

Discussion Paper: Contextual Admissions

This is one of a number of discussion papers that will be published on the [Commissioner for Fair Access website](#) on key issues relating to fair access. The aim is to bridge the gap between detailed research (where it exists), which is often only accessible to experts, and the wider public conversation, especially in political circles and the media. The hope is that these papers will contribute to, and stimulate, that conversation by presenting data and evidence as accessibly and objectively as possible. Each paper will also include a commentary section by the Commissioner.

This paper considers:

- What current contextual admissions processes are in place within Scotland's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they move towards fulfilling the recommendations from the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA);
- What criteria are used by HEIs to determine eligibility for contextual admissions;
- How these processes might be understood by an applicant;
- The Commissioner's view on contextual admissions.

Background

As SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions) has noted, universities have been using contextual data in admissions for many years to identify applicants with the greatest potential to succeed and to mitigate the impact of socio-economic background, type of school attended and subject choice on attainment and thus progression to higher education ([SPA](#), 2017). A contextual admissions system will include consideration of the context of an applicant's attainment, perhaps giving a lower offer of entry to an applicant who has achieved reasonable results in difficult circumstances in comparison to an applicant with higher grades from a more stable or affluent background.

The [final report](#) of the Commission on Widening Access recognised the importance of contextual admissions. It noted,

the increasing compelling evidence that, within a certain range of attainment, disadvantaged learners consistently achieve the same, or even better, degree classifications than their more advantaged peers with higher grades.... Focussing purely on grades, in isolation from the context in which they are achieved, means that universities are often failing to identify and recruit the best talent. As is repeatedly made clear in the academic literature, it also serves to replicate social inequalities manifesting earlier in the educational journey and unfairly discriminates against bright applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds (CoWA, 2016, p. 36)

In this context, CoWA made two recommendations directly related to contextual admissions:

Recommendation 11: By 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed.

Recommendation 12: All universities should be as open and transparent as possible over their use of access thresholds and wider contextual admissions policies. In particular, they should seek to maximise applications from disadvantaged learners by proactively promoting the access thresholds to the relevant schools, pupils, parents, local authorities and teachers.

Current models of contextual admissions

All HEIs in Scotland operate some form of contextual admissions, with the exception of OU Scotland which allows entry to those with no prior qualifications. Currently, there appear to be 5 different approaches to contextualise admissions being used by institutions, with some employing several models depending upon the nature of the course and level of demand for places.

Table 1: Models of contextual admissions currently employed by Scottish HEIs

The different approaches used by institutions can be categorised into the following models:

Guaranteed offer	Guaranteed offers at a specified rate for applicants who meet contextual eligibility criteria i.e. every eligible applicant is given an offer of entry at a specified level.
Guaranteed rate of offer	Offers at a specified rate for applicants who meet contextual eligibility criteria if deemed suitable candidates —i.e. contextual applicants are in competition with others in terms of suitability and number of places, meeting eligibility criteria does not guarantee an offer, but level of offer is known.
Offer with conditions	Offer is made conditional on attendance at summer school or additional assessment.
Interview/assessment	Lower threshold for interview or additional assessment for those who meet contextual eligibility criteria.
Additional consideration	Additional consideration or lower offers are made to eligible candidates on an individual basis—i.e. each applicant is assessed individually and may or may not receive an offer, the rate is not known beforehand.

In each of these approaches, the information known in advance to an applicant and the resulting offer may vary considerably.

Measures used by HEIs to determine eligibility for contextual admissions

As well as differences in the nature of the contextual offers given to applicants, in relation to those for non-contextual applicants, there are also distinct differences in eligibility criteria for an applicant to be considered for a contextual assessment of their application. Each institution employs a different set of markers of disadvantage/ under-representation for consideration within the admissions process.

The most common measures of disadvantage used by Scottish HEIs are listed below.

1. **Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)**
2. **Care experience—spent time in care/looked after**
3. **Declared caring responsibilities**
4. **Registered refugee or asylum seeker**
5. **Applicant engaged in access programme such as SWAP, institution’s own**
6. **Parental education—parents do not have degree level education (as stated on UCAS form)**
7. **Attended school participating in SFC Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)**
8. **State-funded secondary school**
9. **Percentage of school leavers progressing to HE**
10. **Percentage of pupils achieving specific number of Highers or specific grade combination**
11. **Percentage of pupils from deprived areas (SIMD)**

Table 2: Measures used by HEIs to determine eligibility for contextual admissions

The table below lists those measures typically used by institutions. This list is not exhaustive, as any measures which were employed at just one HEI were excluded for the sake of brevity.

Institution	Area	Individual					School				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	SIMD	Care	Carer	Refugee	Access programme	Parental Ed	SHEP school	State school	Progression to HE	SQA attainment	SIMD20/40 pupil %
Aberdeen	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Abertay Dundee	X	X	X		X	X			X		
Dundee	X	X	X	X	X		X		X		X
Edinburgh Napier	X	X			X		X		X		
Edinburgh	X	X			X		X			X	
Glasgow Caledonian University	X	X	X		X		X				
Glasgow School of Art	X	X			X		X				X
Glasgow	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Heriot-Watt	X	X	X		X		X				
Highlands and Islands		X			X	X	X				
Queen Margaret University	X	X		X	X		X				
Robert Gordon	X	X			X						
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	X	X			X		X				
SRUC		X	X	X	X		X				
St Andrews	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	
Stirling	X	X	X		X		X				
Strathclyde	X	X		X	X		X		X		
West of Scotland		X			X						

The link between eligibility and equality

The criteria being used to define access students will impact directly upon what equality looks like i.e. the percentage of entrants required to reflect the population. For example, the Commission on Widening Access' target of 20% used SIMD 20 ([Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#)) as a measure of disadvantage and aimed for proportional representation of that group amongst HE entrants.

In 2012/13, of all pupils in S1 to S4 in Scottish schools:

- 21% were resident in SIMD 20 areas

Thus, the target of 20% for this group nationally, appears to be fair and reflective of the size of the population under consideration.

If, however, registration for Free School Meals is used in combination with SIMD to identify access students this would impact on what could be considered fair representation. For the same population of school pupils:

- 16% were in receipt of Free School Meals
- 30% were in receipt of Free School Meals OR in SIMD 20 areas
- 8% were in SIMD 20 areas AND in receipt of Free School Meals

At an institutional level, if a contextual approach requires applicants to have both SIMD 20 residency **and** claim Free School Meals, only 8% of school pupils would meet those requirements, so fair representation within HE would be 8%. If a contextual admissions system provides contextual offers for those in SIMD 20 **or** in receipt of Free School Meals, then fair representation for this wider group would equate to 30% of entrants, in line with the population of potential applicants.

Many institutions use a basket of measures, including SIMD, to assess contextual admissions eligibility and to recognise a broad range of disadvantaged applicants. Consideration should be given to the level of representation that could be expected for each measure; the number of potential applicants who might meet eligibility criteria and, therefore, the ambition of any entry target in relation to that group.

The Commission defined entrants from deprived backgrounds as entrants from the bottom 20% of areas according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), stating that despite some limitations, SIMD is currently the most suitable measure of disadvantage for the purposes of measuring progress and setting targets. The Commission recognised the advantages of a more individualised approach and recommended that a robust set of measures should be developed to supplement SIMD.

SFC-funded research by the University of Durham will provide guidance on the robustness and effectiveness of the possible measures employed by HEIs to assess eligibility for contextual offers. This will be available in Autumn 2017. The Scottish Government is also convening a working group to ensure delivery of CoWA Recommendation 31 (develop a consistent and robust set of measures to identify access students) as reported in its recent update on progress, [Implementing a 'Blueprint for Fairness'](#). Both should provide additional tools and evidence for institutions to employ within their contextual admissions processes.

Finally, eligibility criteria also needs to be considered within a national context. If resources to support access are directed towards an increasingly wide, and often differing, group of potential students, then there is a real risk that our collective efforts are no longer focused on improving access for those who are most deprived and furthest away from HE at present. Consequently, we may see limited progress for this group.

Contextual admissions from the learner's perspective

If contextual admissions and access thresholds are to be effective, it is vital that they can be understood by potential applicants. Ideally, a learner should be able to understand, easily, if they meet eligibility criteria for contextual admissions and what that would mean for them in practice—guaranteed offer, guaranteed interview, specified level of offer, for example. Whilst transparency and clarity are important for all applicants, this is especially true for the learners contextual admissions processes have been designed to support. They are often the most lacking in informed support and guidance, with family and peers unfamiliar with application processes and requirements. There will likely be very good reasons for the differing contextual admissions models employed by institutions and the different eligibility criteria, reflecting their institutional priorities, local geography and historical context. Nonetheless, these variations make things difficult to understand from the point of view of the applicant. For each of their five choices made through UCAS, an applicant may have to navigate different eligibility criteria and processes:

- * They might be considered for a contextual offer at one institution but not another;
- * They might be given a much reduced offer for one programme but not another;
- * A third choice may stipulate attendance at a summer school;
- * Websites might use terms such as 'contextual offer', 'minimum entry requirements', 'adjusted offer' or 'supported offer' to describe similar processes;
- * For some programmes and institutions they may be able to ascertain the offer they are likely to receive before applying, for others they will not.

This is likely to be confusing, even off-putting, for someone considering an application to higher education study.

There may also be a group of people who remain unaware of the existence of contextual admissions and who do not, therefore, make an application because they do not believe their attainment or predicted attainment will be sufficient for admission when judged against standard entry criteria.

Commissioner's commentary

'Contextualised admissions', in other words reducing the entry grades that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have to meet, are a key weapon in the fight to secure fairer access. But the term itself is opaque, even obscure. Comparatively well informed people may struggle to understand what it means. The students who are the target beneficiaries of 'contextualised admissions' are likely to encounter even greater difficulty. The first need, therefore, is for up-to-date and **accessible language**. 'Contextualised admissions', and other topics related to fair access, need to be described in 'plain English' that everyone can understand.

The second need is a more **transparent and consistent framework** for 'contextualised admissions'. Universities - rightly - guard their independence. This explains the variety of factors that they take into account and also the weight these factors are given. Also the adjusted (i.e. lower) offers made to disadvantaged students, the mechanism used in 'contextualised admissions', often need to take into account the needs, and potential, of particular groups of students as well as the requirements of particular subjects and courses.

But what may appear from the perspective of universities to be a fine-tuned, and customised, set of adjusted offers may appear to potential applicants as a jungle of different offers, with different grade reductions and subject to different conditions, without apparent rhyme and reason. In some cases they will be entitled to receive unconditional adjusted offers if they meet the criteria; in other cases those offers will be subject to certain conditions, usually attending a summer school; in others again disadvantage will simply be taken into account in judging individual applications. It is a system designed for universities, with the very best intentions of course, not for potential students.

The impact of 'contextualised admissions', how many students benefit, especially when universities merely take account of selected indicators of social disadvantage in reaching individual decisions is also difficult to assess. This raises issues of how to measure progress and also public accountability, if the effectiveness of 'contextualised admissions' in meeting institutional and national targets on fair access is to be compared to that of other fair access initiatives.

The third need is **greater clarity about the rationale**, educational as well as operational, for 'contextualised admissions'. In some cases the emphasis is on meeting targets for increasing the number of students from disadvantaged groups (and especially those living in SIMD 20 areas). That is clearly not a sufficient rationale. In others the emphasis is on admitting more disadvantaged students, but only if they can match the 'success' rates of their more privileged peers (in terms of continuation and degree outcomes). Understandably, although sadly, universities are reluctant to risk their positions in league tables. There is less evidence that 'contextualised admissions' have always been grounded in serious work on determining the thresholds that students need to meet, in terms of skills, knowledge and aptitude, to benefit from higher education. To do so, of course, would establish a direct link between 'contextualised admissions' and 'access thresholds', another key recommendation of the Commission on Widening Access.

Questions for HEIs

Consistency

- Could a set of key principles underlying contextual admissions in general, and for each of the models, be developed by the sector? For example, in what circumstances is it appropriate to make an offer conditional on attendance at a summer school? Are there costs involved and how might these be overcome for disadvantaged learners? Might it be possible to undertake transition/preparation aspects of pre-entry or summer programmes as online modules?
- Could a common terminology be agreed upon and employed by the sector to allow applicants, family and guidance staff to better understand the process and how it can facilitate entry to HE for under-represented groups and disadvantaged learners?

Transparency

- Could a sector wide statement or kite marking system be developed to signpost applicants, family and guidance staff to information on contextual admissions?
- How can the sector and individual institutions ensure their contextual admissions processes are understood by prospective applicants and those supporting them?
- Would it be helpful to develop an interactive eligibility map for applicants and, if so, who is best placed to take forward that project?

Impact

- How should the sector best evaluate the impact of contextual admissions processes? How should individual institutions measure and report on impact and progress?
- Are institutions clear about the rationale underpinning their eligibility criteria for contextual admissions and do these relate to their institutional targets and priorities in relation to equality?



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