Modernization or mistake? The impact of Covid-19 on social work course admissions in a university in England

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Abstract: This article is a reflection on what reverting to virtual higher education admissions in response to Covid-19 represents in terms of practical assessment of suitability to study regulated health and social care courses. For the last six years, I have researched admissions praxis to better understand the assessment of suitability to study social work, specifically. This reflection considers the unprecedented nature of the move to online admissions, the implications going forward and concludes posing whether admissions praxis deserves greater critical pedagogical attention.

Keywords: higher education; regulated professional course admissions; virtual interviews; digitalization; Covid-19

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Introduction

This paper builds on a presentation given to the 13th Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning International Conference, held virtually in October 2021, and an in-university review of admissions in 2022. Applying initial doctoral research findings to admissions praxis changes resulting from Covid-19, I reflect on how the move to virtual admissions was done and perceived. Now two years on, I reflect on my experience as school-lead for admissions reviewing whether to continue virtually or to return to in person interviewing. I critically explore the dual rationales of virtual admissions as modernization against concern that to continue to admit students onto regulated courses virtually would be a mistake. Finally, in considering my own professional location in social work education admissions, I reflect on what meeting in-person represents in social work education admissions praxis, the research gap, and what might further research offer in terms of inclusivity.

Reflecting on initial findings in the context of covid-19 offered a unique perspective to consider the meaning admissions processes give to in-person - versus virtual - interviewing. Hitherto a majority held 'common sense' belief that only in-person admissions praxis was possible, reverted, seemingly overnight, to virtual interviewing. This paper considers first the experience of moving to virtual admissions in the absence of guidance before reflecting on how no longer meeting a prospective student in person has become problematized. I close by considering what problem does meeting applicants in person represent as a solution and why there is a need for greater scrutiny of admissions praxis as critical pedagogy. In doing so, recognition will be better given to course gatekeeping processes.

It should be noted that this is an ethnographic reflection from my unique experience of being a doctoral student researching admissions praxis in one university in England. I had joined the university as a social work lecturer and admissions lead for a master's in social work a month before the first lockdown was announced. Six months later, I was appointed school lead for admissions coordinating admissions tutors across seven health and social care subject areas, all regulated professional education courses (including nursing, occupational therapy, and oral health). In the last year, I was tasked with reviewing whether to continue with virtual or return to in-person. Virtual admissions are defined as prospective students attending interview online (place holders being later offered the opportunity to visit campus). In-person is used in preference to face-to-face as, while virtual allows for

seeing each other in real time, it is head and shoulders only. Admissions processes are a regulatory requirement in England to be discussed in detail below. It is acknowledged that admissions processes differ globally. While this paper refers to other regulated health and social care courses, the focus is on social work education admissions as a case study example.

Covid-19: A crisis change

In early December 2019, a new regulatory body came into being, Social Work England (SWE), enacted by the Children and Social Work Act (2017). In the lead up to SWE taking over responsibility from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), SWE agreed HCPC's social work education and training standards would be subsumed into SWE's guidance (SWE, 2019).

Coinciding with the regulatory changeover, reports were beginning to emerge globally of a *coronavirus disease 2019* (named Covid-19) growing rapidly with significant risk to life. By March 2020, Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, the first in a century. In England, this was met with government decision to implement the first of what would become three national lockdowns. The impact on social work was immediate and systemic. For social work education, a national lockdown and concern for health and safety, Covid-19 meant an immediate review of course delivery. With limited guidance from SWE, education providers responded locally (Pentaris et al, 2021). Practice placements, an integral part of social work education and training was paused for some students. Across Scotland, for example, the Scottish Social Care Council, suspending student placements for three months until the summer of 2020 when ordinarily students would be on their summer break (SSCC, 2020). In England, it was possible in the main to move to virtual practice using digital technology including video conferencing. The guidance to students was that their wellbeing was paramount with each education provider moving to devise and implement occupational health assessments using a red/amber/green risk assessment following Universities UK guidance.

For social work education, the move to digital platform delivery was swift with education providers moving to online virtual delivery often within days then developing increasingly creative methods of teaching, collaboration and support. It would be fair to say the term *unprecedented*

was used more in that first March 2020 month than in any month before.

Social work education more broadly had experience of delivering lectures virtually through the Open University, for example, but placements, accounting for 70 and 100 days had always been considered learning needing to be done in person. Reports began to emerge of social work student concern about the impact of covid-19 on their learning (Community Care, 2020). Initial findings from a covid-19 survey conducted by the British Association of Social Work reported that by late March 2020 1,200 cross-profession respondents called for an improved coordinated approach (BASW, 2020). Citing SWE (2020) support for student communication being publishing online 20th March 2020, while encouraging students to work with their education providers, there was little in terms of practical guidance. Over time case studies began to be shared but not for many months by which time practical decision-making had overtaken process and policy.

Working on doctoral research exploring social work academic admissions decision-making in England, like many doctoral students, I had collected my data without factoring for covid-19. My methodology had been to ask academics about their decision-making, not the context in which the decision-making was made. While I had a representative sample covering all English regions, I had asked what admissions processes were followed, not how. I had asked which processes were considered the most important in deciding suitability, all the while assuming in-person assessment. Had I asked the same questions with covid-19 in mind, it would have undoubtedly added dimension to my initial analysis of centrality of suitability as a construction of *good citizen*. If I had asked my survey questions during covid-19, I believe I would have been better able to examine what meeting a prospective student represents in a situation where assessment of suitability takes priority over relationship-based praxis, the latter only recently emerging as rationale to return to face-to-face admissions.

This article is an application of my doctoral work to what happened to admissions processes. Like with placements, what had been considered 'common sense' to be delivered only in person, no longer seemed as absolute a requirement with the emergence of covid-19. There was an emerging 'needs must' approach with all the social work skills of working with the context at hand coming to the fore. A dominant narrative was in ensuring students were able to continue with the studies, a concern for those final year students due to qualify, register and start work within months of covid-19 emerging.

Researching social work education admissions, there was a natural incentive to listen for guidance relating to this area of social work education practice. I had already found a significant gap in researching the area of admissions, particularly as pedagogy. My research explores how academics construct their assessment of an applicant as suitable to study social work. Admissions practice had also been considered only in terms of in person praxis – again 'common sense'. Throughout the lockdown, little to no mention of admissions practice was raised by either SWE or BASW. The focus was entirely on those currently in social work education and more specifically those nearing completion.

It would be fair to say that given the circumstances covid-19 created, it was impossible to know how long a lockdown would last. It feels other worldly to imagine a time when whole countries were told to remain indoors, with laws speedily put in place to enforce and daily government briefings including death tolls. There was no way of knowing what covid-19 meant for social work education, only a recognition there were current students and a demand for social workers. It might therefore be considered that the lack of consideration given to admissions was either because it was a less critical or immediate area of attention or that there was less concern about the impact on student learning.

Admissions praxis: Context

It is worth locating social work education admissions in England in context. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the *empowerment and liberation* of people. Principles of *social justice*, human rights, collective responsibility and *respect for diversities* are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work *engages people and structures to address life challenges* and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (IFSW, 2014)(author's emphasis)

In terms of ethical principles, the IFSW expands on professional commitment to challenge discrimination (3.1), access to equitable resources (3.3) and challenging unjust policies and practices (3.4) (IFSW, 2018).

In the UK, the British Association of Social Worker's code of ethics echoes the IFSW definition of social work, reminding that the 2018 statement was made jointly between the IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The BASW code of ethics, followed across English social work, goes on to say that:

> social workers should respect, uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well- being (1); recognise that any limitations on rights should be necessary and proportionate and are for a legitimate purpose (2); promote the right to participation (3) and, again echoing the IFSW, that social work values challenging unjust policies and practices (4)'. (BASW, 2021)

There is no specific reference to admissions processes in either IFSW or BASW code of ethics however that is not unexpected given the span of their application. What is less expected, is the absence of explicit application of the code of ethics to the workforce and by extension student social workers and course applicants. In combining both codes of ethics, what is gained in generalisable values, misses the opportunity to address offering the same protections to the workforce. As such, the code of ethics perhaps unintentionally presents a view that codes of conduct apply only to those the profession works with, missing the opportunity to reflect inclusive values apply equally to the workforce. This is particularly relevant to the *right to participate* with much being said about the value of workforce diversity. Not encompassing admissions praxis in the code of ethics explicitly risks social work values not being considered central to decision-making about who enters education and becomes social workers (see: Bald et al (2022) for application to students with criminal records).

This outward facing practice is relevant in admissions praxis. Admissions is by definition the space in which an applicant seeks to move from outside to insider the social work profession. In other words, admissions processes are by design gatekeepers or keepers of the gates. By its very nature, admissions is designated a space where decisions are made as to the suitability of admitting an applicant to social work education and by extension the profession. The Children and Social Work Act (2017), in establishing the SWE regulator, sets out for the regulator under s46(5) that social work training means 'education or training that is suitable for people who are or wish to become social workers in England'. The emphasis is clear that in England, social work education is intended, at least from a legal standpoint, to be a *pipeline* into the profession. This distinction is relevant

to better understanding the relevance of social work education and which admissions processes presented a solution to the legally enshrined problem of *suitable*. It is worth noting at this point that while suitable is used as a measure in law, its application is to suitable social work education. The operationalising of suitability becomes one of individual applicant attribute at regulator level.

Why suitability as a construction is important comes in how admissions is guided by the regulator and delivered by social work education providers. In order words, what problem does admissions practice solve that standard course application processes do not? For this, it is important to return to the law and consider the three over-arching objectives for the regulator: protection of the public, public confidence in social workers, professional standards (Children and Social Work Act: 2017: s37(2)).

The wording is relevant when considering a critical report feeding into its design (Narey, 2014). Criticised on lack of evidence, Narey (2014) often presenting anecdotal 'one student wrote to me' as fact (p.19). Nevertheless, the report built on growing narrative about the quality of social work education graduates (Hanley, 2021). The report constructed 'difficult to fail' students as either criticism of social work education's gatekeeping out of the course or failing to meet social work vacancy rates, quoting a government think tank that 27% of newly qualified social workers were left unemployed in England three years before (Narey:2014, p.18). Concluding his report, Narey (2014) recommended that 'entry standards *be crutinised' by the* then College of Social Work (his arguing that regulatory authority should sit with the College rather than sit 'oddly' in the broader HCPC which itself only took on responsibility following the abolition of the General Social Care Council in 2012) (p.43, 5).

Interestingly, Narey (2014) prescribes an even more direct pipeline to practice. The idea being muted that social work education is in itself 'filled with attitudinal stuff rather than skills' quoting an unnamed Director of Children's Services (p5). This contrasts significantly with the profession's definition and code of ethics which presented as priding itself on being guided by ethical principles rather than derivative prescriptive skills. Narey (2014) questions admissions processes specifically in asserting that it 'is perfectly possible to envisage a university being able to demonstrate compliance with these processes while, at the same time, admitting students who are unlikely to become successful social workers' (p.7). The emphasis is towards graduate recruitment than education. For fullness, the HCPC Standards of Education and Training relating to admissions is quoted:

The admissions procedures must give both the applicant and the education provider the information they require to make an *informed choice* about whether to take up or make an offer of a place on a programme;

> The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including evidence of a *good command of reading, writing and spoken English*;
>
> The admissions procedures must *apply selection and entry criteria*, including criminal convictions checks;
>
> The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including *compliance with any health requirements*;
>
> The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including appropriate academic and / or professional entry standards;
>
> The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including accreditation of prior (experiential) learning and other inclusion mechanisms;
>
> The admissions procedures must ensure that the education provider has *equality and diversity policies* in relation to applicants and students, together with an indication of how these will be implemented and monitored.
> (HCPC, 2014) [author's emphasis]

Admissions in England

In England, there are multiple routes into social work education with all programs being validated by the professional regulator, Social Work England, whose responsibility is to accredit courses, set guidance and uphold standards (SWE, 2020). There are currently 88 approved social work programs admitting around 4,000 students per year across England (Community Care, 2021). Application to undergraduate (UG) three-year degree programs is through a national system, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), with two-year postgraduate (PG) applications made directly to accredited providers/universities. In addition, there are apprenticeship and fast-track routes, affiliated to universities but run independently through programs, Step Up and Frontline.

Social Work England's (SWE) admissions guidance has changed very little the HCPCs. The focus is for local admissions processes to be 'robust, transparent, ensure that applicants meet entry requirements and involve a range of stakeholders' using language of *could* rather than must (SWE,

2019). While all 88 social work education courses across the country had been approved to deliver learning either in person or online, there was no such approval process or specific guidance as to how admissions should be run by each approved provider with admissions forming part of the wider revalidation process. Of note, this is an increase from 72 courses in 2012/12 (Narey, 2014).

SWE continues to use the word *suitable* as an assessment of suitability though as mentioned previously the application is different to that in the Children and Social Work Act (2017). *Suitability* in contemporary social work education admissions has its origins in a General Social Care Council (GSCC) publication in which the term itself is not defined, as in for example defining what might preclude an applicant as unsuitable (GSCC, 2007). Most likely, the origins of suitability are deep seated in the beginnings of social working when in the 1900s there was concern for needing more skilled social workers as *good citizens* (Burt, 2021). However, the SWE (2019 and subsequent) guidance calls on social work education providers to offer an 'holistic/multi-dimensional assessment process'. In reality, the admissions process is a number of gatekept steps, including from initial application, though not consistently applied: timed written exercise, observed group discussion, panel interview, criminal record and health checks. This process could be considered daunting and reminiscent of Bourdieu's questioning of how capital is played as a game, or *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1989). Reflecting back on what admissions represents, there is cause to ask what exactly social work academics use as a measurement of *suitability* and once constructed, how it is applied. Reflecting (Yosso, 2005), I ask in my doctoral research whose culture has capital and what admissions represents given the global definition and ethical principles the profession holds dear.

To expand on *illusio* and Yosso's questioning whose culture had capital, it is worth reflecting on what interviewing social work students represents. Or put in another way, what problem does interviewing students ahead of education solve? From conversations with social work academics, admissions praxis differs internationally. Similarly, not all courses leading to professional qualifications in the UK require interview, for example psychology or law. In those subjects, there is a distinction between undergraduate and qualification. In social work, and similarly across those public sector professional courses in my School, interview is considered the first step towards becoming a social worker, a nurse or speech and language therapist for example. There is a link made between accessing the

course and working in the profession – this despite social work requiring additional Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (AYSE) to be fully considered *qualified* by statutory employers.

To reflect on the review I conducted in 2022 into whether social work ought to return to face-to-face interviewing, it was useful to reflect on the role of the interview and what meeting in person meant. For many colleagues, meeting in person was an opportunity to learn about an applicant's commitment to the ethics and values underpinning their profession. It was a chance to meet a full self beyond the head and shoulders screen of an hour's virtual interview. Reflecting Bourdieu's *illusio,* the benefit of in-person meeting was valued as getting to know someone – the real person as it were. There was concern that virtual meeting meant applicants might be coached from in the room or it limited the physicality of meeting such as missed opportunities to better gauge interpersonal skills. *Illusio* as a construct asks to what extent interviewing represents a hoop, through which we expect applicants to jump. How possible is it to assess a person's suitability in a one-off meeting in-person or indeed virtually? It might be considered that the course is sufficiently rigorous to consider suitability to practice as a social worker. Nevertheless, the want for in-person student interviews remained, while locally qualified social work job applicants interviewed virtually.

Yosso (2005) guided my review – whose culture has capital? Reflecting on the operational realities of interviewing in person, as it has been considered the norm prior to covid-19, we perhaps did not count the cost of travel, parking, work dress or childcare and time from work. Prior to Covid-19, it was common practice in the two universities I interviewed students for the process to be spread across a full day. This often mean applicants waiting their turn for a panel interview, but it allowed a campus tour and more time for questions. It also allowed for groupwork and a written test under exam conditions. Virtual interviews remain a panel but are scheduled by the applicant for an hour as a convenient time for them. Groupwork was no longer feasible. A written exercise remained however was not conducted under exam conditions, in preference to a reflection about a case study provided at the point of interview offer. Considering whose culture has capital, my initial doctoral thinking stemmed from observing in-person applicant days. Many who attended were nervous and would rarely comment on being kept waiting for part of the day. Most dressed for a work interview occasionally commenting to imply it was bought for the occasion. Few asked for expenses to be reimbursed. No complaints were

received in the time I interviewed. I wondered to what extent the *illusio* of assessing suitability in this way suited whose cultural capital – namely those more used to interviewing and financially able to cover the cost of attendance or loss of a day's salary.

Admissions during covid-19

Returning to March 2020 and covid-19 beginning to impact, following the imposition of a national lockdown there was a pause in SWE guidance. You would be forgiven to forget what March 2020 felt like as so much has happened in the intervening years that it is possible to lose sight of how uncertain the situation seemed. The word 'unprecedented' lacks the sense it once had when there were questions about how social work would be delivered let alone whether it would be possible to plan for the coming year's social work student cohort. Digitalisation had limited use with most courses having an online virtual classroom work area though this acted mostly as a repository for lecture notes and links to classroom lecture recordings. In the three universities I had worked in, all conducted 'holistic/multidimensional process' admissions in person (SWE, 2021, 1.1).

Prior to March 2020, I had not heard of Zoom or Teams, feeling outside my comfort zone when occasionally using of Skype for Business. I was of a generation of practitioners working in criminal justice who opposed using video conferencing for parole report preparation arguing the technology was impersonal and limited assessment. While digitally aware, lockdown forced social work education to move lock stock to virtual delivery, in my own university's case using first Zoom where it has remained for two years though latterly combining with Teams.

The guidance remained the same. Social work courses were still required by the regulator to run an admissions process, a checking process to 'ensure' applicants meet course entry requirements. These requirements are set out in Section 1 of the SWE Education and Training Standards (2021) and stipulate approved course providers must ensure applicant must have:

- Potential to develop (1.1)
- Good command of English (1.1)
- Capability to meet academic standards (1.1)
- Prior relevant experience (1.2)

- Suitability including conduct, health, and character…including criminal conviction checks (1.4)

In return, the approved course provider is required to ensure:

- Employers, placement providers and people with lived experience of social work are involved in admissions processes (1.3)
- The admissions process is multi-dimensional (1.1)
- Equality and diversity policies are in place, implemented and monitored (1.5)
- The applicant is given information they require to make an informed choice about whether to take up an offer of a place (1.6)

The Standards do not provide admissions processes best practice or define potential, good, capability, relevant or suitability leaving university admissions process gatekeepers responsible for delivery and measurement of applicant suitability to meet course entry requirements. It was at this point where I noticed the presumption inherent throughout social work and specifically admissions for in-person. While the profession had embraced texting, email and the telephone before that, there remained a sense that unless you have seen the person, you cannot say you know them. Into this covid-19 world came a technology which allowed applicants to be seen as well as heard, only this time through a screen and from the neck up. I was curious to then hear reasoning by my colleagues that this too was not sufficient to truly say you knew an applicant. Despite applicant feedback since routinely sharing gratitude that online admissions were more cost and time efficient, there has been divided opinion as to whether video conferencing should be an option.

Digital knowledge in social work education

Taylor (2017) writing three years before the pandemic, identified digital socialization as a developing knowledge skills gap in social work and wider social work education. Specifically, she raised cause for concern that social work ought to first reflect on the ethical consideration digitalization raises for technology enhanced practice. While the use of technology in social work education was not new, the scale of its use had not been seen before

Covid-19. The expansion of digitalization in social work education was fast paced, driven by unprecedently national lockdowns. Driven initially by health and safety concerns, the pace of moving to online delivery of social work education process offered little space to reflect on its practice implications or limitations. Digital poverty, for example, was brought into sharper focus in social work education through the Covid-19 response (Pentaris et al., 2021). Of relevance to admissions processes, there was a presumption that applicants had digital access and knowledge.

The change in admissions practice in response to the pandemic formed part of a SWE commissioned report (Pentaris et al, 2021). While not addressed in detail given to student learning, academics noted the challenges the rapid move to carrying out admissions processes virtually as opposed to the traditional in person suite of assessments. Academics primary concern was for IT literacy preparedness and concern about whether applicants could be 'assessed adequately in a virtual environment' (p.41). The report authors note academics flagged concern about the extent to which people with lived experience and practitioners were less able to engage with the process when being delivered virtually. Concerns for technical issues and applicant access to IT impacting on the admissions processes. The report includes a quote from an academic in which they mention being unable to deliver a group discussion online. The academic offered losing groupwork from the assessment was important 'because that's when you began to see *people's character' (p.41).*

It is this last quote which brings this paper full circle. Admissions praxis has a gatekeeping function in that it focuses on ensuring suitable or quality students enter social work education. The regulator's legal principles of protection and reputation have become meshed with admissions decision-making. There is a presumption, perhaps echoing Narey (2014) that once applicants enter a social work course, they will become social workers. Or to put in other words, admissions as front loading gatekeeping (Lafrance and Gray, 2004) is the first and perhaps only space to vet out 'unsuitable people' (HEA, 2014). This is all without revisiting the profession's ethical principles let alone the widening participation inclusive practice of near twenty years (Dillon, 2007).

Conclusions

Without doubt Covid-19 changed the world, at the very least, a generation experienced a global pandemic with daily national reported death tolls and a whole cultural shutdown. Looking back, it continues for many to be a troubling time. There is no doubt lockdown impacted families and communities (Dillon et al., 2021). What is less known is how Covid-19 changed social work education let alone assessment of the impact of changes made. While my doctoral research design had not factored Covid-19, from my vantage point, I was able to explore admissions praxis closely – specifically applying my findings of there being no one consistent common admissions praxis to what reverting to virtual represented. No professional regulator updated their admissions guidance to reflect the change to virtual – in fact, pre-pandemic wording made no reference to how admissions should be conducted in the same way regulators did not explicitly say teaching must be in person in a classroom.

Similarly, a review of social work education webpages shows little to no mention of whether admissions are conducted in person or virtually. Given the marketized nature of higher education, it might be asked to what extent applicants might view admissions format as a factor when deciding to apply.

Alternatively, in addition to the processes, applicants, attending interviews remotely via video conferencing technology are required to interview from their personal space set up as a workplace for privacy – their home, their workplace or another space such as their car. Discussion in my own team has been had about the implication if applicants were unable to switch on their camera, perhaps experiencing technical difficulties such as internet bandwidth. The idea of a person needing to be seen 'to appear at the window…answering to his name and showing himself when asked' resonates with admissions processes during the covid-19 pandemic (Foucault, 1995, p.196). To be seen and therefore physical presentation becomes part of the admissions process though is not explored.

In closing, it is worth reflecting on the role of digital technology in social work and by extension social work education. Is technology such as video conferencing here to stay in social work education admissions processes? Some may consider virtual interviewing as modernisation. It allows parity of interview experience for an applicant anywhere in the world and in any work/care/financial circumstances. As such virtual interviewing might be considered inclusive and consistent with ethical principles of addressing social justice and equity of access. Conversely, for a person-centred profession, some might say social work loses an opportunity for that core connection with applicants because of not meeting initially in person.

Limited time with an applicant for many might mean limited space for answering questions or enabling fuller answers.

To close, I wonder if video conferencing might become the profession's next email technology: that being used fully though providing good warning for how best it should be used. It could be considered that virtual interviewing has a place, such as for international students, but then it could be asked how far away might an applicant live to merit the offer of a virtual interview?

For the time being, the narrative of quality graduate social worker continues and perhaps time will tell if this period of virtual admissions will attract greater scrutiny of admission praxis. The move to virtual admissions was a necessity during a time of crisis. While the technology had been available prior to Covid-19, most academics interviewed or taught in-person. The relationship built with students held paramount and assumed in-person. The change to virtual might be considered a contextual experiment. What we gained might be expedience and lowered costs as a time of international health and economic crisis. What might be argued to be lost is that initial relationship building with applicants considered careers in health and social care. It would be helpful for regulators to comment on which medium they feel would best meet guidance however I suspect, as with teaching, the presumption will be the operationalisation of regulatory guidance ought to sit with the higher education institution. My sole hope for this paper is to general discussion, simply: what does meeting an applicant in person represent to assessing suitability to study?

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