

Dear Lynn,

I am writing in my capacity as Chair of the Universities Scotland Admissions Working Group, which is taking forward sector-agreed recommendations in relation to admissions as set out in [Working to widen access](#).

As part of our work to monitor the implementation of these recommendations, Universities Scotland recently issued a survey to the sector about contextualisation in admissions and related matters, and how these support widening access. This survey was partly to gather information that had been requested of us by Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and School Leaders Scotland, and partly to gather information to help us monitor the implementation of *Working to widen access*. This letter is to update you on our findings to date.

Some of this material requires quite extended discussion in order to convey the current range of approaches in the sector. We believe that these approaches are justified and reflect the care with which admissions colleagues treat fundamental questions that relate to people's lives. We are also, however, committed to rationalising and presenting as clearly as possible these processes in the future where it is fair and makes sense to do so.

Information requested by the Scottish Government concerned the number of applicants who currently benefit from contextualised approaches to admissions (in terms of being considered for reduced offers). This is addressed below, but we have also taken this opportunity to inform the Scottish Government about other survey findings where these provide a broader sense of progress to date with implementing agreed sector actions.

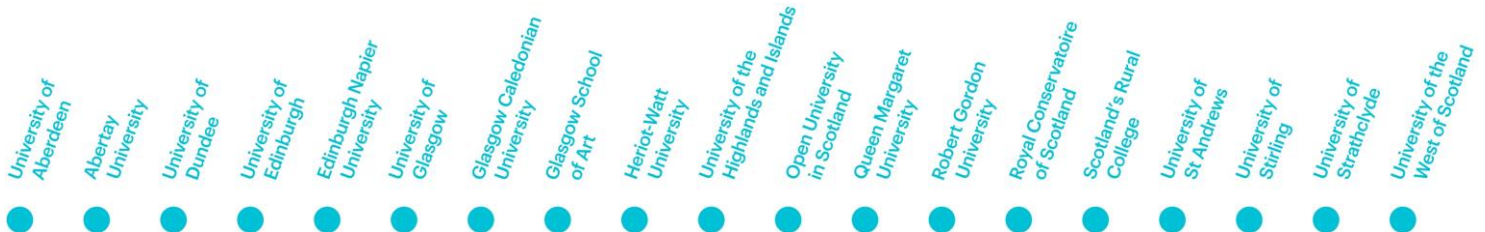
We received responses from 17 of the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland.

Current practice in contextualised admissions

All responding institutions said that they operate contextualised admissions. Most institutions publish their contextualised admissions policies online and others are reviewing their policies with the view to publishing them on completion.

Policies and the way they operate vary considerably across the sector. Different institutions use different baskets of contextual indicators to support widening access and applicants through the admissions process, not always or only by making reduced offers.

All responses show a sense of progress and evolution. Several institutions are reviewing their policies with a view to expanding current practice. For example, Glasgow School of Art currently applies contextual factors to the application process rather than to offers, which they are considering as part of their wider work on admissions. Likewise, the University of Stirling will incorporate its approach to contextualised admissions into a broader revised admissions policy later this year, which will support the University to meet its commitments to CoWA targets as well as SHEP (Schools for Higher Education Programme) and care-experienced student recruitment.



Institutions were asked to provide data on the number and proportion of Scotland-domiciled entrants in academic years 2016/17 and 2017/18 to whom contextual indicators were applied, who were made offers, and who firmly accepted their offers. This question aimed to gain a sense of how many applicants benefit from contextualised approaches to admissions in terms of receiving reduced offers.

From the information provided, it is clear that we are not in a position to provide comparable data systematically, noting the complexities of individualised admissions and the need to take into account differing approaches. Institutions are working on systems and processes to improve reporting for the future. The diverse range of approaches within institutions to supporting applicants, to flags and record-keeping means that in order to aggregate figures across the sector reporting across all contextual flags may be the best option in the future. The information in this letter gives a sense of this diversity.

Nonetheless, data provided at individual institution level show progress and improving numbers or percentages of Scotland-domiciled applicants with contextual factors getting offers. Outcome Agreements capture this in more detail.

For example, in 2017/18 at the University of St Andrews 42% of Scotland-domiciled applicants had a contextual marker and 47% of entrants had at least one contextual flag, an increase of 4% and 8% respectively compared with the previous year. At the University of Edinburgh in 2017/18 over 52% of accepted offers were held by applicants with a contextual flag, a 2% increase from the previous year. In Strathclyde, in 2017/18, 28% of the Scottish domiciled applicants had a contextual marker; within the offer holders this was 50%. At Glasgow Caledonian University, 70% of applicants with a contextual marker received an offer; 53% of these applicants received a reduced offer.

Supporting applicants through the application and admissions processes

Apart from making reduced offers, all institutions said that they also use contextual flags to identify applicants who may need particular support through the application and admissions processes, and each institution has several measures in place to do this and to support students post-entry. Some of the examples we were given include:

- using contextual data and information as well as other factors (including protected characteristics) to identify applicants most likely to benefit from targeted support;
- offering free accommodation for the first year of studies to SIMD20 applicants, as well as 365 day accommodation contracts for the full duration of studies for care-experienced students, and guarantees of places in university-managed accommodation;
- transition support, e.g. by working with students during the summer following offers;
- individual communications to contextually-indicated applicants offering support;
- support to attend summer schools;
- e-mentoring and other peer-to-peer support mechanisms prior to and following entry, as well as additional induction activities;
- bursaries for access students;
- financial support to help cover travel expenses;
- information, advice and guidance about the application and admissions process specifically aimed at different groups of learners, communicated through a range of outreach and other activities;
- on-course support, e.g. prioritising WP groups for some study abroad and global leadership experiences, and extra support to take part in extra- and co-curricular activities.

Chances of receiving an offer

Institutions were asked whether contextually-indicated applicants who meet minimum entry requirements (or the entry requirements set out in their offer) have a greater chance of receiving an offer compared to non-contextually-indicated applicants. Institutions commented on their approach to offer-making to describe in more detail the impact of contextual flags on the application process for applicants with contextual markers.

In general, contextually-indicated applicants do receive offers at the minimum entry requirement level. In some cases an offer will be made even if the minimum entry requirement is not met – e.g. if an applicant has experienced adverse circumstances during their school exams, or in some other way demonstrates great potential. Contextual flagging allows institutions to identify learners from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds with potential for success at university, and to respond to this not only in admissions but also in terms of academic and pastoral support post-entry. At some institutions, applications from contextually-indicated applicants are separated out and looked at as distinct groups of applicants, whereas at other institutions they are not, so again approaches do differ. One institution explained that contextual flagging does not result in either an automatic offer or a lower offer – all applicants have to at least meet the minimum entry requirements, and offers below this level will not be made.

In some cases institutions may only be able to prioritise contextually-indicated applicants for invitation to interview/audition (rather than offer), which is another way of increasing the likelihood that they will receive an offer.

Institutions were then asked if there is a greater likelihood that contextually-indicated applicants who have been made a conditional offer (compared to non-contextually-indicated applicants holding conditional offers) will gain a place even if conditions are not met. In general, applicants who fail to meet the conditions of their offers will not be automatically rejected, and near-miss applicants will be considered on a case-by-case basis, which might include (for example) referral of the application back to academic decision-makers or a senior leadership panel or an admissions management committee, so there are often opportunities for those applicants to gain entry even though they have not met their offer conditions. Whether such an applicant actually gains entry may depend on the availability of places at the confirmation stage of the UCAS process. In some cases, near-miss applicants may be set additional work or offered another route to ensure they are adequately prepared for study. One respondent said that if an applicant has taken part and done well in their summer school for access, or in a bridging programme, they can still gain entry even if other offer conditions are not met. Several respondents noted that the flexibility they are able to offer to applicants who do not meet conditions is linked to the constraint of capped numbers in Scotland.

Progress with implementing ‘minimum entry requirements’

The Commission on Widening Access recommended that institutions set access thresholds, which we have referred to as minimum entry requirements. More than half of institutions (9/17) currently set minimum entry requirements (as distinct from standard or typical entry requirements), and some have done so for several years; others are working towards establishing minimum entry requirements and are on track for delivery on this in 2019, to support entrants in 2020/21. This is in line with the timescale set out in *Working to widen access*. Once minimum entry requirements are in place, institutions are planning to guarantee offers for care-experienced learners entering 2020/21 who meet those requirements.

Guaranteed offers for care-experienced applicants

At least 10 institutions currently guarantee offers (or, where necessary, interview/audition) for care-experienced applicants who meet the relevant entry criteria, which is generally the minimum entry requirement. Institutions which do not currently guarantee offers already have this issue under consideration and are planning to introduce guaranteed offers once minimum entry requirements are in place, as stated in *Working to widen access*. Universities Scotland has written to Who Cares? Scotland to clarify that care-experienced learners do receive additional consideration in the admissions process and will continue to do so until institutions have set minimum entry requirements. Once minimum entry requirements have been set, care-experienced applicants who meet those requirements will be guaranteed an offer (or, where necessary, an invitation to interview/audition). Across the sector, there is a presumption that a care-experienced applicant will be accepted if the institution believes that they have the potential to complete their chosen course of study successfully, with appropriate support.

Diversity of entry qualifications

Institutions were asked what plans they have for including a wider diversity of qualifications in their entry requirements, reflecting the wide range of flexible pathways available to learners. The very clear response we got from institutions was to say that a very wide range of qualifications from around the world, and the increasing diversity of qualifications in Scotland, are already recognised, considered and accepted, and that in assessing an application the entire educational profile is taken into account to support decision-making. Institutions continually monitor and respond to changes in the qualifications landscape and have the necessary expertise to cope with changes in this area; accepted entry qualifications are also kept under regular review.

Several institutions mentioned Foundation Apprenticeships specifically as an example of an entry qualification newly accepted, or being considered. One institution also mentioned partial HN qualifications topped up with summer school credits, and other part-time programmes for adult learners that lead to admission to degree programmes. Universities are therefore able not only to recognise new qualifications but also to combine existing qualifications in innovative ways if that would benefit an applicant in demonstrating their qualification for entry.

Non-academic factors

CoWA recommended that SFC should review the use of non-academic factors in the admissions process, such as UCAS personal statements, to ensure these support access. We therefore issued a range of questions about non-academic factors on behalf of SFC to support its work and generate information in this area.

In summary, all institutions use non-academic factors. There is variation between institutions and between courses in the extent to which different factors influence decision-making. All institutions, for example, said that they consider personal statements and references, whereas interviews, auditions, work experience, portfolios and extracurricular activities are used more selectively. Institutions will consider all academic and non-academic information in applications together with contextual data and contextual information as part of an holistic approach to admissions decision-making. The influence of each different factor varies by programme, as do entry requirements and subject-specific grades etc.

Non-academic factors provide a more rounded picture of applicants and their achievements, and a more holistic basis for decision-making especially in more competitive programmes where the number of highly qualified applicants is much higher than the number of available places.

Supporting applicants to demonstrate non-academic factors in their applications is done in different ways. For example, applicants to medicine and dentistry via Reach, and applicants residing in SIMD20/40 areas, have 10% added to their UKCAT scores at some schools of medicine and dentistry, to aid their ability to reach the threshold for interview. Work experience placements are also obtained for some applicants if they have difficulty accessing these personally. Institutions also provide personal statement workshops and online advice.

Institutions also host dedicated projects, summer schools, online mentoring, interview preparation, pre-examination preparation seminars and workshops to support applicants, and have dedicated staff for supporting care-experienced applicants. Some institutions also provide CPD for teachers and guidance counsellors in schools and colleges, and institutions also take part in various fairs and exhibitions across Scotland, the UK and further afield offering general advice on applications and admissions. Applicants can ask for advice on issues they are unsure of. Open days are another useful way of connecting with potential applicants. Our Admissions Working Group will be looking at the use of personal statements to ensure that approaches do not unfairly advantage learners from advantaged backgrounds.

Work experience

The final two questions in the survey were put to us by School Leaders Scotland, who have an interest in these issues, and concerned whether institutions:

- require work experience for vocational courses; *and*
- give credit for relevant work experience if this is mentioned in a personal statement (even if it is not a requirement).

Work experience is sometimes included in entry requirements for vocational courses, but there is variation by subject. Where work experience is required, it tends to be for highly selective professional programmes like medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry and education. Institutions that offer these programmes tend not to stipulate a set period of work experience, and they are also flexible in terms of the range of work experience they will accept (providing it is relevant). Also, in most cases work experience mentioned in UCAS applications is not given credit weighting. This reflects an acknowledgement that applicants may not have equal opportunities to participate in similar amounts or types of work experience.

Follow up

We have agreed that our Admissions Working Group will continue to drive progress on the admissions actions to which we committed in WTWA, and will work with institutions in considering how to take into account the findings from the survey. Implementation of our other actions will be monitored in other ways, e.g. via the National Articulation Forum.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like further information about our survey results, or any other aspect of our work in relation to widening access.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Sally Mapstone