

UCL Undergraduate Project Report
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UCL Econ Department: Admissions Procedures and Student Performance

Main Objective

The main purpose of this task is to identify the problems that UCL Economics Department (UCL Econ) students might be experiencing and possible reasons that prevent them from graduating with a First or an Upper Second (II.1) degree after three years of undergraduate education in the Department.

Two hypotheses could explain the gap between apparent promise at the time of admission and subsequent performance:

- (1) The UCL Econ admissions department is not recruiting effectively, failing to differentiate between those likely to be successful, and those likely not to; and
- (2) The training in the UCL Econ department is not satisfactory, especially in the first year.

Of the two hypotheses, this report focuses on the former. Specifically, I will examine part of hypothesis (1), namely that the 2004 change to the “Math requirement” at entry level in 2004 enhanced recruiting effectiveness.

Admissions and Graduation Outcome 2001 – 2004, 2002 -- 2005, 2003 -- 2006, and 2004 – 2007

Like many other universities in the UK, the UCL Econ Department offers a three-year undergraduate program, mostly to students who have completed A-levels or equivalent in high school. Students fall into three categories: 1) UK or “Home” students, abbreviated “H”; 2) Overseas students, abbreviated “O;” and 3) European Union students, abbreviated “EU.”

There are five levels of degrees awarded. The majority of students “succeed”. They receive a First or an Upper Second (*i.e.* I or II.1). Upon graduation most of these students either continue to study economics in a graduate school or else find an attractive job. A smaller number receive a Lower Second or a Third (*i.e.*, II.2 or III). These degrees reflect the struggles which these students underwent while at UCL, and they rarely go on to a first – tier graduate school or get an attractive job. Finally, a few students either fail or drop out.

The first question addressed in this section is whether the admission policies of UCL Econ Department are correlated with the lower-end-of-the-distribution outcomes -- specifically, with the II-2, III, and fail/no degree outcomes. For four consecutive years -- the graduating

classes of '04, '05, '06, and '07 -- a considerably larger proportion of these lower-end-of-the-distribution students are either H or O students rather than EU students. I have already shown these preliminary results to the Head of the Department and the Head of Admissions.

Given the political constraints on UCL having to accept a disproportionately large number of H students; the financial constraints on having to accept a disproportionately large number of O students; and given that the number of applicants (both H and O) is particularly high; we shall investigate whether lower-end-of-the-distribution students' performance correlates with admissions criteria. And if so, whether UCL can improve its admission policies in order to attract the most promising H and O students, and thereby further minimizing the number of students that graduate with a II.2 or a III degree class.

It is important to know that a point score between 26 and 30 is awarded to each applicant who ultimately receives an offer of acceptance by UCL Econ Department. As I have already discussed with the Head of the Department, and the Head of Admissions, however, the data shows no positive correlation between lower point scores at entry, and lower-end-of-the-distribution degrees awarded at the end of the three-year undergraduate program.

This could be interpreted in two different ways. Either the UCL Econ Admissions Department is doing an excellent job at identifying those students who are not necessarily the most studious --as per number of As received at A-level, but whose prospects of succeeding are nevertheless very high (and who perhaps were overlooked by competing universities with less discerning admissions processes); or UCL Econ admissions is not doing so well at identifying students that will perform well --just on the basis of A-level marks --which are the guiding marks for awarding a certain number of points (between 26 and 30) to the applicants.

The main question: Did changes in the math and grade requirements enhance recruiting effectiveness?

Up until 2001, students were accepted at UCL Econ Department with two As and one B at A-level. Admissions requirements became tougher as of 2002, when the Admissions office decided to accept students with three As.¹ As of 2004, one of them had to be in A-level Math. Hence the question: has the much tougher admission policy changed the number of students receiving the lower range of degrees?

When comparing the Class of '06 (prior to the regime change) with the Class of '07 (the first class admitted with the more stringent Math and grade requirements), I found the following trends:

First, at the bottom end of the distribution the number of H students did not change while the number of overseas students decreased by nearly ten percentage points. So, even though my preliminary results involve just two data samples (the graduating classes of '06 and '07), it appears that the change to a tougher undergraduate recruitment regime did help to reduce the number of overseas students at the lower end of the distribution in 2007. Second, most overseas students come from Asian countries, and the data seems to show that students from China were not doing particularly well. Third, regarding the H students, existing data for '07

¹ This policy was not carried out fully until 2004, however, because the UCL Econ Department needed to meet « targets ».

shows that a large majority of UCL undergraduates come from different parts of the UK. However, Londoners were not particularly the worse students, which might be due to the fact that Londoners are already adjusted to living conditions in a large city and can devote more time to study. Fifth, students from Singapore and Hong Kong --where one of the official languages is English --were not the worse students either, which might reflect the fact that English proficiency may be an important consideration for delivering strong answers to non-quantitative exam questions.

Future Avenues For Research

- Regarding H students:
 - a) Characteristics which are not necessarily geographical (London vs. the rest of the UK) at entry level might be keeping that pool of lower-end-of the-distribution students stationary. One is the type of degree that those students get prior to joining university. Given that the entry requirements became tougher but that the percentage of students who found themselves at the lower end of the distribution did not change might mean that A-levels are getting easier (grade A-level inflation) at some very good schools, whose performance is judged by the number of students that manage to join top universities. This might in turn make it increasingly difficult for the UCL Econ Department to identify the students who truly meet the (tougher) entry requirements. Maybe a policy guided by scores at the International Baccalaureate (IB) might be more appropriate. The IB is now offered by a large number of schools in the UK, and the concern here might be that those schools might be for students from rather high socioeconomic backgrounds.
 - b) Other characteristics, such as the type of school that the applicants attended might play a role (private versus public, for example). This indicator might proxy the socioeconomic background of the student. However, it might be very difficult to distinguish the “good private schools” from the “bad private schools.” At a minimum the UCL Econ Admissions Department would need to acquire a good a detailed knowledge of the UK pre-university educational system and institutions. The bias in favour of private schools is also a concern, as the UCL Econ Admissions Department would wish to give at least the same opportunities at entry level to those talented students from unprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This raises an additional complication in that tearing apart the “good state schools” from the “bad state schools” might also require a good institutional knowledge of the UK pre-university system.
- Regarding O students:

Again, two years ('06, and '07) is not enough to draw any conclusions regarding the characteristics that can help us identify why overseas students who found themselves at the lower end of the distribution in the past have remained there. It would be interesting to see, in future years, if there is a trend here. With the restricted data set we have so far, however, we can conjecture that the Math requirement has attracted a large number of students from China. As I have already mentioned, unlike the students from Singapore or Hong Kong, Chinese students might be facing language barriers, particularly in non-quantitative courses. It would be interesting to analyze which subjects those

are, if any. Should those courses turned out to be core courses, it might be useful to increase the threshold on language proficiency tests at entry level.

- Regarding Second and Third Year Students:

Since courses taken during the second and third year carry more weight towards the final degree mark, it would be interesting to see which of those courses bottom-end-of-the-distribution students find particularly difficult, as proxied by marks, and if those courses are more on the quantitative side of the spectrum across both O and H students.

Concluding Comments

Some of the basic requirements needed for carrying this research forward on how to improve the selection process and how to adjust the UCL Econ curriculum in order to lower the number of H and O students at the bottom end of the distribution include:

a) A very good institutional knowledge of the pre-university curriculum in the UK, the A-Level system, in particular; as well as knowledge of overseas students' backgrounds, be this a replication of the British A-level system or any country – specific pre-university training, seems important for carrying forward this research.

b) A time-consuming exercise involving consulting each individual application of students who are on the bottom end of the distribution, identifying why each individual student was accepted and why they find themselves at the end of the three-year university system at the bottom end of the distribution for a sufficiently long period of time. Moreover, knowing how to interpret those pre-entry requirements is important.

c) A very good knowledge of second and third-year courses taught at UCL. It might well be that H students experiencing difficulties during those two last years come from a more pastoral background, and that their learning difficulties are really “adjustment difficulties” to a system where students are much more on their own during those two last (more crucial) years of their education.

d) Investigation of whether underdeveloped essay-writing skills by non-native English speaking students play a role in placing otherwise brilliant students in the pool of underperforming students.

On a bright note, I do believe that this econometric exercise is doable, and worth taking on board by UCL faculty, both for ameliorating admission practices, and for guiding students who face any type of linguistic barrier. A research assistant is, however, important for input-output data gathering from actual files. Needless to say that the continued collaboration of the person in charge of admissions, Dr. Malcolm Pemberton, and Administrative Assistance, Julie Everett is a must. I see this research potentially transforming itself from a qualitative to a more quantitative research, definitely worth undertaking.

