

Impact case study (REF3)

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| Institution: The University of Manchester | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 23 (Education) | | |
| Title of case study: Promoting Equity in Undergraduate Admissions | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 – 2016 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Steven Jones | Professor of Higher Education | 2004 – present |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>University of Manchester research is changing how young people apply for higher education courses. Jones's core research – a pioneering study of the way in which equal-attainment university applicants construct their 'personal statement' – has impacted on more than 25,000 non-traditional university applicants. It has shifted practice among teachers, careers advisors and other practitioners, and raised awareness of access gaps among sector representatives, policy-makers and the wider public. Sustained collaborations with multiple independent partners have led to high-participation, evidence-based initiatives, such as the Academic Apprenticeship, now part of the Sutton Trust's summer school, the Online System for Completing Applications & References (OSCAR) and UniRise.</p> | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research addressed a persistent access gap in higher education, namely that applicants from state schools with the same grades as their privately-educated peers are less likely to receive an offer from selective universities.</p> <p>In 2012, Jones developed a project that investigated the potential role of the UCAS (University and Colleges Admissions Service) personal statement (PS) in perpetuating this access gap. This work was part of a long-standing collaboration with the Sutton Trust, an educational charity that seeks to address educational disadvantage. Drawing on his background in corpus-based linguistics, Jones used computational methods to identify discursive trends in the PSs of applicants to a Russell Group university course that attracted over 5,000 applicants per year. Each statement was tagged according to the applicant's background, and double-coded against three UCAS-endorsed indicators: fluency of expression, as evaluated by a range of linguistic measurements (ind-A); work-related activity, as evaluated by the breadth and prestige of experiences undertaken (ind-B); and extra-curricular activity, as evaluated through perceived extent and relevance of cultural capital (ind-C).</p> <p>Results were stark. Persistent disparities according to school type and socio-economic background emerged, even with strict controls applied for academic achievement. Far from levelling the higher education admissions playing field, as previously assumed, the PS tilted it further against applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.</p> <p>Research findings were targeted at four different groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For scholarly audiences, an article was published in a leading academic peer-reviewed journal in the UK [1]; • For international and practitioner audiences, a chapter appeared in the <i>US Handbook of Higher Education Admission Policy and Practice</i> [2]; | | |

Impact case study (REF3)

- For UK policymaking and school/college leadership audiences (and in funded collaboration with major UK charity, Education and Employers), ind-B aspects of the research were developed through an exploration of the distributions of work experience opportunities [3];
- For health professional audiences (and in funded collaboration with NHS England), both ind-B and ind-C aspects of the research were pursued to explore inequitable access to medical careers [4].

The 2012 Sutton Trust report [5] at the heart of the research received extensive media coverage. The report recommended that the undergraduate admissions process be urgently reviewed, and that all applicants have access to informed and evidence-based guidance on how to construct their PS most appropriately. Follow-up research in 2016 [6], found that school teachers and careers advisors conceptualised a high-quality PS differently from university admissions tutors. When statements were read and graded by representatives from both groups, three quarters were evaluated incompatibly. This research concluded that the advice and guidance that some young people receive at school when composing their PS did not reflect the expectations of university admissions tutors in relation to ind-A, ind-B or ind-C. This finding raised fresh concerns about admissions processes in UK higher education and underlined the pressing need for further research-driven intervention and national policy reform.

3. References to the research

1. **Jones, Steven.** 'Ensure That You Stand Out From the Crowd': A corpus-based analysis of personal statements according to applicants' school type. 2013. *Comparative Education Review* 57 (3), 397-423. Journal article. DOI: [10.1086/670666](https://doi.org/10.1086/670666).
2. **Jones, Steven.** "Non-academic indicators and the Higher Education admissions process: a case study of the Personal Statement." 2015. Book Chapter. In *Handbook of Higher Education Admission Policy and Practice*, ed. Virginia Stead. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
3. **Jones, Steven.** "The role of work experience in the UK Higher Education admissions process". 2014. Book Chapter. In *Understanding Employer Engagement in Education: theories and evidence*, ed. Louise Archer, Anthony Mann and Julian Stanley. London: Routledge.
4. **Jones, Steven, Anthony Mann, and Elnaz Kashefpakdel.** "My brother's football team mate's dad was a pathologist': serendipity and employer engagement in medical careers." 2014. Book Chapter. In *Essays on Employer Engagement in Education*. London: Routledge. pp. 132-145.
5. **Jones, Steven.** *Is the personal statement a fair way to assess university applicants?* 2012. The Sutton Trust. Public report. Available at: <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/the-personal-statement/>
6. **Jones, Steven.** *Making a Statement*. The Sutton Trust. Research Brief: edition 10. 2016. Available at: <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/making-a-statement/>

4. Details of the impact

Context

According to the UCAS End of Cycle Report for 2020, 18-year-olds from the most advantaged socio-economic (POLAR4) quintile in the UK remain almost three times more likely to apply for university than those from the least advantaged quintile. Of the 289,510 university applicants in 2020, only 32,915 were from the least advantaged quintile. These applicants also had the lowest rate of acceptance.

Pathway to impact

Jones's research has impacted over 25,000 students and over 400 schools in the UK. The main pathway to impact has been through interventions rolled out by charities and third-sector organisations. These interventions have taken Jones's research findings and translated them into real-world support programmes for applicants and their advisers. This case study focuses primarily on the work of Causeway Education (formerly known as the

Higher Education Access Network) in turning Jones's research into two ongoing interventions. A second strand of impact has been secured through engagement with practitioners and applicants through charitable and school-based interventions, and a third is on wider public engagement with university gatekeepers and policy makers in relation to the reform of the admissions process.

1. Causeway Education's interventions to support less advantaged students to prepare their personal statements

As per Jones's findings, a key premise of Causeway Education's interventions is that academic capital (in this case, the detailed understanding of a scholarly discipline and its distinctive modes of reasoning) has greater value in the admissions process than the ind-B and ind-C indicators that less advantaged students were being advised to foreground.

Launched in 2013, the Academic Apprenticeship is an intensive intervention that involves a set of structured activities which enables Sutton Trust summer school students to identify and showcase their academic capital. Hands-on advice is offered in relation to ind-A, and participants are encouraged to focus exclusively on disciplinary indicators in relation to ind-B and ind-C. Launched in 2016, OSCAR is a parallel intervention based on a different platform. Being on-line, it has greater reach. The design of OSCAR mitigates the possibility that students receive counter-productive advice and guidance. In 2019-20, the Academic Apprenticeship and OSCAR, together with Causeway Education's PS workshops, reached 1,936 young people and 57 schools [A].

A published evaluation [6] showed that PSs written by academic apprentices were read more favourably by university lecturers than those of students who had not undertaken the intervention. Judged on a 1-5 scale of whether the statement increases or decreases the student's chances of being offered a place, applicants who had received the intervention scored an average of 1.14 marks higher than those from the control group. A version of the evaluation specifically designed to support the work of school teachers was published. Four further partner universities (University College London, Kings College London, Bristol and Durham) subsequently signed up for the intervention. In 2013, Jones was invited to work with Causeway Education as a member of its External Evaluation Unit and Advisory Board.

[Text removed for publication] [B].

2. Charitable and school-based interventions

Jones's research also triggered interventions by a range of charities and other organisations, including local initiatives that focused on access to university from young people within a particular region.

Launched in 2015, a charitable intervention based in Cumbria involves seven universities, and the number of students attending the annual 'conference' has increased from 35 to 150. The creator and organiser of the intervention states that "*the research gave me more information to challenge what the universities say, and to ask evidence-based questions about what people are looking at in personal statements. Following the conference, the students walk away more confident about how they are going to write their personal statements and how they are going to present themselves in interviews. The research gave me an insight into how we approach this and that it is not a level playing field. The research helped me shape my advice in terms of how to approach the personal statement*" [C].

Launched in 2020, UniRise (www.unirise.co.uk) is "*a social enterprise that aims to help less advantaged students to get into the UK's top universities*" [D]. Its 'Perfect Statement' course was built around Jones's research [D], and offers "*everything you need to submit the ultimate UCAS application and get into your dream university*". 4,939 students signed up in the first three months. As the founder of UniRise explains, Jones's research "*influenced how we set up the course and how we run our workshops. For example, in our (virtual) workshops, we use example extracts from his 'Making a Statement' study [6] and ask*

students and teachers whether they think the extract would increase or decrease a student's likelihood of getting a place. As expected, most students and teachers give answers that don't align with admissions tutors, and we show them what admissions tutors think and why these misconceptions exist" [D].

Practitioner impact is exemplified by the Deputy Head of a comprehensive school in Durham who has used Jones's research in his outreach work with "around 100 schools, each with an average of 150 students per year" [E]. He says: "[Prof] Jones's findings have enabled me to disseminate best practice to the heads of sixth forms that I work with in the North East. [Prof] Jones's research was useful in the work that I do... through local and regional networks or through UCAS giving advice to schools about how best they can best support their students and why the quality of the personal statement actually matters.... It is the fact that [the research looked at the issues] on a national scale and you can see the difference between colleges, grammar schools, state comprehensives and independent schools makes it possible to emphasise to school leadership teams that they should be putting a greater level of resource into this" [E].

Jones has engaged with many other practitioner groups. In 2013, at the invitation of participant consultants Sixth Sense, he presented his research and recommendations to 120 school teachers and careers advisors from across the South-West of England. He addressed a similar number of practitioners at Liverpool Life Sciences UTC (Northern Schools Trust) in 2019, a multi academy trust which works predominantly with young people from areas of socio and economic deprivation. This extended the reach of the work exponentially, as his presentations were recorded and shared through national digital networks, developing understanding among practitioners.

3. Public debate and influencing policy-makers

Publicity and debate about the research has generated substantial awareness-raising impact. The Russell Group, Universities UK and several individual universities issued press statements in response to Jones's research, and he was approached directly by the chief executive of UCAS to discuss his findings. Following the publication of the Sutton Trust reports, Jones was interviewed on the BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme [F]. He has also addressed the Sunday Times Festival of Education and his research is regularly cited in the national press [G].

This awareness-raising work has been central to driving a wider public conversation about fairness in university admissions, and has facilitated direct communication of the research to policy-makers. For example, Jones was invited to deliver a briefing session for senior Whitehall officials at HM Treasury (2014), and to take part in a panel event at the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2014). He also spoke at the November 2015 meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group alongside the incumbent Minister for Universities and Science, and addressed the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) annual conference in London, where other speakers included then secretary of State for Education and her opposition counterpart (2015). [Text removed for publication] [H]. Following the publication of his second Sutton Trust report in 2016, Jones was invited to present his research at Social Mobility in the Northern Powerhouse, a roundtable chaired by a former Chief Secretary to the UK Treasury (2016).

In 2019, both the Office for Students and Universities UK launched independent reviews of the higher education admissions process. Jones's research was cited in detail in the report *Admitting Mistakes* [I, p. 34], which the leading education thinktank EDSK submitted to both reviews. Among the report's core recommendations was that PSs be removed entirely from the application process "because they bias the whole admissions system against the most disadvantaged applicants" [I, p. 47].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Causeway Education Ltd. Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/2YX7icM>.
- B. [Text removed for publication]
- C. Testimonial from the founder of the Cumbria Student Conference. Received February 2021.
- D. Personal e-mail from the Co-founder of UniRise, 17th December 2020.
- E. Testimonial from the Deputy Head of Durham Johnston Comprehensive School. Received January 2021.
- F. Jones is interviewed live on the *Today* programme, 28th January 2016. <https://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/dr-steven-jones-talks-to-john-humphrys-on-today/>
- G. For example, Jones's research is cited in the *Observer*, 17th August 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/17/university-access-unfair-poor-students-inequality-fees>
- H. [Text removed for publication]
- I. Richmond, T. & Bailey, A. 2020. *Admitting Mistakes: Creating a new model for University admissions*. EDSK (Education and Skills). Available at <https://www.edsk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EDSK-Admitting-mistakes.pdf>