



NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus October 2008 Survey

**Qualifications and University Admissions
Sutton Trust**

December 2008

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Introduction

Two questions were submitted by the Sutton Trust to NFER's Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey in October 2008. The questions covered the following topics:

- teachers' views of the suitability of specified qualifications for particular groups of learners and for learners from particular types of schools
- teachers' views about whether university admissions tutors, when making offers of places, should take account of specified background characteristics of pupils

This report provides an analysis of the responses to the questions, along with supporting information about the survey. Results are presented by school phase (primary and secondary) and by teacher seniority level (classroom teachers or senior leaders).

Analysis of findings

Context

There has been considerable debate about the influence of qualification types and pupils' backgrounds upon decisions by universities to offer places to young people, and about whether universities should change their admissions processes in order to encourage more pupils from state schools and less advantaged backgrounds to attend university.

The Sutton Trust has a particular interest in these debates in that its main objective is: 'to support innovative projects that provide educational opportunities for young people from non-privileged backgrounds'¹. The Trust, founded in 1997, supports this objective by providing a range of projects to encourage the raising of aspirations among children from non-privileged backgrounds. These include 'on the ground' projects, such as summer schools held at a number of universities to provide a taste of university life for over 800 young people every year, through to research projects, such as a recent study by the Institute of Education (University of London) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies which found that sixty thousand state school pupils who had been among the top fifth of academic performers in their year did not go on to higher education.²

¹ Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust: <http://www.suttontrust.com/index.asp> [5 December 2008]

² Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2008). *Wasted talent? Attrition rates for high-achieving pupils between school and university*. London: Sutton Trust. Available: <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/wastedTalent.pdf> [5 December 2008]

In this context it was useful, in this round of the Teacher Voice survey, to seek information about teachers’ current perceptions of university admissions policies, and whether these were changing in the light of the introduction of new qualifications, such as the 14-19 Diplomas, and government initiatives, such as Aimhigher, that are seeking to inspire more learners to consider taking up higher education opportunities.

Overall findings

The sample

The survey was completed by a sample of over 1,300 teachers and the sample was weighted to ensure representativeness. The sample included teachers from a wide range of school governance types and subject areas. Sample numbers were sufficient to allow for comparisons between the primary and secondary sectors. Detailed information about the sample is given in the supplementary section of this report.

Suitability of qualifications for particular types of learners

The first Sutton Trust question in the Teacher Voice survey asked teachers to identify the suitability of specified qualifications for particular types of learners and school populations. As can be seen from Tables 1 to 4 below, and as would be expected, there were differing views about the suitability of qualifications for particular groups of pupils.

Table 1. Who do you think the following qualifications are suitable for?

- A levels

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Suitable for the academically able	94	90	99
Suitable for those who want to go to university	96	92	99
Suitable for those who want to pursue a vocational route	18	19	18
Suitable for independent schools	75	71	80
Suitable for schools in poorer areas	70	66	74
I don't know enough about the qualification	3	6	0
Local base (N)	1297	613	689

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
 Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008
 Respondents were able to make more than one selection so percentages do not sum to 100*

Table 2. Who do you think the following qualifications are suitable for?**- Diploma 14-19**

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Suitable for the academically able	24	20	30
Suitable for those who want to go to university	21	14	29
Suitable for those who want to pursue a vocational route	83	72	93
Suitable for independent schools	29	26	34
Suitable for schools in poorer areas	74	64	84
I don't know enough about the qualification	24	35	13
Local base (N)	1289	609	685

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

Respondents were able to make more than one selection so percentages do not sum to 100

Table 3. Who do you think the following qualifications are suitable for?**- International Baccalaureate**

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Suitable for the academically able	62	49	73
Suitable for those who want to go to university	56	43	67
Suitable for those who want to pursue a vocational route	13	13	12
Suitable for independent schools	58	46	69
Suitable for schools in poorer areas	35	32	37
I don't know enough about the qualification	36	48	25
Local base (N)	1264	595	674

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

Respondents were able to make more than one selection so percentages do not sum to 100

Table 4. Who do you think the following qualifications are suitable for?

- Cambridge PreU

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Suitable for the academically able	44	37	51
Suitable for those who want to go to university	36	30	42
Suitable for those who want to pursue a vocational route	1	1	2
Suitable for independent schools	43	33	51
Suitable for schools in poorer areas	21	17	25
I don't know enough about the qualification	61	66	56
Local base (N)	1248	584	670

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

Respondents were able to make more than one selection so percentages do not sum to 100

- **A levels** were seen (by around 95 per cent of the full teacher sample) as a qualification suitable for the academically able and for those who wished to go to university. They were seen as appropriate for pupils both in independent schools (75 per cent of the sample) and in schools in poorer areas (70 per cent of the sample). A levels were less frequently mentioned as suitable for those wishing to follow a vocational route (18 per cent of the sample).
- The government has sought to persuade employers and universities that Diplomas *should not limit* young people's future options and to ensure that this qualification is suitable preparation for both work *and further study*. In relation to the **14-19 Diploma**, however, few teachers (21 per cent) saw it as a qualification suitable for those who want to go to university and just under one quarter of teachers saw it as a qualification for the academically able (24 per cent). Unlike A levels, which teachers saw as suitable for both independent schools and schools in poorer areas, only 29 per cent of the sample (less than one third) felt the Diploma was a suitable qualification for independent schools compared to nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of the sample who felt that the Diploma was suitable for schools in poorer areas.
- There was a more mixed set of findings in teachers' views about the suitability of the **International Baccalaureate (IB)** for different types of learners and schools, but there was still a bias, in that nearly two-thirds of the sample (62 per cent) thought that the IB was for the academically able and more than half (56 per cent) felt that it was suitable for those who wished to go to university. Thirteen per cent of respondents felt that the IB was suitable for those who wished to pursue a vocational route. It is also worth noting that over one third of the sample felt that they did not know enough about the IB to express a view on the suitability of this qualification.
- An even larger proportion of respondents, over three out of five teachers (61 per cent), felt that they did not know enough about the **Cambridge Pre-U qualification** to

comment.³ The responses to this sub-question should therefore be treated with caution, but it is worth noting that, of those teachers who did express a view, twice as many saw this as a qualification suitable for independent schools (43 per cent) than for schools in poorer areas (21 per cent).

There were some important differences in the views of primary and secondary school teachers. The two most important differences were as follows:

- Firstly, in all cases, proportionately more primary teachers than secondary teachers said that they did not know enough to comment on the qualification. For example, 35 per cent of primary teachers said that they did not know enough about the Diplomas to express a view, compared with 13 per cent of secondary teachers. This finding is not surprising, given that secondary teachers will have had much closer contact with 14 to 19 qualifications and with pupils' plans for future study.
- The second finding by sector was an interesting one: put simply, this was a finding that primary teachers' views of the various qualifications appeared less 'polarised' than those of secondary teachers. In other words, fewer primary respondents identified the suitability of the various qualifications in terms of what might be called a vocational / academic divide: their views were more evenly distributed across the categories of learners and schools than those of their secondary colleagues. This might well reflect their more limited awareness of some of the newer qualifications, particularly given that the one exception was in relation to A levels, where primary and secondary teachers had very similar views.
 - Proportionately fewer primary teachers (72 per cent) than secondary teachers (93 per cent) said that Diplomas were suitable for those who wish to pursue a vocational route. Proportionately fewer primary school staff also commented that Diplomas were for schools in poorer areas (64 per cent compared with 84 per cent of secondary school respondents)
 - Proportionately fewer primary teachers than their secondary colleagues expressed the view that the International Baccalaureate was suitable for both the academically able (49 per cent compared with 73 per cent) and for those who wish to go to university (43 per cent compared with 67 per cent)
 - There were large numbers of 'don't knows' in response to the question about the Cambridge Pre-U, but again, relatively fewer primary teachers than secondary teachers indicated that the qualification was suitable for the academically able (37 per cent to 51 per cent) and for those who wish to go to university (30 per cent compared to 42 per cent).

³ The Cambridge Pre-U is a new qualification, launched in September 2008 by the University of Cambridge International Examinations group, partly as an alternative form of assessment to A levels. It is specifically designed to equip students for university. Students take three 'Principal Subjects' (chosen from a set list) and each of these is graded into one of three bands (distinction, merit and pass), with each band in turn having three grades.

Interestingly, when the sample was divided into senior leaders and classroom teachers, there was a similar difference in sub-sample views in relation to Diplomas, the IB and the Cambridge Pre-U, but this difference was less marked than that between primary and secondary sectors. Proportionately more senior leaders than classroom teachers appeared to have a balanced view of the suitability of different qualifications for different groups of pupils. The exception, again, was A levels, where both senior leaders and classroom teachers expressed similar views. Thirty three per cent of leaders said that Diplomas are suitable for the academically able, compared with 23 per cent of classroom teachers; while 28 per cent of leaders compared with 20 per cent of classroom teachers said that Diplomas are suitable for those who wish to go to university. This may suggest that official messages about the ‘parity of esteem’ of Diplomas and A levels may have, at this stage, been more effectively communicated to senior leaders than to classroom teachers.

Factors for consideration by university admissions tutors

A second question from the Sutton Trust allowed for some exploration of teachers’ views regarding the fairness of taking into account a number of external factors when university admissions tutors made offers to pupils. These factors were: the overall results of a pupil’s school or college (that is school level results, not individual level results); the pupil’s household income; and whether or not the pupil’s parents had been to university.. Responses are summarised in Tables 5 to 7 below.

Table 5. Do you think it is fair for university admissions tutors to take account of the overall results of a pupil's school/college when making offers to pupils?

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Yes it is fair to consider this	45	41	49
No it is not fair to consider this	47	49	46
Don't know	8	10	6
Local base (N)	1317	630	691

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

Table 6. Do you think it is fair for university admissions tutors to take account of the pupil's household income when making offers to pupils?

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Yes it is fair to consider this	31	26	36
No it is not fair to consider this	62	66	58
Don't know	7	8	7
Local base (N)	1317	630	691

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

Table 7. Do you think it is fair for university admissions tutors to take account of whether or not a pupil's parents went to university when making offers to pupils?

	All	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%
Yes it is fair to consider this	18	11	25
No it is not fair to consider this	76	82	69
Don't know	6	7	6
Local base (N)	1317	631	691

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008

While nearly one fifth of the respondents (18 per cent) thought that taking account of a family's educational background (whether or not the child's parents had been to university) was fair, just over three-quarters of the sample (76 per cent) felt that it was not fair to consider this when planning an offer of a university place. The majority of teachers (62 per cent) also felt that it was not fair to consider a pupil's household income in this process. On consideration of the overall results of the pupil's school or college, however, opinion was fairly evenly divided: 45 per cent of teachers felt that it was fair to consider this and 47 per cent felt that it was not fair.

It should be noted that the proportions of teachers feeling that these factors *should* be considered in admissions processes, although always a minority, were still quite sizeable: as noted above, 45 per cent felt that it was fair to consider the school's overall results, nearly one third (31 per cent) felt that it was fair to take account of household income, and, just under one fifth (18 per cent) said the same about whether or not parents had been to university.

Looking at the results by school sector it was found that proportionately more primary school teachers than secondary teachers took the view that it was *not fair* to consider these factors in admissions processes, especially in relation to household income and parental attendance at university:

- 66 per cent of primary teachers felt that it was not fair to consider the pupil's household income as a factor in the admissions process, compared with 58 per cent of their secondary colleagues
- 82 per cent of primary teachers felt that it was not fair to consider whether the pupil's parents went to university as a factor, compared with 69 per cent of secondary teachers.

Opinions were less divided about the fairness of taking school's overall results into account; 49 per cent of primary teachers felt that it was not fair to consider these as a factor, compared with 46 per cent of their secondary colleagues

The differences between the responses of senior leaders and classroom teachers were not large, but relatively more of the former said that it *was fair* for admissions tutors to consider each of these factors. Just under half (49 per cent) of school leaders compared with 44 per cent of classroom teachers, for example, said that the school's overall results should be considered.

Conclusions and implications for the client

The findings from these questions are unlikely to bring any surprises for the Sutton Trust or for others working to improve the aspirations and opportunities of children and young people from non-privileged backgrounds.

At present, and by comparison with any other qualification, a higher proportion of teachers appear to regard A levels as the one most suitable for 'academically able' pupils and those wishing to go to university. Although the International Baccalaureate was regarded as an appropriate qualification for higher education entrance by over half of the respondents, the proportions viewing the 14 to 19 Diploma in this light were much lower. This latter qualification, indeed, was seen as pre-eminently for those wishing to follow a vocational rather than an academic route. Those promoting Diplomas as a route to higher education, as well as to training and employment, alongside A levels, may be disappointed that less than one quarter of the responding teachers see Diplomas as being for 'academically able' pupils or for those who wish to go to university. It seems that the academic / A level route *versus* the vocational / Diploma may still be part of teachers' thinking, but perhaps less so among senior managers and secondary teachers than

amongst classroom teachers in primary schools. There may be some work still to be done in communicating the aims of key government initiatives to provide different routes into higher education for young people from non-privileged backgrounds.

Teachers' perceptions of the relative fairness of university tutors considering different structural / societal factors when considering student admissions, indicates that there is still a belief, at all levels and across both phases of education, that factors such as parental education and family income should not be central to the admissions process (whether in terms of positive discrimination or not). Nonetheless, a substantial minority of the sample (and sub-samples) felt that these factors *should* have a place in such considerations. An exploration of *why* teachers took these views was not possible in this survey. Such investigations, however (why are primary teachers apparently less willing than secondary teachers to include consideration of structural factors with respect to university admissions?), might be a useful first step in developing a pro-higher education culture amongst young people from all backgrounds, so that those who have the ability *do choose*, and *are able*, to benefit from the university experience of which they are capable.

Supporting information

How was the survey conducted?

The survey was completed in October 2008 by a panel of 1,361 practising teachers from 787 (weighted) schools in the maintained sector in England. The survey was conducted online and teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire between 31st October and 12th November 2008. At the end of the survey period all ‘open’ questions (those without a pre-identified set of responses) were coded by a team of experienced coders within the Foundation.

What was the composition of the panel?

The panel included teachers from the full range of roles in primary and secondary schools, from headteachers to newly qualified class teachers. Forty-seven per cent (642) of the respondents were teaching in primary schools and 53 per cent (719) were teaching in secondary schools⁴.

How representative of schools nationally were the schools corresponding to the teachers panel?

The achieved sample of teachers represented a good spread of school types and regional areas. There was, however, an under-representation of schools in the highest quintile in terms of eligibility for free school meals. To address this, weights were calculated using free schools meals factors to create a more balanced sample. Due to the differences between the populations of primary schools and secondary schools, different weights were created for primary schools, secondary schools and then for the whole sample overall. The weightings have been applied to all of the analyses referred to in this commentary and contained within the tables supplied in electronic format (via Pulsar Web).

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the representation of the weighted achieved sample against the population. Table 4 shows the representation of the weighted teacher sample by role in school.

⁴ *These figures are before weighting was applied*

Table 1 Representation of (weighted) primary schools compared to primary schools nationally

		National Population	NFER Sample
		%	%
Achievement Band (Overall performance)	Lowest band	18	19
	2nd lowest band	19	18
	Middle band	20	20
	2nd highest band	20	22
	Highest band	22	20
% eligible FSM (5 pt scale)	Lowest 20%	20	20
	2nd lowest 20%	20	20
	Middle 20%	20	20
	2nd highest 20%	20	20
	Highest 20%	20	20
Primary school type	Infant/First	17	8
	Primary/Combined	73	76
	Junior	9	16
	Middle/other type	1	1
Region	North	31	24
	Midlands	32	28
	South	37	48
Local Authority type	London Borough	11	14
	Metropolitan Authorities	22	19
	English Unitary Authorities	16	19
	Counties	51	48
Number of schools		15785	502

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Some schools included more than one respondent
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008*

Table 2 Representation of (weighted) secondary schools compared to secondary schools nationally

		National Population %	NFER Sample %
Achievement Band	Lowest band	20	12
	2nd lowest band	22	28
	Middle band	21	21
	2nd highest band	21	22
	Highest band	16	18
% eligible FSM (5 pt scale)	Lowest 20%	15	15
	2nd lowest 20%	26	26
	Middle 20%	26	26
	2nd highest 20%	21	21
	Highest 20%	13	13
Secondary school type	Middle	7	0
	Comprehensive to 16	37	28
	Comprehensive to 18	46	65
	Other Secondary schools	5	3
	Grammar	5	4
Region	North	29	28
	Midlands	34	26
	South	37	46
Local Authority type	London Borough	12	13
	Metropolitan Authorities	21	21
	English Unitary Authorities	16	21
	Counties	51	45
Number of schools		3237	285

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Some schools included more than one respondent
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008*

Table 3 Representation of all schools (weighted) compared to all schools nationally

		National Population %	NFER Sample %
Achievement Band	Lowest band	19	17
	2nd lowest band	20	21
	Middle band	20	20
	2nd highest band	20	22
	Highest band	21	20
% eligible FSM (5 pt scale)	Lowest 20%	19	19
	2nd lowest 20%	21	21
	Middle 20%	21	21
	2nd highest 20%	20	20
	Highest 20%	19	19
Region	North	30	25
	Midlands	32	27
	South	37	47
Local Authority type	London Borough	11	14
	Metropolitan Authorities	22	20
	English Unitary Authorities	16	19
	Counties	51	47
Number of schools		19022	787

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Some schools included more than one respondent
Source: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008*

Table 4 Comparison of the achieved (weighted) sample with the national population by grade of teacher

Role	Primary schools		Secondary schools	
	population	weighted sample	population	weighted sample
	%	%	%	%
Headteachers	10	8	2	2
Deputy Headteachers	7	9	3	4
Assistant Headteachers	4	5	6	11
Class teachers and others	79	78	89	84

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100

*Sources: NFER Omnibus Survey October 2008, DCSF 618g survey 2008 provisional data
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000787/index.shtml> (October 2008)*

How accurately do the findings represent the national position?

Precision is a measure of the extent to which the results of different samples agree with each other. If we drew a different sample of teachers would we get the same results? The more data that is available the more precise the findings. For all schools and a 50 per cent response, the precision of that response is between 46.6 per cent and 53.4 per cent. For secondary schools the same precision is + and – 5.6 percentage points and for primary schools it is + and – 4.3 percentage points.

With the weightings applied to the data, we are confident that the omnibus sample is broadly representative of teachers nationally and provides a robust analysis of teachers' views.