University admissions: best pupils 'losing out'

Teachers may be hurting pupils’ chances of getting into university by predicting high grades for them – because higher predictions can lead to higher offers.

By Richard Alleyne

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37 Comments

Some admissions chiefs like to get a range of abilities and skills on their courses and so make a range of offers.

Academically strong pupils with higher predicted grades may therefore have to get higher grades to secure a place, while those predicted lower grades may get lower offers if they can persuade admissions staff they have other qualities.
The problem is that the admissions systems vary considerably and are complicated, according to the report in the Times Educational Supplement.

A pupil predicted three top grades at A-level may be made an offer of AAA, whereas a candidate expected to achieve As and Bs may be offered AAB or ABB for the same course.

Roberta Georghiou, the head of Bury Grammar School for Girls in Greater Manchester and co-chairman of the Independent Schools’ Universities Committee, said: “The danger is that universities admit candidates who are unable to capitalise on the opportunity they have been offered, while others who meet the criteria are excluded.”

Pia Pollock, the admissions policy adviser at Manchester University, said: “Some of our academic schools use what we call a range of offers to ensure that they recruit and select the best students.” Lower offers were made to candidates unlikely to achieve the highest grades if they could convince staff that they had the potential to succeed, she added.

Details of the variation in admission systems were laid bare in a Freedom of Information Act request.

“Students and their teachers are being put in a difficult position by the complexity of the university admissions system and the lack of predictable patterns, with each university setting its own rules,” said Dr William Richardson, the general secretary of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference.