

Making the Right Choice

Jana Madjarova

Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden

The first hesitant steps of a new student into the temple of wisdom we call university bear witness to a double choice being made, resulting in a union. The young person has chosen a programme which hopefully will lead to a degree and a successful career, and the university has chosen a student who, again hopefully, will study hard and graduate within a reasonable time. When both sides choose wisely, it may be called a union made in heaven. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. A wise choice is dependent on enough and trustworthy information from both sides. The student's choice is based on presentations of the university programmes, and the choice of the university is based on the applicant's marks or on some kind of test results. There is however a variety of problems bringing a degree of uncertainty into the picture – the virtual impossibility to explain the contents and the level of an educational programme to a person who has not been exposed to it, and the virtual impossibility to find absolutely trustworthy criteria for admission, to name but two.

In this talk we focus mainly on the latter of the two mentioned problems. We discuss why upper secondary school marks may not be the best criterion for admission, and what other methods of choice we have tried. More specifically, we shall discuss our experience of the admission test in mathematics and physics, which exists since 2007, and which is used for several programmes at Chalmers and at the Royal Institute of Technology.

We shall also discuss a related topic which has figured rather frequently in media lately, namely the weaker backgrounds of the new students compared to earlier. Is it a myth? Is it a typical case of “things were a lot better when we were that age”? Is it true that we ask the wrong questions? And if so, what are the right questions to ask? Can we formulate what a student should know in order to be successful? Chalmers has a long history (more than 40 years) of submitting students to a diagnostic test at the very beginning of their studies. We discuss the outcome and give some statistics. The last topic also touches a hobbyhorse of most universities, namely the wish to gain influence over upper secondary school education.