

# Contextual admissions in London's higher education institutions

*A report for The Greater London Authority  
by CFE Research*



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# CONTENTS

Summary	1
Glossary	4
01. Introduction	5
02. Designing contextual admissions	7
03. Implementing contextual admissions	18
04. Things to consider	25
References and notes	28



## SUMMARY

Contextual admissions enable higher education institutions (HEIs) to take into account factors that may have affected applicants' educational attainment. Educational attainment by itself is not always the best indicator of an applicant's potential. Using contextual information allows HEIs to level the playing field for disadvantaged applicants.

Contextual information can include individual characteristics, area-level and school-level indicators, and prior engagement in institutional outreach activities. With the exception of care leavers, individual characteristics are generally less frequently used as the basis for contextual admissions by London HEIs. HEIs face considerable challenges in obtaining relevant and accurate individual-level data on which to base contextual admissions. There is a need to improve access to individual-level data, such as that collected by UCAS, and in particular whether an applicant is in receipt of free school meals.

School-level data is more accessible and is frequently used to identify priority schools for contextual admissions and related outreach work. Priority schools include those with poorer pupil outcomes and those with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils.

Area-level indicators based on student postcodes are the most common type of measure referenced in contextual admissions policies. POLAR (participation of local areas) was designed as a measure of participation in higher education (HE) rather than of disadvantage more generally and should not be used in isolation to decide whether to offer a place to an individual applicant. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) appears to be increasingly used by London HEIs to inform contextual admissions.

Linking contextualised admissions to outreach programmes helps to ensure a coherent and comprehensive approach to access and participation. Participation in outreach activities (such as summer schools) can provide valuable additional insight about applicants. Students also felt that workshops and summer schools provide a good indication of an applicant's passion for their chosen subject and ability to be successful in HE.

In many cases, there is a need for more integrated internal admissions systems capable of flagging when an applicant meets contextual admissions criteria.

Contextual indicators can be used to inform contextual offers, additional consideration of applications and entry to foundation years. Contextual offers involve reducing the level of attainment required for entry, usually by 1 or 2 grades compared with a standard offer. HEIs are concerned to maintain minimum thresholds of achievement to ensure students can manage the demands of undergraduate-level study, so they may still expect contextual students to have studied particular subjects and meet any minimum GCSE requirements expected of all applicants to a course.

HEIs may also use contextual information to give applications closer consideration, taking into account how background and personal circumstances may have affected elements such as personal statements and portfolio submissions. Contextual indicators can also mean guaranteed interviews, additional points when scoring applications, and prioritising borderline applicants. Students with contextual indicators may be offered places on a foundation year, successful completion of which provides direct access to a related undergraduate degree course.

Clearly communicating *what* contextual admissions are and *who* may be eligible is essential so that potential students, as well as their parents and carers, and school and college staff, fully understand how they can support under-represented and less advantaged groups to progress to HE. Use of multiple communication channels is necessary to ensure the message gets across, including HEI websites, via UCAS, school assemblies and as part of outreach programmes. Making the criteria and process used in contextual admissions as clear as possible is also essential to help prospective students, schools and those that support them work out if they are eligible. The information about contextual admissions on HEI websites varies greatly; in some cases it is not clear who is eligible and what this means in practice for applicants.

Though students were generally supportive of the use of contextual admissions, some, including those who had received a contextual offer, perceived that stigma could be attached to it. HEIs need to clearly articulate the rationale for contextual admissions and publicly champion their use. This is important for dispelling misconceptions and combating potential negativity surrounding contextual admissions.

Communicating the rationale for contextual admissions within HEIs is important too. There can be tensions between making contextual offers and perceptions of high entry-tariffs as indicators of high quality.

Providing excellent academic and pastoral support to all students mitigates against any stigma experienced by contextual admissions students. Inclusive, mainstream programmes are important for developing a sense of belonging and this maximises the success of all students. However, disadvantaged students may be less likely to take up available support. Targeted communications are needed to ensure contextual admissions students are aware of the support available, understand how it would benefit them and are encouraged to take it up.

The use of contextual admissions contributes towards HEIs achieving their access and participation targets. HEIs also report that their undergraduate student populations are gradually becoming more diverse as a result of adopting this approach. Students indicate that contextual admissions can help to encourage them to aspire to higher-tariff institutions and help to boost their confidence, making them feel wanted and supported by HEIs.

There is some evidence to suggest that contextual admissions students perform just as well as non-contextual admissions students, but more work is needed to assess the impact of

contextual admissions on key performance measures, such as continuation rates, attainment and progression. However, at present some HEIs struggle to identify and track contextual admissions students within their data systems.

# GLOSSARY

<b>A&amp;P</b>	Access and participation
<b>APP</b>	Access and participation plan
<b>BAME</b>	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
<b>CACI Acorn</b>	Proprietary geodemographic classification based on demographic data and consumer behaviour
<b>FSM</b>	Free school meals
<b>GLA</b>	Greater London Authority
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEAT</b>	Higher Education Access Tracker
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>High tariff HEIs</b>	Most selective HEIs based on average number of UCAS points (tariff scores) achieved by entrants
<b>IMD</b>	Index of Multiple Deprivation
<b>OfS</b>	Office for Students
<b>POLAR</b>	Participation of local areas – a UK area classification based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education
<b>Post-92</b>	Higher education institutions in the UK given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 – many, but not all, are former polytechnics.
<b>Russell Group</b>	Group of 24 research-intensive and higher-tariff universities
<b>TUNDRA</b>	Tracking under-representation by area is an experimental area-based measure that tracks state-funded mainstream school pupils in England to calculate young participation in HE.
<b>UCAS</b>	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service



# 01. INTRODUCTION

*This report describes use of contextual admissions at some of London's most selective and specialist higher education institutions. It outlines good practice and explores some of the challenges involved.*

## Background and project aims

London is one of the leading centres of higher education (HE), with universities and specialist colleges a major asset. The Mayor wants all Londoners with the potential to succeed to have the opportunity to study at a higher education institution (HEI) that is right for them and to secure the best outcomes.

London performs well on key indicators of access to HE. It has the highest levels of progression among young people eligible for free school meals to HE generally and to high-tariff HE providers specifically.<sup>1</sup> However, the non-continuation rate for students at London's HEIs is higher than the English average.<sup>2</sup> While students at London HEIs are highly diverse, inequalities in participation and student outcomes remain. Analysis by the Greater London Authority (GLA) indicates that there are significant differences in the ethnicity of students between London HEIs. Black students, in particular, are underrepresented at medium to higher tariff HEIs and Londoners who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who have taken non-A-Level routes are concentrated in certain HEIs.

The GLA commissioned CFE Research to carry out qualitative research into the use of contextual admissions to support the access and participation of Londoners from under-represented group. The research aims to identify good practice, explores challenges and how they can be addressed and makes suggestions for how practice could be developed.

## Contextual admissions

Contextual admissions enable HEIs to take into account factors that may have affected applicants' educational attainment.<sup>3</sup> The Office for Students (OfS) encourages HEIs to consider adopting use of contextual admissions<sup>4</sup> as part of their access and participation plans (APP) in support of the long-term goal to eradicate inequalities in HE within a generation. Contextual admissions may become more important in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as early evidence suggests school closures are likely to widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.<sup>5</sup>

This report explores in some detail the different types of contextual indicators that HEIs use and how the information is used to inform offers and additional support (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3 we consider issues relating to the implementation of contextual admissions, including communication their use and providing support to students. We conclude by summarising key points for HEIs to consider when developing contextual admissions policies.

## **Method**

The evidence in this report is based on research undertaken between March and October 2020. The research began with a desk review of the admissions policies of London's HEIs.

We then undertook in-depth telephone interviews with 13 staff from a sample of seven HEIs. HEIs were sampled to ensure a range of geographic locations and size of institution. Based on the results of our desk research we focused our sample on high tariff institutions (three HEI) and specialist institutions (four HEIs), several of which also have high entry tariffs. Engaging HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly challenging. Six of the seven HEIs were based in London. Staff interviewed included heads of admissions, heads of access and participation and policy advisors.

We also held four online focus groups with 24 second and third year students. Fourteen were from London based HEIs and 11 attended Russell Group or other high tariff institutions. Eighteen were from lower socio-economic groups and 13 were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Students were recruited to our specification by YouthSight<sup>6</sup> from their youth research panel.

## 02. DESIGNING CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

*In this chapter we set out the rationale for contextual admissions, the indicators that are commonly used and the different approaches to contextual admissions that are currently in place in our sample of predominately London-based, high tariff HEIs.*

Educational attainment by itself is not always the best indicator of an applicant's potential. HEIs recognise the different ways applicants' background and experience may have disadvantaged them. Using contextual information allows them to 'level the playing field' amongst applicants. A commitment from HEIs to take contextual information into account helps to ensure that less advantaged applicants have the opportunity to study at the most selective, higher-tariff institutions. Adopting contextual admissions also helps HEIs to meet their access and participation goals by addressing under-representation within the student body.

*It is about acknowledging...that A-level attainment is quite a blunt tool for measuring ability and potential to succeed... So our contextual approach is a way of saying, 'we will make a different sort of offer to different sorts of applicants, based on criteria which we think disadvantaged them in their school attainment but won't disadvantage them in their ability to succeed on course.'*

— HEI

Approximately two-thirds of London-based HEIs explicitly reference using contextual admissions on their websites. Contextual admissions policies are most likely to be found in Russell Group and other higher-tariff institutions. Post-92 institutions typically have lower entry tariffs and are more likely to have more diverse student populations.

### Contextual indicators

Contextual information can focus on individual characteristics, area-level and school-level indicators, and prior engagement in institutional outreach activities and programmes. Decisions about which indicators to select are driven principally by the availability of data and the priorities set out in an HEI's Access and Participation Plan (APP). Aligning contextual indicators with the APP ensures admissions policies support wider work to address under-representation in particular institutional contexts.

#### Access to data

Previous work by CFE for the OfS identified the considerable challenges HEIs face when seeking to obtain relevant and accurate data on which to base contextual admissions and target access and participation interventions.<sup>7</sup> These challenges were echoed by the institutions consulted as part of this research. Several expressed a desire for access to

further, individual-level data, such as that collected by UCAS. In particular, whether an applicant is in receipt of free school meals.

Others highlighted the need for more integrated internal admissions systems capable of ‘flagging’ when an applicant meets different contextual admissions criteria. The data systems in place in many institutions are typically not well linked and as such, act as a barrier to the development of more sophisticated approaches to contextual admissions. Where integrated systems are in place, such as in one of the HEIs consulted, checks are built in to ensure contextual offers are made to students who meet the criteria. In this institution, the admissions team also has access to information on individual applicants from the access and participation team, including attendance on outreach schemes, levels of engagement and the results of academic assignments.

*We had to update a lot of our systems to make sure the students were correctly flagged and to automate a lot of things ... as you're assessing an application you can clearly see if a student [meets] a key widening participation criterion ... if you're about to issue an offer that's not a contextual offer to one of those students it will pop up, 'Okay, you're using the wrong offer.'*

— HEI

Given the challenges of accessing data, and the limitations of different sources and indicators (this is explored further in the following sections), many HEIs use a range to identify applicants for contextualised admissions. Combining indicators can help to target the most disadvantaged students. This approach acknowledges that aspects of disadvantage are linked and encountered differently; as such, some applicants will experience greater barriers to fulfilling their academic potential. Students felt strongly that a range of factors should be taken into account to identify those facing the most severe disadvantage and those who may need less support.

*I think intersection is important. Personally, I am first generation and I'm Muslim, but I am relatively well off and I had support throughout the admissions process. So, I think intersection and ethnicity are important when you're considering diversity.*

— Student

## Individual characteristics

In their latest APP guidance<sup>8</sup>, the OfS identifies five key groups whose access and participation HEIs should monitor and target if necessary. These groups relate to the individual characteristics of applicants: those from lower household income or socio-economic backgrounds; Black, Asian and minority ethnic students; mature students; disabled students; and care leavers. While contextual admissions policies of London HEIs acknowledge all of these groups, individual characteristics are generally less frequently used as the basis for contextual admissions. Other research also found individual indicators were the least commonly used contextual indicators by leading universities.<sup>9</sup>

There are a number reasons for this, including the challenge of sourcing individual-level data.

The exception to this is care leavers. As a group, there is well-documented evidence of the disadvantage they face and the necessary data is available to HEIs to support targeting and contextual admissions.

While low income is recognised as an important contextual factor, some HEIs find it difficult to identify low-income applicants. Research cited by the OfS suggests eligibility for free school meals is the best indicator of disadvantage.<sup>10</sup> Improved access to and guidance on using indicators of low income/socioeconomic status would be beneficial to HEIs.

Ethnicity as a contextual indicator does not appear to be widely used across London HEIs. Again, this may be because access to this data is limited. Some London HEIs draw on the highly diverse local population and, to some degree, have more diverse student populations. Understanding the specific and additional disadvantages different BAME groups face, such as cultural barriers to HE participation, was important for many students. Given the intersectionality between ethnicity and other contextual indicators such as first in family, using these rather than ethnicity as an indicator can have the effect of enabling access for a higher volume of BAME students according to one HEI.

*I'm Caribbean, and not a lot of people in my family went to university, because it didn't seem like the thing to do. I feel like culturally, it seemed better to have a paying job as opposed to getting higher education.*

— Student

Most of the HEIs featured in this report are high-tariff institutions using contextual information to help increase access to undergraduate study to under-represented and disadvantaged groups with a focus on young first-time entrants to HE. However, mature students often face substantial barriers to HE and in the context of a decline in part-time provision, are increasingly under-represented as a result.<sup>11</sup> HEIs such as Birkbeck College (part of the University of London) and The Open University, have been built around making HE accessible to mature students, including those without traditional entry qualifications. As such, a separate contextualised admissions policy is not required as admissions criteria are by default inclusive and flexible.

### **Birkbeck College, University of London**

Birkbeck College was established almost 200 years ago to provide a university education in the evening to working Londoners. The majority of Birkbeck students are mature and study-part time in the evening for an undergraduate, masters or research degree. Almost all Birkbeck students combine work with study and other caring responsibilities. Whilst a number live in halls of residence most are commuter students.

Although UCAS Tariff Point requirements are included on the website and in the prospectus, it is made clear that offers are based on an assessment of academic potential and formal entry requirements may be waived altogether. In all their communications with potential students Birkbeck encourages students without entry qualifications to consider applying.

Birkbeck offers a wide range of supported entry routes, including bite-sized courses that provide a taste of a subject, one-year certificates and undergraduate degrees with foundation-year programmes to build university-level study skills. These are open to people with no or few prior qualifications.

Academics experienced in teaching mature students assess each application to determine the extent to which applicants have the necessary subject knowledge and interest. They try to avoid conducting formal interviews as this presents a further barrier but may undertake video or phone calls with applicants. The focus of these discussions is often on ensuring applicants understand the level of commitment and time involved in undergraduate study so they can make an informed decision.

The OfS APP guidance also highlights a further five groups who are particularly under-represented in HE: carers; people estranged from their families; people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; refugees; and children of military families. These all feature in at least one HEI contextual admissions policy. Several HEIs described prioritising refugees and asylum seekers. One is working with a refugee support organisation to find alternative ways to evidence students' ability and achievements where they have no formal qualifications because their education has been interrupted by forced migration.

Students described a wide range of individual circumstances that they felt would impact an applicant's ability to achieve their full academic potential. This included factors rarely or never mentioned by HEIs such as mental health problems, bereavement, long-term illness and involvement with the criminal justice systems (e.g. parents in prison). Students also described how less tangible factors, such as prevailing culture and parental attitudes, have an impact on aspirations and ability to progress to HE. They also recognised the challenge of measuring these things directly.



*This isn't particularly practical to measure, but the thing that affected me was not having a desk at home. [Other factors to take account of include] having parents who worked periodic shifts, having to stay at home to look after children, having to work during A-levels. Even the cultural mind-set of parents who didn't go to university, not knowing the application process, not understanding the finances, seeing it as a debt burden, they're huge factors in educational performance.*

— Student

Some of these issues, including parental knowledge and attitudes to HE, provide the focus for institutional and collaborative outreach programmes and activities so they do not become barriers to progression. Developing a more detailed understanding of how these factors are related to other characteristics and impact on educational attainment can also provide HEIs with a further way to contextualise applications.

### **Area-level indicators**

Area-level indicators based on student postcodes are the most common type of measure used in the contextual admissions policies of the London HEIs we consulted. Area-level indicators include the proportion of young people who progress to HE from a given area (the OfS participation of local areas (POLAR) classification), the extent of deprivation in an area (the index of multiple deprivation (IMD)) or a range of socio-demographic characteristics (CACI's Acorn classification).

POLAR was designed as a measure of HE participation but the limitations of this data as a measure of disadvantage, particularly in London, are well documented.<sup>12</sup> This includes research conducted for the GLA, which recommended that the OfS assessed how an alternative measure could be developed to complement POLAR.<sup>13</sup> It is widely recognised that POLAR lacks the level of granularity needed for targeting activities such as contextual admissions and outreach, and for masking pockets of deprivation (and advantage) in densely populated urban areas. As young people in London are more likely to access HE than young people elsewhere, there are few areas in London that are in the lowest POLAR quintiles.<sup>14</sup> Students themselves are sceptical of the ability of area data and postcodes alone to effectively identify disadvantaged students; however, it is recognised as a useful starting point.

*The system isn't perfect ...but it's important to realise that for the large majority the postcode is a good starting indicator that someone might need more support. ... I know a lot of people, myself included, have benefitted from the indicator of where we lived. I also understand there are things that slip between the net.*

— Student

Given these limitations, the OfS recommends that POLAR is not used in isolation to decide whether to offer a place to an individual applicant.<sup>15</sup> As a result, many HEIs use other indicators alongside POLAR to identify disadvantaged students. In 2019 the OfS launched a new area-based measure, TUNDRA, which tracks the participation rate of state-funded

mainstream school pupils only (POLAR includes all school types). However, like POLAR, TUNDRA is a measure of HE participation and not deprivation.

IMD does measure deprivation directly and appears to be increasingly used by London HEIs as part of contextual admissions and targeting of access and participation activity. London has the highest number of small areas that are classified as deprived based on the IMD and not classified as low-participation using POLAR.<sup>16</sup>

*You can have a street with a postcode that is the same but one side of the street you've got six families living, but on the other side of the street you've got 140 families that are in block flats. ... POLAR is good for the rest of the country but not so good for those densely populated metropolitan areas.*

— HEI

### School-level indicators

HEIs frequently identify priority schools and use this as a way to target students for contextual admissions. Priority schools can be identified based on a variety of factors, including the proportions of pupils in receipt of free school meals, achieving grades 9 to 4 (previously A\* to C) at GCSE, progressing to HE or from low participation areas.

Priority schools are often those that HEIs are working with as part of their wider access and participation programmes. Some HEIs make contextualised admissions offers for pupils of the academies they sponsor. In both instances, the priority schools tend to be local to the HEI. Additional indicators therefore are needed to ensure fair access to students outside the locality.

HEIs acknowledge that school-level indicators, like area indicators, may be more of a blunt tool than individual characteristics – pupils at the same school may have very different backgrounds and experiences. However, the necessary data to identify priority schools is generally more accessible than individual-level data. Some make use of the school performance data available through the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) that many HEIs' access and participation teams subscribe to. Maintaining a list of eligible schools, keeping on top of changes in name, performance and other circumstances can still require significant effort on the part of the HEI.

Students also considered school data a useful indicator. They highlighted how lack of resources in some schools may mean they have to work harder. In particular, the lack of a culture of high achievement and progression to HE generally and high-tariff institutions in particular can make it more difficult for those who might want to consider that route. Students also highlighted that guidance and support with progression can be lacking in schools with low participation rates.

*Student 1: In my two years at sixth form there was only one person who applied to Oxbridge, and the teachers didn't take it seriously at all.*



*Student 2: I think the thing about the culture of schools is important. It was expected at my school that people would apply to medicine, and Oxbridge, and they already had a pathway to help them.*

## **Participation in outreach programmes**

Linking contextualised admissions to outreach programmes helps to ensure a coherent and comprehensive approach to access and participation. Outreach activity is increasingly designed as a sustained programme of support, starting early in pupils' school career. Contextual admissions provide an important final link in the chain, supporting people to secure a place in HE and at higher tariff institutions in particular.

Participation in outreach can include summer schools, workshops, masterclasses and mentoring programmes. These may be run by individual HEIs, partnerships of HEIs (e.g. Uni Connect and Realising Opportunities) or by third parties – as in the case of Sutton Trust Summer Schools.

In the absence of other sources of individual-level data, engagement with widening participation activities can provide valuable additional insight about applicants. Participation in outreach programmes can act as an indicator of disadvantage; in order to be eligible participants will already have met one or more of the criteria outlined above. Outreach programmes also provide an alternative to A-level results as a means to assess the potential, ability and commitment of applicants. Incorporating contextual admissions with outreach is a way for HEIs to ensure their offers are based on a rounded understanding of applicants and that potential students receive support to acquire the necessary skills.

*Students have to complete a range of activities throughout the year. Attendance is monitored. There are components such as an academic skills module, so we're really ensuring students are prepared, and it's not a case we're just offering a blank offer without the additional support.*

— HEI

Indeed, many of the students we spoke to felt that workshops and summer schools with HEIs provided a better indicator of whether a student would be able to cope with university level work than A-levels, which involve a different approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Students often felt strongly that applicants should demonstrate a passion and commitment to their subject and university study. A summer school or pre-application assignments were viewed as good ways to allow applicants to show their potential.

*I think that summer school and pre-application work [are] a good idea. Universities normally do a selection process for students to get onto summer schools. That you get onto a summer school would show you are motivated to go to this university. It shows*

*you're willing to put in the effort. You're doing something extra. It shows your determination to go to that university.*

— Student

Those who had participated in summer schools and other outreach activities were generally positive about the experience. However, some students also highlighted that disadvantaged students may miss out on the opportunity to participate in outreach activities because they lack the confidence to put themselves forward, or are unable to attend because of their wider commitments, such as caring responsibilities or the need to work. As with the other measures, HEIs need to use a range of contextual indicators to overcome the limitations of using a single approach.

### **Bristol Scholars at the University of Bristol**

The innovative Bristol Scholars scheme invites teachers at every secondary school in Bristol to nominate several Year 12 students who they perceive have the potential to succeed at the University but who may not necessarily achieve the required grades because of challenges they have experienced.

Pupils admitted onto the scheme are supported throughout Year 13, benefitting from outreach activities, such as visits to the University, and private academic tuition. They also receive a guaranteed tailored offer for an undergraduate course at the University, which is typically lower than the standard entry requirements.

Bristol Scholars who firmly accept their offer may also be eligible for the means-tested Bristol Scholar Bursary which provides £3,855 of financial support for each year of study. All Scholars also have access to a Bristol Scholars Advisor whose role it is to support them through their transition to the University. Advisors deliver an enhanced induction for Bristol Scholars in addition to organising monthly social events and annual residential conferences. They also offer one to one coaching and act as the main point of contact for students throughout their studies.

The University of Bristol devised the Bristol Scholars scheme alongside other activities as part of its commitment to working with local schools and colleges to nurture talent.

*It has been part of our community engagement, in terms of bringing the city and the university closer together.*

As a result of these activities, the University has successfully increased proportion of local students studying at the institution which in turn supports the achievement of its wider access and participation goals.

## Approaches to contextual admissions

Once the suite of indicators is agreed upon, these can be used in different ways to support the access and participation of under-represented groups. These can be broadly categorised as contextual offers, additional consideration and foundation years.

### Contextual offers

Contextual offers generally involve reducing the level of attainment required, usually by 1 or 2 grades compared with a standard offer for a particular course. HEIs are concerned to ensure entry levels are not dropped substantially and that minimum thresholds are achieved so students are well equipped to manage the demands of undergraduate-level study. For example, HEIs may still expect contextual students to have studied particular subjects and meet any minimum GCSE requirements expected of all applicants to a course.

Students generally agreed that this was a sensible approach – small reductions in offer levels were regarded as helpful and fair. However, they also emphasised the need for additional support post-enrolment to ensure students are able to cope with the level of work and do not drop out.

Most of the HEIs we spoke to made contextual offers to at least some of their applicants that were identified using contextual indicators. Where HEIs did not make contextual offers, this seemed to be because they were concerned that reduced offers may affect student motivation.

*It's something that we've had a lot of discussion about, and we feel like there are positives and negatives to doing that, it might encourage more people in, but it might also prevent people from aspiring to do better.*

— HEI

While some students shared this view, many felt that a contextual offer would actually service to boost confidence and reduce anxiety rather than demotivate students. Notably, those students who revealed that they had received a contextual offer were clear this acted as further encouragement to them. Students appear generally more cynical about the value of unconditional offers and considered that these were more likely to result in demotivation. The OfS has expressed concern at the steep rise in the use of unconditional offers in recent years and suggests that contextual offers are a more effective way to support fair access for disadvantaged students. Further research into the use and impact of unconditional offers is needed but applicants who accept an unconditional offer are more likely to miss their predicted grades by two or more grades.<sup>17</sup> There is also analysis to suggest that these students are more likely to drop out of HE.<sup>18</sup>

As well as grade reductions, HEIs can use contextual information to reduce or waive other entry requirements or to bolster traditional measures. For example, results from summer school and other pre-entry assignments can be used to supplement student's grades.

Some HEIs highlighted how they also accept alternatives to A-Levels, in particular BTECs. Although this is arguably not the same as contextual admissions, students with BTEC qualifications are more likely to be from low-participation areas and ‘type of qualification’ may therefore be an indicator of other contextual factors.<sup>19</sup> Accepting BTEC qualifications is an important element of widening participation, yet there are perceptions that the BTEC route does not prepare students well for university-level study and students who enter with only BTEC qualifications have poorer outcomes from HE.<sup>20</sup> To address this, HEI’s access and participation teams often target students entering via this route for additional academic support (e.g. with maths).

### **Additional consideration**

Contextual offers are not made to all students identified using contextual indicators. However, some give the applications from students from under-represented backgrounds additional consideration, taking account of contextual information. This additional consideration can take a wide variety of forms. HEIs describe reading and considering flagged applications more carefully. At one HEI, all flagged applications that would ordinarily be rejected are reviewed again with a view to identifying what other help and opportunities could be offered to the applicant to enable them to successfully progress. The background and personal circumstances may also be taken into account when reading personal statements. It is recognised that more advantaged students are able to draw on their social capital to put together a more impressive statement than their less advantaged peers<sup>21</sup> and, as such, the personal statement is often not the best way to assess potential.

Contextual information can also be useful when considering portfolio submissions as some students will not have had access to the same facilities and materials as others. A better indicator of potential can be the students’ ability to demonstrate they are able to reflect on their work.

*A bad portfolio doesn't mean a bad student. It can mean a bad experience. What's more interesting is the student's ability to talk about their work and understand where there's still work to be done.*

— HEI

More concrete assistance offered as a result of contextual factors includes: adding extra points to interview scoring; prioritising borderline or ‘near miss’ students; and making offers or suggesting alternative, less-competitive courses that may be appropriate. One HEI guarantees an interview for contextual students. This provides another opportunity for students to sell themselves and provides the HEI with additional insights to supplement the application form.

Students were less obviously enthusiastic about the concept of additional consideration unless it was clear to them that action would be taken on the basis of contextual factors to support an applicant.

## Foundation year

The other main way in which contextual information may be used is to offer applicants a place on a year zero or foundation year. Successful completion of this provides direct access to a related undergraduate degree course. Entry requirements are lower than both standard entry and contextualised offers, making them more accessible to students from less-advantaged backgrounds. The foundation year provides the opportunity for students to develop the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to study at undergraduate level. Students are aware of foundation year schemes and held mixed views. They see foundation years as a good way to help contextual students get up to speed with peers. But the extra year of study to and associated debt was less appealing.

### The Royal Veterinary College's Veterinary Gateway

The Royal Veterinary College's Veterinary Gateway is a foundation programme aimed at students from under-represented backgrounds who are interested in studying Veterinary Medicine but who might not meet the entry requirements. Up to 50 students a year who meet the [eligibility criteria](#) are offered a place on the Gateway. The entry requirements are lower than the standard and contextualised entry requirements for the undergraduate course.

The Gateway is designed to prepare students for the five year Veterinary Medicine undergraduate degree by equipping them with essential knowledge and skills and nurturing their confidence. It also provides students with farm and animal experience, which has been identified as a gap for applicants from less-advantaged backgrounds.

*We were conscious that these young people didn't have the networks to find work experience in a veterinary practice, which is really very, very difficult to get if you don't have the social networks and social capital to do it.*

The institution is proud of the success of the Gateway and how it is helping to widen access to higher education and the veterinary profession for a more diverse range of students. Graduates of the Gateway recognise the benefits of taking part and help to raise awareness of the opportunity among others with similar backgrounds

*When [student] graduated, they were one of our student ambassadors, and they would always say they'd put on their blog and Facebook that Gateway had made them, and they were so much more confident because of that.*

### 03. IMPLEMENTING CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

*This chapter considers why it is important to raise awareness of contextual admissions among students, parents and school, college and HE staff. It highlights how contextual information can be used to support students throughout the lifecycle and the benefits of more inclusive approaches for the HE sector.*

#### Communicating contextual admissions

Clearly communicating *what* contextual admissions are and *who* may be eligible is essential so that potential students as well as their parents and carers, and school and college staff fully understand how they can support under-represented and less advantaged groups progress into HE. Approximately a third of students participating in the focus groups had either never heard of contextual admissions or were unsure exactly what the term meant. Those from lower socio-economic groups, who are most likely to benefit from contextual admissions, were generally less well informed. There is clearly scope for improved communication about contextual admissions.

*I didn't know exactly what it was and if other people are like that too, and don't hear about it, they're not going to use it.*

— Student

#### Making the case for contextual admissions

HEIs need to clearly articulate the rationale for contextual admissions and publicly champion their use. This is important for dispelling misconceptions and combating potential negativity surrounding contextual admissions. Some HEIs reported resistance, for example from independent schools, when contextual admissions were introduced.

*I think we are really clear about it and we're upfront about it... we've been at the forefront of saying 'yes we should be celebrating this, we should be putting it front and centre'... when we first introduced this we had a lot of flak from organisations and individuals who felt they were being disadvantaged by it and I think that was what really lead us to be so transparent.*

— HEI

Though students were generally supportive of the use of contextual admissions, some, including those who had received a contextual offer, perceived that stigma could be attached.



*I think there's a stigma with contextual offers, there is definitely a group of people that would say you don't deserve to be at university if you didn't achieve the grades... Some people might not understand contextual offers as they've not been in that boat, the stigma definitely comes from students who had to achieve their top offer grades and didn't get support.*

— Student

Some students also argued that those who do not meet the eligibility criteria but who are not in the most advantaged groups might feel resentful. This underlines the importance of HEIs being transparent about the purpose of contextual admissions, how contextual indicators have been selected and why these factors affect educational attainment. A lack of understanding can lead some students and other stakeholders to regard the policy as unfair and advantaging some groups over others, rather than merely levelling the field.

One approach to addressing stigma and championing contextual admissions is to take an asset-based approach, focusing on students' strengths rather than deficits.

*I suppose, what's really important in terms of all of our widening participation work is that we don't really talk about disadvantage, we talk about ability, we talk about potential. We're not making you a contextual offer because you go to a school that's under-performing. We're making you a contextual offer because we think you're brilliant, because we think you're really bright and you can do really, really well when you're here.*

— HEI

Communicating the rationale for contextual admissions within HEIs is important too. Ensuring academic and senior staff buy-in is important as they lead the way and set the ethos of an institution. There can be tensions between making contextual offers and perceptions of high entry-tariffs as indicators of high quality. Some staff expressed concern about the impact of contextual offers on their institution's league table rankings as these use average entry tariffs as a measure of prestige.<sup>22</sup> Staff are also clearly concerned to ensure contextual admissions students are able to cope with the demands of undergraduate study. Measures of student continuation, attainment and progression are all key performance indicators for HEIs. Providing support to students and monitoring their progress is important (this is discussed in the following sections) but a recent study found little evidence that leading HEIs adopting greater contextualisation experience significantly higher dropout rates, lower degree completion or lower degree classifications than those that do not.<sup>23</sup>

### **Promoting contextual admissions to potential students**

Information relating to contextual admissions needs to be received from multiple sources to ensure that the message reaches eligible learners. While students agreed that universities should clearly outline their policies on their websites, they highlight that this should not be the only source of information.

*If it's just on the university website, it's quite easy to miss. You might just see the word 'contextual' and skip past it. It has to come from a variety of sources.*

— Student

Many of the students who were familiar with contextual admissions had initially heard about them through their school or college, often in assemblies or as part of presentations on HE. Providing information to all pupils so everyone understands the rationale is important as set out above. Following up with likely candidates for contextual admissions helps students understand how the policy applies to them.

Students also thought that UCAS could play an important role in promoting contextual admissions to prospective applicants. Students explained that they receive a high volume of email traffic, but they always read communications from UCAS. UCAS provides information on contextual admissions for teachers and advisers on its website; information targeted at applicants to HE may also be useful.

Making the criteria and indicators used in contextual admissions as clear as possible is essential to help prospective students, schools and those that support them work out if they are eligible. This should also include how contextual information will be used and the nature of contextual offers. The information about contextual admissions we found on HEI websites varies greatly; in some cases it is not clear who is eligible and what this means in practice for applicants. This may be because contextual offers vary between courses. HEIs acknowledged that there was further work to be done in this area. A couple of institutions explained how they aspired to make their websites more interactive so prospective applicants can check their eligibility for a contextual admission in future.

### **The Queen Mary University of London's awareness raising activities**

In order to raise awareness about contextual admissions to potential applicants, Queen Mary University embed information, including the rationale for using contextual data, into school/college outreach activities and key events such as undergraduate open days. Information, including eligibility criteria, also clearly feature on their website.

To ensure the most under-represented groups, including care leavers, refugees and asylum seekers have access to this information, Queen Mary University also delivers targeted awareness raising messaging and activities to these groups. Applicants who meet the contextual admissions criteria are automatically flagged and contacted to ensure they are informed about all of the support available to them.

*They get proactive messaging straight away as soon as they've applied to us, before any decision is made on their application and after as well, to make sure that they're signposted to our advice and counselling services, for example, if they need any advice about funding...*



These individuals are identified in a number of ways, including as a result of their previous involvement in outreach activity, attendance at an open day or based on the information in their application. When these applicants take up a place at the University, they are also provided with additional support during enrolment and for the remainder of their time at the University.

All applicants who receive an offer on the basis of their contextual data are informed that this is the case and are signposted to additional guidance and support services to help them prepare for university life prior, to confirming their university choices.

*When we issue an offer for someone who has met our contextual indicators...they get some information in their offer letter to acknowledge that they've been given an offer based on the fact that we recognise they may not have had the same advantages and some contextual data has been used... Anyone who has got a reduced offer will receive some additional text and guidance, and signposting to relevant areas.*

## Support for contextual admissions students

Some HEIs provide additional support for contextual admissions and other students from disadvantaged or under-represented groups. This may take the form of an enhanced induction, either during the summer prior to entry or at the beginning of the first year, to help ensure contextual admissions students are well-prepared to begin their journey into HE. This is also a useful way to inform students about all the support that is available to them during their time at the institution.

Students also thought that ongoing support was important for ensuring that contextual admissions students settled into university life and were not left to struggle. However, they also highlighted the risk of students feeling singled-out. HEIs are also aware of this tension and try to balance this by providing excellent academic and pastoral support to all. This also mitigates against any stigma experienced by contextual admissions students. There is evidence to suggest that inclusive mainstream programmes, rather than targeted interventions are important for developing a sense of belonging and this maximises the success of all students.<sup>24</sup>

*What we find is that students who come from an under-represented or disadvantaged background tap into [support opportunities] more, but it's not stuff that's just available for those students. We're very deliberate about why we do that and it's because a lot of our feedback is that students don't want to be singled out when they're here. You know, they don't consider themselves to be a special case, they don't consider themselves to be particularly needy or disadvantaged.*

— HEI

HEIs offer a raft of support to their students including access to academic and pastoral tutors, mentoring, peer-assisted learning and bursaries. However, both HEIs and students highlighted that whilst contextual admissions students might be amongst those who would benefit most from this support, they might be less likely to proactively access it. Communications therefore need to be strategically targeted to ensure contextual admissions students are aware of the support available, understand how it would benefit them and are encouraged to take it up. HEIs do this in a variety of ways, including through extended/enhanced inductions and enrolment and targeted email communications to contextual admissions students.

*I think that one of the barriers to people getting support once they get to university is it's a bit awkward to talk about sometimes. It's easier for someone to reach out to you and offer you support, rather than you having to seek out the right person to email and know all of the policies. It would be easier to have that ready when you get there, when you've already got the whole stress of starting university.*

— Student

## Monitoring contextual admissions students

In order to ensure contextual admissions students are not disadvantaged once they enter HE, and to assess the impact of contextual admissions on key performance measures such as continuation rates, attainment and progression, it is useful to monitor contextual admissions students throughout their HE journey. Tracking students can also help HEIs to alleviate any concerns of potential students, schools and staff that contextual admissions students will not be able to cope in high-tariff institutions. However, at present several of the HEIs we spoke to struggle to isolate contextual admissions students within their data systems. They are able to identify students by various characteristics but in many cases data systems do not yet have a marker for contextual admissions students. Even where this is possible at the admissions stage, the contextual admission marker is not always transferred to student tracking systems following enrolment. This is part of wider challenges of fragmented data systems, as outlined on page 8.

One HEI that has successfully created a contextual admissions marker, tracked students' attainment and compared this with non-contextual admissions students. The analysis suggests that contextual admissions students perform just as well as non-contextual admissions students. Widespread communication of this type of evidence is important for promoting the benefits of contextual admissions, including to HEIs who may be more cautious about their adoption.

## Contextual admissions and COVID-19

HEIs expressed concern over how COVID-19 would affect their access and participation activities. At the time of interview, most felt it was too soon to know the full impact of the pandemic on admissions, but they shared some key concerns.

HEIs recognise that, whilst all pupils will suffer from disruption to their education, this would further compound the disadvantage experienced by contextual admission applicants. HEIs have had to stop running the face-to-face elements of their outreach programmes. Without this, HEIs worry that activities will not be as effective. HEIs were mindful of how this could affect admissions via outreach programmes.

They also recognised how the use of predicted grades in place of exam results further disadvantages applicants with contextual data as they are more likely to receive lower predicted grades than their more advantaged peers.<sup>25</sup> HEIs were particularly mindful of this as the exam results approached and whilst they were keen to ensure that they offered leniency during this unprecedented time, they also had to ensure that applicants were capable of successfully participating in their chosen courses and that they were not setting them up to fail.

HEIs plan to continue monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on the number of applications from disadvantaged/under-represented students and their attainment so that they can respond with appropriate interventions.

## The benefits of contextual admissions

The use of contextual admissions contributes towards HEIs achieving their access and participation targets. They are also essential for achieving wider social justice and mobility objectives, including more a representative academic and professional workforce. HEIs reported that their undergraduate student populations are gradually becoming more diverse as a result of adopting this approach. A more diverse student body creates a virtuous circle, where potential students have more role models in HE from backgrounds they can identify with which in turn can encourage them to apply. It can also help to enhance an institution's reputation:

*I think it is having an impact and I think it's having an impact in terms of image and how we present ourselves as an institution who are interested in welcoming diverse students... the more an applicant comes to university and they can see people who they think look like them, or someone comes in as a fresher and they feel more at home in the community or there's student organisations which talk to their needs and interests and aspirations better, it all kind of helps with that cycle.*

— HEI

Students also indicate that contextual admissions could help to encourage them to aspire to high-tariff institution that they may have otherwise considered to be out of their reach. A few students who were unaware of contextual admissions suggested they may have reconsidered their choices if they had understood more about contextual admissions. It is also perceived to help to boost students' confidence, making them feel wanted and supported.

*It gave me the confidence to go. I thought I wasn't going to fit in, but it made me realise, especially these big institutions, they want you there and they are trying their best to help you succeed. It was a massive boost of confidence.*

— Student

In addition, adopting contextual admissions may help to raise awareness of the importance of access and participation within institutions more generally. One HEI explained how work to adopt contextual admissions had contributed to a change in ethos at the institution.

*There are a huge number of people involved in the contextual admissions process... that has a ripple-effect. Student ambassadors, there are hundreds of people working on our schemes, and, all of a sudden, the university is talking about widening participation a lot, and aware of the contextual admissions process.*

— HEI

## 04. THINGS TO CONSIDER

*Contextual admissions have a key role to play in increasing access to the most selective institutions for under-represented groups. We conclude our report by summarising key things HEIs should consider when developing a contextual admissions policy.*

The points below are based on insights and learning shared by the HEIs included in this research. We also indicate the types of support that HEIs would find helpful in developing their use of contextual admissions.

### **Consider how contextual admissions fit with wider access and participation strategies**

Contextual admissions help support the achievement of access and participation objectives by facilitating access to HE, particularly amongst selective institutions, for those with the potential to succeed but who face challenges that impact on the level of educational attainment they can achieve. However, they are not a panacea and work best when they form part of an integrated university-wide strategy for access and participation that seeks to address under-representation and inequalities across the full student life-cycle.

### **Work closely with access and participation teams**

Integrating contextual admissions with outreach programmes helps provide a comprehensive approach to access and participation. Access and participation teams will also have rich insights into under-represented students and the disadvantages they face that can be invaluable in developing a holistic understanding of applicants and their potential.

### **Get the message out to potential students, schools and other stakeholders**

Clearly communicating the rationale for contextual admissions to staff within HEIs is essential to develop their understanding of and support for the policy. Taking a positive and aspirational approach that celebrates success and emphasises the benefits for the institution as well as students is felt to be most effective.

It is also essential that students know about the availability of contextual admissions and, crucially, just what this means in terms of their application to a specific HEI. Consider how to reach potential students who, with contextual admissions, could be successful, but may not be considering a more selective HEI. A range of channels at different stages in the application process should be used, such as through open days and via UCAS. Early communication in schools and colleges is key.

Ensure all students understand the purpose and rationale for contextual admissions to challenge misconceptions about fairness and to prevent those who receive a contextual offer from becoming stigmatised.

It is equally important to ensure key influencers, such as parents, teachers and careers professionals have an accurate understanding of contextual admissions so they can raise awareness of the ways in which students can benefit from them and signpost them to further information.

### **Identify available data and how this could be linked to admissions systems**

Individual-level data is better than area or school-based measures for making contextualised admissions. However, accessing quality individual-level data is often not possible. Support with making the necessary data available across the sector would be particularly valued by HEIs. HEIs would also welcome guidance on which indicators are best to use for different purposes. Effective systems are needed to ‘flag’ students who are eligible for contextual admissions. HEIs should not under-estimate the time and resource that may be needed to achieve this.

### **Share insights and learning with other HEIs**

HEIs make use of contextual data in a number of ways. HEIs would find evidence of the impact of different approaches helpful in making decisions about how best to implement contextual admissions. There is currently limited evidence of what works and so some HEIs have turned to others with more experience to gain insights and learning. Further evaluation, along with opportunities to share good practice and learning between HEIs, including London-based HEIs, would be welcomed.

### **Gather evidence of impact**

Having good evidence of the impact of contextual admissions – on student diversity, attainment and outcomes – is also an important part of communicating about the policy and building support. Setting up systems to track contextual admissions students will help with this, as well as ensuring those students that require further help while on programme are identified and receive support.

### **Ensure effective academic and pastoral support for all students**

Contextual admissions are just one step in the journey of improving access and participation in HE. Under-represented students face many disadvantages that do not disappear once they enter HE. Good quality support should be available to all students. This may include enhanced inductions, mentoring, supplementary tuition and financial support. It is important to ensure support is accessible to under-represented students and they are encouraged to access it where appropriate. Work with students to understand their needs and design support that works for them. A more diverse student body has

implications for all aspects of HE, including curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning.

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