically on the issue of tuition fees versus costless access, see P. Van Parijs, "Est-il juste que l'Université soit gratuite?", in *Ethics and Economics* 2(1), 2004, pp. 1-8, [http://ethiqueeconomique.neuf.fr/VAN\\_PARIJS.pdf](http://ethiqueeconomique.neuf.fr/VAN_PARIJS.pdf)

lowest prospects whatever the cause, and this is likely to justify firm action to prevent great inequalities between the quality of schools. But this is less obvious for higher education, which those with the worst prospects will anyway never attend.

Consequently, we are back to the empirical question of whether more inequality between establishments — as in France, the UK or the US — tends to damage or benefit, all things considered, the performance of the educational system as a whole and thereby eventually, through the working of other institutional mechanisms, the prospects of the worst off. Is the benefit to society as a whole greater when the better students are concentrated in a few places, or is it greater when they are spread all over the system. A ban on decentralized admission tests may turn out to be justified in this light. But it will not be because inequality of university quality or of student achievement is bad as such, nor because inequality between institutions makes it more difficult for students from poor backgrounds to get to the top, but because of the virtues of systematic mixing for the sake of average educational performance.

## **8. Epilogue: Universities are not just professional schools**

By way of epilogue, I wish to draw attention to a point that was stressed at the Forum by student representatives and came up now and then, but never systematically, in our discussions.

It is no doubt a central job of universities to train highly skilled professionals, to help create the sophisticated human capital our economy needs. But even as regards teaching, this is arguably not the universities' only job. Universities often claim to be more than high-level professional schools. They have the ambition to produce and reproduce a highly educated elite, endowed with the competence and disposition to actively engage in their democratic society's permanent and multi-faceted public debate. Without such engagement, no hope for a reflective and informed public opinion, no hope for a political process that will generate fair and efficient decisions, no hope for institutions and policies that will intelligently pursue distributive justice, understood as the best sustainable prospects for the worst off.

Taking this distinct dimension of the teaching mission of our universities into account is important.<sup>6</sup> And it is bound to yield a lower level of justified access restriction than whatever one might have found acceptable if universities had no other job than to train competent professionals. But it need not justify opening universities to all. With unavoidably limited resources, the cruel trade off between quality and quantity is no less relevant to the education of a critical demos than it is to the training of a productive workforce.

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<sup>6</sup> This dimension is likely to be more central in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Ethical Forum (“Is it wrong to teach what is right and wrong ? Is it (still) part of a university's job to teach its students moral standards and social responsibility?”, University Foundation, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007).