Nuffield Foundation

Fair Admission to Universities in England: Improving Policy and Practice

Public Report

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1. Report summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a Nuffield Foundation funded research project which set out to explore how universities in England offering courses with high academic entry requirements and a high demand for places conceptualise fair admissions in policy terms and operationalise fair admissions in practice. The report draws on three main data sources:

1) In-depth interviews with university Heads of Admission at 17 HEIs, both Old (pre-1992) and New (post-1992), located throughout England. These interviews were conducted during the 2017/18 academic year and explored the philosophical underpinnings and overarching goals of universities' undergraduate admissions policies.

2) In-depth interviews with 51 admissions selectors at the same 17 HEIs, responsible for the day to day work of selecting applicants for a range of Science programmes and Arts programmes encompassing the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts. These interviews, also conducted during the 2017/18 academic year, explored how institutional policies were enacted in practice with a particular focus on the ways in which selectors sought to differentiate between strong, weak and borderline applicants.

3) The Access and Participation Plans produced by 25 higher-tariff universities in England, including eleven of the institutions in our interview sample, which were submitted to the Office for Students (OfS) in 2019 and look ahead to the period 2020/21 to 2024/25.

Our analysis of these data focused on the extent to which the undergraduate admissions policies and practices of universities with high academic entry requirements and a high demand for places aligned with each of two competing perspectives on fair access and admissions:

Two competing perspectives on fair access and admissions

i.   The traditional 'meritocratic *equality* of opportunity' model, which holds that university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of social background in accordance with the principle of *procedural fairness* interpreted as equal treatment.

ii.   An alternative 'meritocratic *equity* of opportunity' model, which holds that prospective students' qualifications should be judged in light of the socioeconomic circumstances in which they were obtained in the pursuit of a greater degree of *distributive fairness* with regard to the allocation of university places.

Key findings from interviews with Heads of Admission

The interviews with Heads of Admission (HoAs) showed that fair access and admission was framed largely with reference to the traditional meritocratic *equality* of opportunity paradigm. More specifically:

➢ These HEIs sought to admit the "best students", defined as those most likely to succeed at degree level, regarded as being evidenced first and foremost by high levels of previous and predicted academic attainment in school examinations. Fairness was defined primarily with reference to the procedural justice principles of transparency and consistency, with the latter interpreted as requiring that all applicants should be treated the same. These universities relied heavily on predicted A-level grades as indicators of 'merit' despite an awareness that A-level grades were often over-predicted. As a result, many HEIs ultimately admitted a substantial number of offer holders who failed to meet the academic entry requirements as "near-misses" during the August confirmation period.

➢ The emphasis on meritocratic *equality* of opportunity and procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment was held in tension with a secondary commitment to the competing paradigm of *equitable* opportunity in the pursuit of distributive fairness. While all of the Old (pre-1992) universities in the sample had some form of contextualised admissions policy in recognition of the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on prior academic achievement, only half of these institutions routinely reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants and instead gave additional consideration to these applicants where they were projected to meet standard academic entry requirements. Where entry requirements were reduced, this was typically by just one or two grades.

➢ Most HoAs at both Old and New universities reported resistance by some academic staff members to reducing academic entry requirements for socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants on the grounds that doing so would inevitably set those students up to fail. Many HoAs also indicated that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate to the task of ensuring that contextually admitted students would be appropriately supported to fulfil their potential at the institution. In order to resolve the tension between interviewees' adherence to the meritocratic *equality* of opportunity paradigm on the one hand, and their sympathy for competing arguments in favour of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity on the other, many HoAs were aware that an overhaul of support for contextually disadvantaged students would be needed to ensure that potential was reliably converted into achievement at university.

Key findings from interviews with admissions selectors

The interviews with admissions selectors also showed that day-to-day admissions practices were informed principally by the meritocratic *equality* of opportunity model. More specifically:

➢ Selectors were seeking to identify applicants with most potential to succeed on the degree programme, evidenced first and foremost by high levels of prior and predicted attainment in line with typically high formal academic entry requirements at A-level, often coupled with similarly high informal expectations regarding attainment at GCSE. Many selectors were also looking, often secondarily, for evidence of applicants' understanding of, motivation

towards, and suitability for the degree programme in question, as evidenced by personal statements, teacher references, and for some programmes portfolios of work and performance at interview.

➢ Most but not all selectors voiced a concern for meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and the associated goal of distributive fairness, and sought to evaluate applications with a mind to the impact of applicants' socioeconomic circumstances on their opportunities and achievements to date. Correspondingly, three-quarters of Science selectors and two-thirds of all Arts selectors at Old universities reported using contextual data to inform admissions decisions in some form or other, involving contextually disadvantaged applicants either being given extra consideration for admission to the programme subject to meeting standard entry requirements, or being admitted on the basis of a contextual offer involving a small reduction in academic entry requirements.

➢ Few selectors reported the existence of, or scope to develop, teaching and learning practices that could support contextually disadvantaged learners admitted with lower grades to bridge gaps in their knowledge and skills in order to successfully complete their programmes. This, coupled with the need to select a small number of applicants from a large and highly qualified applicant pool, meant that concerns for ensuring equitable opportunities in pursuit of distributive fairness tended to be outweighed by the dictates of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm.

Key findings from Access and Participation Plans

The Access and Participation Plans (APPs) for 2020/21 to 2024/5 submitted in 2019 to the Office for Students by England's 25 higher-tariff universities revealed that there had been a shift in institutional thinking on fair access and admissions since our interviews in 2017/18. These universities had begun to move away from the traditional meritocratic *equality* of opportunity model towards the meritocratic *equity* of opportunity framework. More specifically:

➢ In response to the challenge laid down by the OfS to "rethink merit" in pursuit of the goal of equitable access within a generation, all providers had committed to much more ambitious widening access targets than ever before. Although some providers' ambitions fell short of the OfS's target of a 3:1 ratio of POLAR quintile 5 to quintile 1 entrants by 2024/25, this was justified by reference to concerns about the adequacy of POLAR as a means of identifying genuinely socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, especially in London.

➢ Many providers identified the dearth of highly qualified individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds as a continuing obstacle to widening participation at their institution. However, the APPs indicated that there had been a shift in organisational thinking since we interviewed admissions personnel in 2017/18 away from interpreting lower attainment in terms of individual deficit and towards a more structural understanding of social inequalities in school attainment. Most providers also recognised that they had a contribution to make in closing the school attainment gap through varied forms of outreach work. All providers now reported some form of contextualised admissions policy, with many institutions having recently introduced a policy of reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants. Only four of the twenty-five higher-tariff universities stated that

they would continue to require that contextually disadvantaged applicants meet standard academic entry requirements.

➢ Answering the OfS's call to address inequalities in the continuation and attainment rates of admitted students, in addition to access issues, all providers acknowledged that they had a major role to play in ensuring the success of their students at degree level, especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds. Correspondingly, all providers had committed to a range of initiatives designed to significantly improve the social and academic inclusion of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups as a means of helping to ensure these students fulfil their potential at university.

Recommendations for universities in relation to fair admissions

Recognising the distance already travelled by higher-tariff universities in response to the OfS's call to "rethink merit" in relation to admissions, and the OfS's call to take on a greater level of responsibility for supporting students to succeed at degree level, the following recommendations set out how institutions can continue on the path towards meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and a correspondingly greater degree of distributive fairness with respect to the allocation of university places.

Recommendation 1. Universities should aim to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data on the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants to inform admissions decisions. Universities that have pioneered contextual admissions practices have increased their ambition over time, progressing from the initial use of contextual data to give extra consideration to disadvantaged applicants subject to standard entry requirements, to the introduction of reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants. In some cases, these universities have subsequently increased the size of the reduction in academic entry requirements for such applicants, or rolled out contextual offer making previously limited to widening access programme participants to contextually disadvantaged applicants in general. However, many universities have only recently begun to dip their toes in the water. It is understandable and appropriate that universities should engage with contextualised admissions in a somewhat cautious manner given the current lack of resources and systems invested in ensuring that contextually disadvantaged students are supported appropriately to succeed on their degree programmes. But it is equally important that universities set an intention to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions over time in the pursuit of distributive fairness goals.

Recommendation 2. Universities should commit to the contextualised assessment of all selection criteria used formally or informally to reach admissions decisions including grades achieved at GCSE, scores on additional entrance tests, personal statements, references, portfolios of work and performances at interview. It is widely recognised that there is a need to contextualise such information, and some universities are already doing so, but often on a piecemeal and informal basis. Ensuring that applicants' achieved GCSE and AS-level grades are contextualised before this information is used to rank applicants is particularly important to ensure that high potential applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are shown to be competitive applicants within the wider pool. Formalising the requirement to contextualise all parts of the application is crucial for distributive fairness, but would also adhere to the procedural fairness principles of transparency and consistency in decision-making.

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Recommendation 3. Universities should continue to develop currently nascent academic support systems and newly inclusive approaches to teaching and learning for the benefit of all students but especially those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Developing effective ways of supporting students to fulfil their potential at university is critical to ensure the wider and fairer access gains made at the point of admission are successfully translated into rates of completion of achievement at degree level for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups that are on a par with those of other student groups. This will require a cultural shift away from a deficit model of student under-achievement towards a model which recognises and celebrates the fundamental role universities have to play as teaching and learning institutions. Universities should carefully monitor the effectiveness of their developing support and inclusion initiatives in 'real time' and should seek to share effective practice and lessons learned with the wider sector.

Recommendation 4. Universities should proactively communicate to prospective students and the wider public their commitment to contextualised admissions policies and to inclusive teaching and learning practices. Universities have an important role to play in making the case for more equitable access to and achievement in higher education. By setting out a clear commitment to the values of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and distributive fairness, universities have the opportunity to forge new reputations for excellence in promoting social mobility, and in supporting all students to achieve their full potential.

Recommendations for national policy makers in relation to fair admissions

The findings of our research also point to a number of recommendations for national policy makers in relation to fair admissions.

Recommendation 5. National policy makers should facilitate the shift to a post-qualifications admissions (PQA) system in order to ensure that admissions decisions are made on the basis of achieved rather than predicted grades, and to make it more possible for institutions to select applicants with a mind to distributive fairness. Currently, the unreliability and frequent over-prediction of A-level grades results in some applicants receiving offers of places on the basis of predicted grades that they subsequently fail to achieve and being admitted anyway as 'near-miss' (or sometimes as 'far-miss') applicants. For offer holders who go on to achieve A-level grades that meet the academic entry requirements for their course, the over-prediction of their A-level grades may have placed them higher in the ranking of applicants than was really warranted. Although it is not entirely clear which social groups are favoured by the current system in which most applications are judged on the basis of predicted A-level grades, and although some universities seek to prioritise applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented groups when reviewing 'near-miss' cases, it is probable that the current system favours those from more advantaged backgrounds whose families and schools are more attuned to the value of generously estimating probable A-level achievement. In any case, the shift to a post-qualifications admissions system would enable institutions to make selection decisions for a single gathered field of applicants, based on accurate information about their attainment, making it easier to select applicants in accordance with distributive fairness goals.

Recommendation 6. National policy makers should replace the area-based widening access metric POLAR with individual-level measures of socioeconomic disadvantage and should make this information available to universities so that it can be used to inform individual admissions decisions. In their APPs, many providers point to empirical evidence which shows that most socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals do not live in POLAR quintile 1 areas, and that many individuals who do live in POLAR quintile 1 areas are not from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, the use of POLAR and other area-level measures to set and monitor progress towards widening access targets, and correspondingly to target widening access initiatives including contextualised admissions policies, may mean that any apparent progress on widening access is more illusory than real. National policy makers should revise the regulations governing Access and Participation Plans to ensure a focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals rather than on those who happen to reside in low HE participation areas, and should ensure that individual-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage such as information from the National Pupil Database on individual students' free school meal status is made available to universities via UCAS so that it can be factored into admissions decisions

Recommendation 7. National policy makers should require universities to record and report on the number of applications they receive from prospective students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and on the admissions decisions made in relation to these applications. Currently very little is known about the socioeconomic characteristics of individual university applicants (as distinct from the characteristics of the areas in which they live) and less still is known about how socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals fare in the admissions process, including whether or not they receive contextual offers involving a reduction in standard academic entry requirements. Requiring universities to record and share more detailed applications and admissions data using individual-level measures of socioeconomic background would enable universities and policy makers to more accurately monitor their progress on widening access.

Recommendation 8. National policy makers should continue to facilitate the development and dissemination of the growing evidence base supporting good practice in the use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions and in the use of academic support systems and inclusive teaching and learning practices to ensure that students from all backgrounds realise their potential once at university. The recently created organisation for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) should take a highly proactive role in publicising the existing evidence base, developing models of good practice, and supporting individual institutions to collect and share emerging evidence from their own experiences of developing contextualised admissions policies and more supportive and inclusive learning practices.

2. Background to the research

Achieving fairer access and admissions has been an implicit goal of national widening participation policies in England ever since the Robbins Report published in the 1960s advocated the expansion of higher education (HE) on the grounds that "all young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a fulltime course in higher education should have the opportunity to do so".[1] Dramatic increases in the HE participation rate during the 1960s and 1990s,[2] and further steady increases since 2000,[3] have created a mass HE system in which half of all young people participate at some point between the ages of 17 and 30.[4] However, the socioeconomic gap in rates of HE participation has been slow to close, especially at England's most academically selective universities.[5] Currently, comparatively advantaged young people who were *not* in receipt of free school meals during secondary school are three and a half times more likely than their free school meal recipient peers to enrol in a higher-tariff university.[6] Similarly, according to the POLAR metric currently favoured by the Office for Students (OfS), young people living in areas of England with the highest rates of young participation in HE are five times more likely to enrol at higher-tariff universities than their counterparts from low HE participation areas.[7]

The OfS has recently set challenging new targets for England's most academically selective universities, calling on them to deliver a rapid reduction in the ratio of young entrants from areas with the highest and lowest rates of HE participation to 3:1 by 2024/25 and to 1:1 by 2038/39.[8] In light of current figures and recent trends, achieving these targets will be no mean feat. The single biggest obstacle to widening access to higher-tariff universities is the persistence of socioeconomic inequalities in prior academic attainment. Young people in receipt of free school meals in England, for example, have lower GCSE attainment than non-FSM pupils on average, are only around half as likely to continue in upper secondary education, and are one-third as likely to have achieved key stage five qualifications equivalent to three A-levels at grades ABB or better by age 19.[9] As such, young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely than their more advantaged peers to meet the high academic entry requirements set by the most academically selective universities.

The high bar set for entry to the most academically selective universities is largely informed by the traditional 'meritocratic *equality* of opportunity' model of fair access to higher education which holds that, for reasons of both efficiency and social justice, university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of their social background. According to this model, a fair admissions process is one in which all prospective students are judged impartially against the same appropriately demanding academic criteria in line with an interpretation of *procedural fairness* as requiring all individuals to be treated alike. This emphasis on equal treatment throughout the admissions processes is deemed to be warranted on the basis that individuals have enjoyed equality of opportunity to demonstrate their ability through the formal examinations system regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances or other ascribed (as opposed to achieved) characteristics.

However, as critics of the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model have pointed out, genuine equality of opportunity to translate ability and effort into academic achievement is more myth than reality in societies characterised by a high degree of socioeconomic inequality.[10] Young people with the most economic, cultural and social capital will tend to find it easier to meet high academic entry requirements than their less well-resourced but no less able and

hardworking peers. As such, critics of the traditional meritocratic model have argued that fair admissions requires that prospective students' qualifications be judged in light of the socioeconomic circumstances in which they were obtained. This emphasis on meritocratic *equity* of opportunity, rather than ostensible equality of opportunity, does not do away with the notion of merit, but stresses that attempts to measure merit must be contextualised. The concern is not with ensuring procedural fairness in the sense of equal treatment, but with achieving *distributive fairness*, that is to say, a more even and hence a more socially just allocation of resources.

In order to achieve its goal of eliminating socioeconomic inequalities of access to England's most academically selective universities within a generation, the OfS has explicitly called on higher-tariff universities to engage in a process of "rethinking how merit is judged in admissions".[11] The OfS's questioning of the traditional meritocratic model of admissions contrasts sharply with the approach of its predecessor the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and will require universities to engage more deeply than ever before with questions of distributive as well as procedural fairness in relation to admissions policy and practice.

This chapter of the report summarises previous theoretical and empirical scholarship on the topic of fairness as it relates to HE access and admissions in general and to the most selective and prestigious institutions in particular. Section one of this chapter discusses competing theoretical conceptions of fairness in relation to access and admission to higher education. It begins by discussing what has become the dominant theoretical paradigm, that of meritocratic *equality* of opportunity and related notions of procedural fairness, before considering a range of critiques of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm, and going on to discuss a competing conceptualisation of fairness, that of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity, which emphasises distributive fairness. Section two of this chapter reviews the findings of a range of prior studies of fair access and admissions in England and the wider UK. It begins by considering statistical analyses of national access and admissions data which have examined the extent to which social inequalities of access to higher education are consistent with the notion of meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness conceived of as equal treatment. It then considers studies which have explored the data from the perspective of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and distributive fairness to consider the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on the capacity of individuals to demonstrate merit through formal qualifications, and the ways in which contextualised approaches to the assessment of merit which take socioeconomic circumstances into account can increase distributive fairness. Finally we turn to a consideration of qualitative studies which have drawn on institutionally-authored policy documents, material published on university websites, and interviews with university staff responsible for developing and implementing institutional fair access and admissions policies at universities in England and the wider UK.

2.1 Theories of fair access and admission to higher education

The expansion of higher education (HE) in England over the course of the last six decades has created a mass HE system. In contrast to an elite system in which HE participation is restricted to a privileged few,[12] opportunities to participate in a mass system are more widely available. However, in contrast to a universal system in which all are entitled to participate,[13] opportunities to participate in higher education in general, and in the prestigious and academically selective institutions and programmes in particular, remain finite. As such, an important and contested

question in a mass system is: who should get to participate in HE in general and in those universities and programmes with high entry requirements in particular? This is both a philosophical question, and a practical one, about the fairest way to allocate a valuable but rationed resource. The question of what constitutes fairness can be answered in a plurality of ways, with radically different implications for policy and practice.[14]

Meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness

The most influential conceptualisation of fairness has been that of meritocratic *equality* of opportunity. Developed in the mid-twentieth century by sociologists seeking to theorise the development of modern industrialised societies,[15] the concept of meritocracy refers to a system for allocating occupational and social roles based on the objective assessment of the abilities and achievements of individuals instead of ascribed characteristics such as inherited social class background, gender or ethnicity. Literally denoting a society governed ("ocracy") by those who have earned it ("merit"), the theory of meritocracy holds that the increasingly specialised and skilled nature of occupational roles in highly developed societies requires that occupations be filled by the most capable individuals irrespective of social background. National education systems involving universal access to primary and secondary education and an expanded higher education sector are seen as playing an increasingly important role in the functioning of a meritocratic society, providing equality of opportunity for all to develop competences that are key to effective occupational performance, and equal opportunity for all to have these competencies certified through objective methods of assessment based on universalistic rather than particularistic standards.[16]

Meritocratic societies are typically considered to be much more efficient than previous forms of social organisation in which positions had tended to be passed down from one generation of family members to the next, because allocating occupational and social positions to the most competent individuals regardless of social origin is regarded as maximising both the average and the total utility of individuals in society.[17] Meritocratic societies are also seen to be more socially just: because the success of individuals in education and the labour market is determined by individual achievement rather than social ascription, unequal outcomes in a meritocratic society, including inequalities in economic rewards and social esteem, are deemed to be legitimate because they are deserved.

This shift from ascription to achievement as the basis for allocating occupational and social roles was heralded by meritocracy theorists as a progressive development, part of a wider trend towards greater democratization of access to educational opportunities and subsequently to positions of power, privilege and prestige. Meritocracy was not expected nor intended to eliminate socioeconomic inequalities and social hierarchies, but rather to provide "equal opportunity to be unequal"[18] via "the displacement of one principle of stratification by another, of achievement for ascription".[19] However, meritocracy was expected to substantially weaken the intergenerational link between socioeconomic origins and destinations, with meritocratic societies anticipated to display high rates of intergenerational social mobility due to a reduced influence of social origins on educational attainment and an increased impact of educational attainment on subsequent occupational attainment.[20]

In relation to higher education specifically, meritocracy was seen as doing away with the former function of universities as sites for the familial intergenerational reproduction of social elites.

Within a meritocracy, the historic principle of restricting access to those displaying "inherited merit" by virtue of their social origin would be replaced by the principle of "equality of opportunity" to compete for a place at university on the basis of individual merit.[21] This has been characterised as a shift away from an "organic conservatism" which historically "defended social privilege and supported explicit class bias in admissions" towards a form of "democratic elitism" involving admission on the basis of "the 'amoral elite' criteria of academic excellence."[22]

The meritocratic ideal has been a key driver not only of the expansion of higher education worldwide in order to meet the need of modern societies for an increasingly highly educated workforce, but also of the growing vertical diversification of higher education institutions that this expansion has entailed.[23] This shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education has meant that universities are no longer few in number and homogeneous in terms of structure and academic entry requirements but are now more numerous and more diverse.[24] Significant variation in academic entry requirements, coupled with various mechanisms promoting competition between institutions such as university league tables and performance based research funding formulas, have fostered what might be termed an 'institutional meritocracy' in which universities do not enjoy parity of esteem but are vertically stratified according to perceived 'merit'.[25]

The meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm gives primacy to procedural fairness which has been interpreted as requiring that all should be judged according to the same criteria and processes so that all have equal opportunity to demonstrate merit. In the case of admission to higher education, the operation of procedural fairness has traditionally entailed evaluating all applicants to a given course at a given institution against the same set of academic entry requirements, regardless of social background and other non-academic characteristics Universally applied selection criteria have been used not only to differentiate between applicants to a given degree programme, but also to demarcate whether or not an applicant is eligible to be considered for entry to programmes and universities occupying a particular place within the meritocratic hierarchy of universities. As such, according to the logic of meritocratic equality of opportunity, places at universities at the top of the institutional meritocracy are rightly reserved for applicants with the highest levels of prior attainment.

Meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment have been the dominant mode of thinking about fair access and admissions to HE in England and the wider UK from the Robbins expansion of higher education in the 1960s onwards. For much of this period, national widening participation policies have focused principally on the perceived need to remove the non-academic barriers to application to university faced by people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was created in 2004 in response to concerns that the tuition fee increase in 2006 might deter those from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to university.[26] Accordingly, OFFA's role was to oversee universities' government-mandated spending of a portion of their tuition fee revenues on reducing the barriers to application for disadvantaged learners, partly through the creation of bursaries, but mainly by means of outreach activities intended to 'raise aspirations'. While the Access Agreements submitted annually to OFFA could be judged inadequate in theory, resulting in the institution being denied permission to set tuition fees at the higher rate, this sanction was never applied even to universities making negligible progress on widening access.[27]

Comparatively little attention has been paid, during the post-war period, to the role of university admissions policies and practices in relation to fairness. Indeed, the admissions policies and practices of universities were positioned as being wholly outside OFFA's remit. However, the concept of procedural fairness in relation to university admissions began to feature explicitly in media and policy debates about fair access following extensive media coverage of Oxford University's rejection of Laura Spence, an applicant for Medicine from a non-selective state school in the North East who was predicted (and went on to achieve) four A* grades at A-level.[28] In response to a perceived crisis of public confidence in university admissions practices, the government commissioned the Schwartz Review of *Fair Admissions to Higher Education* which, in its report published in 2004, set out five principles of fair admission to which universities were encouraged, though not mandated, to adhere, namely: (1) a transparent selection process, (2) based on a holistic assessment of prior achievement and future potential, (3) using valid and reliable metrics, (4) free of unnecessary barriers (5) as part of a professionalised admissions service.[29] With the exception of the second of these principles, which is discussed in more detail later, the Schwartz Review framed fair admissions overwhelmingly in terms of procedural fairness, that is to say, as requiring the open publication of selection criteria and processes and the systematic assessment of applicants against these criteria irrespective of social background and other merit-irrelevant characteristics. Although the Schwartz Review re-emphasised the ultimate sovereignty of universities over their admissions policies and practices,[30] the report recommendations led to the creation of Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA). This practitioner-led organisation, funded by UCAS until 2017, sought to co-ordinate and develop best practice across the sector principally in relation to issues of procedural fairness around transparency and consistency of admissions decision-making.[31]

Critiques of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm

A particularly important line of critique of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm is that it rests on the premise that there has been prior equality of opportunity to achieve the requisite academic qualifications. Critics of meritocratic equality of opportunity highlight the fact that pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities make it harder for those who are disadvantaged by these inequalities to demonstrate merit through formal educational achievement.[32] Socioeconomic inequalities mean that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to access better resourced fee-paying private schools,[33] benefit from material circumstances at home that are more conducive to academic success,[34] or be able to draw support for their learning from educationally successful family members. [35] In the majority state-funded school sector disadvantaged pupils tend to be disproportionately clustering in particular schools,[36] with lower average attainment and fewer peers planning applications to selective universities.

Critics have argued that the traditional meritocratic model obscures the fact that pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities impact on equality of opportunity to demonstrate merit.[37] French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, writing in the 1970s, argued that the grading and certifying functions of contemporary educational institutions were designed to stratify individuals, rather than to ensure a common high standard of education for all, and to do so by rewarding qualities and capabilities such as familiarity with high culture that the education system itself does not cultivate, but which the already advantaged disproportionately possess.[38] Through the apparently objective assessment of individual merit, the determining influence of pre-existing social inequalities on the educational outcomes of individuals is not only obscured by the

education system but is also rendered legitimate;[39] as Bourdieu puts it: "a social gift [is] treated as a natural one".[40] The individualisation of responsibility for academic success or failure that this naturalisation of educational outcomes entails serves not only to place working-class students towards the bottom of the attainment distribution, but also to inculcate in disadvantaged students the sense that they are wholly individually responsible for their failure.[41]

Related to this, meritocratic societies have been identified as inherently wasteful since their primary function of stratifying individuals within a hierarchy requires that "certain people must be left behind" and that "[u]nrealised talent is therefore both the necessary and structural condition of its existence."[42] The claim of meritocracy theorists that the stratifying functions of meritocratic institutions are not wasteful but instead serve to maximise efficiency have been directly challenged by two OECD reports which show that countries with more academically selective secondary education systems display wider socioeconomic inequalities in attainment without increasing levels of educational performance overall,[43] and that economic growth is slower in more socioeconomically unequal societies.[44] This recognition that education systems organised according to strict meritocratic principles inevitably result in 'wasted talent' informs contemporary calls for universal access to university on the basis that *all* have the potential to benefit from higher education.[45]

The idea of meritocratic equality of opportunity has also been criticised for equating merit with worth and hence deservingness, and the use of this as a justification for large socioeconomic inequalities of outcome. Libertarian takes on meritocracy hold that all inequalities resulting from meritocratic competition, no matter how large, reflect natural differences between individuals and are therefore just, rendering any redistributive interventions unjust.[46] In Social Darwinist formulations, both individual and social group differences in educational outcomes and subsequent socioeconomic inequalities are presented as the legitimate product of corresponding individual and social group differences in innate intelligence.[47] The high and rising inequalities in income and wealth that have been documented in countries around the world since the mid-1980s[48] would thus, from both Libertarian and Social Darwinist perspectives, be considered fair because merited.

One important challenge to the use of meritocracy theory to justify wide inequalities of outcome comes from theorists who emphasise the importance of considering *stakes fairness* which centres discussion on the magnitude of the consequences of winning or losing in the competition for prizes or resources.[49] The concept of stakes fairness holds that, even where there is agreement as to what constitutes fair rules of competition and even where procedural fairness is adhered to, fairness also requires some limit to be placed on the risks of participating in the competition, on how much is at stake, and on the impact of the result of one competition on another.[50] Applied to the question of fair access and admission to higher education, a stakes fairness perspective highlights the potential injustices created by a system emphasising meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness insofar as these produce and legitimate excessively unequal outcomes which, at the extreme, may take the form of a "winner takes all" end result. Young people have been found to be particularly attuned to stakes fairness, regarding as unjust the fact that performing poorly in exams or making "bad choices" in relation to upper secondary and higher education would have negative repercussions for "the whole of life".[51]

Correspondingly, meritocracy theorists have been criticised for erroneously equating individual merit with deservingness or what might be termed 'moral worth'. Indeed, it has been widely argued that merit, understood as the combination of natural ability and effort, cannot be considered *achieved* characteristics but instead represent ascribed characteristics resulting from factors beyond the control of individuals including genetic luck and the socioeconomic circumstances of the family into which individuals happen to be born.[52] As US philosopher John Rawls has argued, the equation of merit with moral worth and thus deservingness is ultimately indefensible: "…we do not deserve (in the sense of moral desert) our place in the distribution of native endowments. This statement is meant as a moral truism. Who would deny it? Do people really think that they (morally) deserved to be born more gifted than others? Do they think that they (morally) deserved to be born a man rather than a woman, or vice versa? Do they think that they deserved to be born into a wealthier rather than a poorer family? No.".[53] Similarly, Arrow argues that those who gain access to higher education under conditions of meritocratic equality of opportunity "must recognize that their superior positions rest to a considerable extent on chance: chance in admission, the chance of family and school background, even genetic chances which one can hardly be said to have earned. The university graduate must take his or her position as an obligation, not as a reward."[54]

Meritocracy theorists of the 1970s themselves occasionally acknowledged the tendency of societies organised according to the principles of meritocratic equality of opportunity to exacerbate socioeconomic inequality and foster elite social reproduction. As US sociologist and key advocate of meritocracy, Daniel Bell, noted: "There can never be a pure meritocracy because, invariably, high-status parents will seek to pass on their positions either through the use of influence or simply by the cultural advantages their children would possess. Thus, after one generation a meritocracy simply becomes an enclaved class"[55] Bell's observation echoes that of sociologist Michael Young who has been credited with coining the term meritocracy in the late 1950s. Writing at a time when IQ tests were being used to assess the suitability of children for different kinds of secondary schooling in the UK, Young envisaged a dystopian future in which IQ tests had become the sole determinant of access to educational and occupational opportunities, resulting in a largely socially immobile society due to the intergenerational transmission within families not only of genetically inherited ability but also of the economic and cultural resources needed to nurture that ability.[56]

Meritocratic equity of opportunity and distributive fairness

One of the most influential challenges to the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm is the theory of *justice as fairness* advanced by US philosopher John Rawls.[57] Rawls argues that meritocratic societies offer only *formal* equality of opportunity rather than genuinely *fair* equality of opportunity, or what we term meritocratic *equity* of opportunity. This is because treating individuals equally according to the principles of procedural fairness neglects to take into account the impact of pre-existing structural inequalities on the capacity of individuals to demonstrate their true merit. Rawls defines "fair equality of opportunity" as requiring "not merely that public offices and social positions be open in the formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them".[58] By "fair chance", Rawls argues that "supposing that there is a distribution of native endowments, those who have the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin, the class into which they are born and develop until the age of

reason. In all parts of society there are to be roughly the same prospects of culture and achievement from those similarly motivated and endowed".[59]

Rawls argues that we cannot presume, as proponents of meritocratic equality of opportunity do, that unequal educational attainments simply reflect individual differences in innate ability cultivated by effort under equitable conditions. Rawls argues that "native endowments of various kinds (say, native intelligence and natural ability) are not fixed natural assets with a constant capacity. They are merely potential and cannot come into fruition apart from social conditions; and when realized they can take but one or a few of many possible forms. Educated and trained abilities are always a selection, and a small selection at that, from a wide range of possibilities that might have been fulfilled. Among what affects their realization are social attitudes of encouragement and support, and institutions concerned with their early discipline and use. Not only our conception of ourselves, and our aims and ambitions, but also our realized abilities and talents, reflect our personal history, opportunities and social position, and the influence of good and ill fortune".[60] As such, while Rawls considers the natural endowments of individuals as belonging to those individuals, and considers these to be legitimate determinants of educational and occupational outcomes, Rawls regards the *distribution* of these natural endowments as a "common asset" to be used reciprocally to the benefit of all.[61]

As such Rawls held that unequal outcomes could only be considered fair if they could be expected to benefit the most disadvantaged members of society. This "difference principle", Rawls argued, "requires that however great the inequalities in wealth and income may be, and however willing people are to work to earn their greater shares of output, existing inequalities must contribute effectively to the benefit of the least advantaged. Otherwise the inequalities are not permissible. […] What the difference principle requires, then, is that however great the general level of wealth – whether high or low – the existing inequalities are to fulfil the condition of benefiting others as well as benefiting ourselves".[62] Rawls called, therefore, not for the elimination of socioeconomic inequalities of outcome, which he regarded as an important incentive, but for inequalities to be limited so as to not go beyond the point at which further benefits to the most advantaged in society came with no benefit to, or worse still at the expense of, the least advantaged.

Likewise, Rawls was not calling for the abandonment of meritocracy altogether in favour of a random allocation of opportunities and resources regardless of merit, or for complete equality of outcome. Rather, Rawls argued in favour of what might be termed meritocratic equity of opportunity, requiring efforts to level the playing field in order to ensure genuinely fair (rather than merely formal) equality of opportunity. As such, Rawls called for an emphasis on distributive fairness in place of procedural fairness conceived of as equal treatment, that is, for a conception and operationalisation of the principles of fairness with an eye to achieving a more even distribution of outcomes.

In relation to higher education, a Rawlsian conception of fairness as meritocratic equity of opportunity necessitates a shift away from access and admissions policies practices that adhere to the equal treatment rules of procedural fairness towards those designed to achieve a more proportionate allocation of university places at the group level. The use of contextual data about the socioeconomic circumstances of individuals to inform university admissions decisions in England and the wider UK,[63] the similarly 'holistic assessment' of applicant merit in some US states such as California,[64] and the use of affirmative action policies in the United States and

around the world to help equalise higher education access rates for members of disadvantaged ethnic minority groups,[65] are all examples of meritocratic selection mechanisms that have been adjusted to achieve a greater degree of distributive fairness.

Contextualised university admissions practices, like holistic and affirmative action policies, seek to achieve a greater degree of distributive fairness in relation to higher education access and admissions not by doing away with meritocratic selection criteria, but by placing constraints on their fair use.[66] This entails reaching judgements about the merit of applicants by considering their prior attainment in light of knowledge about the extent to which individuals have enjoyed equality of opportunity to have their abilities and efforts cultivated and rewarded.[67] This corresponds to a shift away from the "democratic elitist" model of meritocratic equality of opportunity towards a "social democratic" model which "[c]ognisant of unequal starting points arising from class privilege" judges fairness with reference to the equitable distribution of outcomes rather than equal procedures.[68]

Proponents of distributive rather than undifferentiated procedural fairness in relation to higher education access and admission have thus called for merit to be judged based on assessments of future potential rather than currently realised ability as indicated by previous academic performance.[69] This might take the form of preferential admission to applicants from less advantaged backgrounds when selecting from among equally well qualified candidates,[70] or requiring applicants from less advantaged backgrounds to meet lower academic entry requirements than their more advantaged peers in recognition of the more challenging socioeconomic circumstances in which those qualifications were achieved.[71] Proponents of distributive fairness in relation to higher education admissions have criticised the view that the purpose of universities is to provide fair access to exercise already-developed ability and that the purpose of a degree is purely to "signal" productivity to prospective employers, arguing instead that universities have an important role to play in developing as-yet-unrealised potential.[72]

In relation to UK higher education, the concept of distributive fairness was touched upon by the 2004 Schwartz Review, which identified as one if its five principles of fair admission the notion that selection processes should be "based on a holistic assessment of prior achievement and future potential", rather than solely on the basis of previous academic performance, given that "equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential" in light of applicants' unequal socioeconomic circumstances.[73] Much of the subsequent reform of the admissions policies and practices of UK universities has centred on procedural rather than distributive fairness, however. This is perhaps unsurprising given the continuing emphasis placed on the ultimate sovereignty of universities over their admissions policies and practices, and the downplaying of structurally-rooted socioeconomic barriers to equitable access, in the widening access policies of New Labour from 1997 to 2010 [74] and those of subsequent Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards.[75]

However, concern for distributive fairness has re-emerged recently with the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 and its heralding of a "new approach to regulating access and participation".[76] In order to achieve ambitious new widening access targets, the OfS has explicitly called on higher-tariff universities to engage in a process of "rethinking how merit is judged in admissions".[77] The stance taken by the OfS in relation to universities in England mirrors that taken by the devolved Scottish Government which has mandated Scottish

universities to reduce academic entry requirements for socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants in recognition that "the school attainment of disadvantaged learners often does not reflect their full potential".[78] In Scotland, contextualised university admissions involving routine reductions in academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants are regarded as being a key means of meeting the Scottish Government's vision that "a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should have no lesser chance of entering higher education than a child born in one of our least deprived".[79] The stance taken by the OfS is also in line with renewed thinking internationally as illustrated by the OECD's recent shift away from endorsing the traditional meritocratic notion of equality of opportunity towards the establishment of *equitable access* to education as one of its sustainable development goals.[80] The OfS's questioning of the traditional meritocratic model of admissions contrasts sharply with the approach of its predecessor, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and will require universities to engage more deeply than ever before with questions of distributive as well as procedural fairness in relation to admissions policy and practice.

2.2 Prior research on fair access and admission to higher education

Statistical research on fair access and admission to higher education

A significant body of quantitative research has explored whether access and admission to UK universities can be said to be fair in the traditional meritocratic sense in that there is no residual impact of social background after merit in the form of prior attainment has been taken into account. Typically, these studies have found that access and admissions to UK universities is substantially but by no means wholly fair in the traditional meritocratic sense.

One set of studies has focused on understanding socioeconomic group differences in the likelihood of enrolment in higher education generally and in more academically selective universities in particular. An analysis of linked NPD and HESA data found that public examination results achieved at ages 11, 14, 16 and 18 accounted for 60% of the raw 40 percentage-point gap in HE participation rates between young men from low socioeconomic status (SES) and high-SES backgrounds, and 62% of the 31.2 percentage point raw difference between low-SES and high-SES young men in their probabilities of attending a high status university given participation in HE at all.[81] The authors of the study conclude that socioeconomic inequalities in access to higher education occur "largely because lower SES pupils do not achieve as highly in secondary school as their more advantaged counterparts" (p.454); but what is clear from their findings is that access inequalities are substantially non-meritocratic as well. Similar findings have emerged from studies of those educated in state-funded as opposed to private fee-paying schools,[82] those who are among the first generation of family members to go to university,[83] those from lower income households,[84] as well as care leavers and recipients of free school meals,[85] all of whom have been shown to be less likely than their more advantaged peers to participate in HE generally and in the most selective universities in particular after controlling statistically for prior attainment.

A second set of studies have examined socioeconomic differences in propensities to apply to more academically selective universities given application to university at all. Analysis of UCAS data for the period 1996-2006 found that university applicants from lower social class backgrounds and from non-selective state schools were much less likely to apply to Russell

Group universities than their comparably qualified counterparts from higher social class backgrounds and private schools.[86] A replication of this analysis for the period 2010-11 to 2012-13 found similar results for those from non-selective state schools and lower POLAR quintiles.[87] These findings chime with those of a study which showed that university entrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to hold qualifications that exceeded those of their peers on their chosen course (referred to as being "under-matched") and were less likely to be comparatively under-qualified ("over matched") for their course.[88]

A third set of studies have drawn on Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data to explore the determinants of being offered a place at university conditional on application. This body of work has invariably found that while previous academic attainment is the strongest predictor of admission, admissions chances differ for applicants from different social groups even when they hold the same grades and have studied the same subjects at A-level. These studies have shown that the chances of comparably qualified applicants being admitted to more academically selective universities are lower for those from non-selective state maintained as compared to private fee-paying schools,[89] from lower as compared to higher social class backgrounds,[90] and from areas with low as compared to high rates of HE participation.[91] Studies which have honed in on particular degree subjects such as Medicine and Law have yielded similar results.[92] British ethnic minority applicants have also been found to be less likely than comparably qualified White applicants to be admitted to more academically selective universities including Old universities generally,[93] the subset that make up the Russell Group,[94] and Oxford University.[95] This body of work indicates that the decisions universities make about which applicants to admit are substantially, but by no means wholly, meritocratic in the traditional sense.

It is not clear why access and admissions appears to be less meritocratic than is often claimed, but one likely factor is that most university application choices and admissions decisions are made on the basis of applicants' predicted A-level grades before actual attainment at A-level is known. Research has shown that only 16% of applicants have their grades predicted accurately, whereas grades are under-predicted for 9% of applicants and over-predicted for a considerable 75%.[96] Another study found that only around half of all individual grade predictions were accurate, with 41% being over-predictions and 6.6% being under-predictions.[97] Those from comparatively disadvantaged backgrounds – state schools, lower social class backgrounds, low HE participation areas, and the Black and Asian ethnic groups – are most likely to have their grades over-predicted, generally speaking.[98] However, among higher-performing students in particular, low-SES students are more likely to have their grades *under-predicted* relative to their more advantaged peers.[99] These findings have prompted calls for a post-qualifications admissions system (PQA) in which all university applications and admissions decisions are made after applicants have received their A-level and equivalent examination results.[100]

Several studies have also examined the impact on admissions chances of the subjects studied by applicants at A-level, net of the effects of predicted attainment at A-level. These studies indicate that having studied what the Russell Group previously termed 'facilitating subjects'[101] increases the chances of being offered a place at these institutions,[102] and that having studied Chemistry and Biology at A-level boosts applicants chances of admission to medical programmes at Russell Group universities.[103] Studies also indicate that those who apply by the

early 'Oxbridge deadline' for university applications of 15th October are more likely to be offered places at Russell Group universities than those applying later in the annual application cycle, even after controlling statistically for subjects studied and predicted grades at A-level.[104]

Another potentially important factor is the influence on admissions decisions of the personal statements submitted to universities by prospective students as part of their applications. An analysis of the personal statements of 309 comparably qualified applicants to humanities programmes at a Russell Group university in 2010 found that private school applicants' personal statements contained fewer typographical, spelling, punctuation and grammar errors, and mentioned a higher quantity and quality of relevant work experiences.[105] Further research suggests that students and teachers in state schools are less knowledgeable than those in private schools about what admissions selectors consider to be the hallmarks of a strong personal statement.[106]

While socioeconomic inequalities in rates of access and admission to higher education generally and to the most academically selective universities in particular are far from wholly meritocratic, corresponding inequalities in prior academic attainment are by far the principal factor. An analysis of data for the cohort of secondary school pupils in England who were aged 15/16 in 2005/6 found that while 87 percent of privately educated pupils went on to achieve A-level and equivalent qualifications by the age of 19, this was the case for just 32 percent of state educated pupils who had been in receipt of free school meals at age 15.[107] By age 19, some thirteen percent of privately educated pupils had achieved A-level and equivalent qualifications that placed them in the top decile of the attainment distribution nationally; by contrast, the corresponding figure for state-schooled free school meal recipients was just two percent.

These socioeconomic disparities in attainment are already evident when pupils start school and grow in magnitude over the course of the educational career. A study of the attainment trajectories of school pupils in England between the ages of 11 and 20 found that, while high achievers at Key Stage 1 (age 7) from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds continued to be higher achievers throughout their schooling careers, similarly high achievers at Key Stage 1 from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds fell steadily down the attainment distribution over the course of their school careers, and by age 16 had been overtaken by their more advantaged peers whose attainment had been merely average at age 7.[108] These divergent trajectories are testament to the fact that socioeconomic inequalities hamper the academic achievements of disadvantaged pupils with the result that their grades fail to do justice to their true ability and potential.

Prior academic attainment is widely considered to be an important predictor of success at degree level. However, A-level grades on entry to university have been found to be a more modest predictor of completing a degree than is often supposed, with a degree completion rate for students attending higher-tariff providers of 88% among those who entered with AAB at A-level compared to an only slightly lower rate of 80% among those who entered with BCC.[109] There is, however, a stronger association between grades on entry and rates of achieving a first or upper second class degree (sometimes referred to as a 'good degree'), with rates of 75% for students at higher-tariff providers who entered with AAB at A-level falling to 46% for those who entered with BCC. Similar patterns have been observed regarding the relationship between Scottish Higher grades on entry and degree outcomes at Scottish universities, with evidence of

a stronger relationship between grades on entry and final degree classification for degrees in science as compared to arts subjects.[110]

Some studies have found that university students with certain markers of contextual disadvantage are *more likely* to be successful at degree level than their comparably qualified but more advantaged peers. Students educated in state schools have been found to perform better at degree level than privately schooled students with the same level of prior attainment at Bristol University,[111] at Oxford University,[112] at Russell Group universities,[113] at UK medical schools[114] and nationally[115] (though, anomalously, not at Cambridge University).[116] National data for the UK also shows that students whose prior attainment is higher than the average for their school perform better at degree level than comparably qualified students whose prior attainment is average or below average for their school.[117] This latter finding also holds for national data on medical students,[118] and for students attending the highly academically selective universities of St Andrews[119] and Cambridge.[120]

The above findings relating to school type and academic performance relative to the school average have been used to support the case for a contextualised assessment of 'merit' which recognises that the prior attainments of comparatively disadvantaged students don't do full justice to their academic potential.[121] However, it is important to note that studies which measure comparative disadvantage at the area level or individual level rather than the school level tend to find that disadvantaged students are *less likely* to succeed at degree level than their comparably qualified but more advantaged peers. Poorer degree outcomes after controlling for pre-university attainment have been observed for students from economically deprived areas studying at Edinburgh University[122] and nationally,[123] as well as for students nationally from areas with low rates of participation in higher education.[124] Similarly, lower levels of degree achievement after controlling for pre-university attainment have been observed for students from lower socioeconomic background,[125] and for those who have been in local authority care.[126] These findings are unsurprising given that the negative impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on academic achievement is likely to persist after enrolment in higher education, raising the issue of the need to support socioeconomically disadvantaged to fulfil their potential once they are at university.

To date only a small number of studies have explicitly explored the degree performances of socioeconomically disadvantaged students admitted via contextualised admissions policies in comparison with those admitted on the basis of standard entry requirements. One study, drawing on data for highly selective Sutton Trust 30 universities,[127] found no evidence of lower rates of degree completion or of lower levels of degree performance overall at those institutions that were known to make contextual offers.[128] A smaller scale study of Accountancy and Finance programmes at a Russell Group university found that those admitted with a two-grade reduction did just as well academically as their non-contextually-admitted peers.[129]

Other studies have examined the degree performance of students admitted to foundation year programmes designed to prepare socioeconomically disadvantaged students with grades lower than standard entry requirements for degree level study. Of the 290 widening access students enrolled on Southampton University's preparatory year zero foundation programme for Medicine with BBC at A-level, 90% successfully progressed onto year 1, 85% of whom subsequently graduated with a medical degree.[130]

Owing to the relatively recent introduction of contextualised admissions policies in England there are not yet any studies of the longer-term returns to higher education for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds who were admitted with grades lower than standard entry requirements, or for those from more advantaged backgrounds with higher qualifications whose chances of a university place were reduced as a result of contextualised admissions practices. However, one study of the impact of the University of Texas, Austin's policy of admitting students with performances that placed them in the top 10% within their school found that the scheme increased enrolment rates, graduation rates, and subsequent earnings for those admitted to the university through the scheme, without corresponding negative effects for more advantaged individuals who might otherwise have gained places at the university.[131]

Representations of fairness in university access and admissions policy documents

A number of studies have analysed institutionally-authored policy documents and texts, including the Access Agreements submitted by universities in England to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access, as well as university prospectuses and university websites. These studies have found that universities in England and the wider UK frame fairness overwhelmingly in terms of meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness, with widening participation efforts restricted to encouraging applications from only the "brightest and best" students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds as evidenced by their ability to meet the high academic entry requirements demanded by "leading" universities.

An analysis of the Access Agreements produced by a sample of 20 English HEIs in 2006/7 and 2008/9 found that Old (pre-1992) universities framed themselves as conforming to the principles of fair access in the restricted sense that they were willing to admit students from all backgrounds, provided they met the institution's high academic entry standards.[132] Their widening access initiatives tended to be targeted only at disadvantaged young people who have already attained high grades at school; those likely to go to university but in need of an 'aspirations raising' intervention encouraging the choice of an Old university rather than a New one. The widening access initiatives of New universities, in contrast, tended to cast a wider net, capturing prospective students with a range of prior achievement levels, and focusing more on developing HE programmes that would be more accessible to students coming from local schools and colleges, such as vocationally oriented pathways. The study authors conclude that Old universities "…use widening participation to soften their reputation as austere, elitist institutions closed off to the needs and desires of the majority. Access agreements allow such institutions to appeal to the meritocratic instinct: they sell the message that if you are good enough you can get in here, whatever your background." [133]

Subsequent analyses of Access Agreements produced by these same universities in 2012/13 found that, while Old universities had become more engaged with the task of widening participation than they had been in 2006/7, they continued to foreground their need to maintain their status as "leading" universities with "highly competitive entry criteria".[134] Consequently, these universities tended to highlight the difficulty of reconciling "high entry criteria and widening access to cohorts that usually do not achieve those criteria" and to focus their widening participation work on disadvantaged young people "most able but least likely" to attend highly selective universities.[135]

A pair of studies involving analysis of policy documents and interviews with senior leaders and widening participation managers at 3 UK HEIs in the early 2000s found that widening participation efforts at both Old and New universities were driven significantly by a need to fill places.[136] For New universities where recruiting rather than selecting students was the norm, flexible entry requirements and efforts to encourage and support non-traditional students to apply were also the norm. At Old universities, high academic entry requirements and a reluctance to accept qualifications other than A-levels were presented as necessary given the demanding nature of the courses, except in the case of courses with a low level of demand for places where entry standards were readily relaxed and a more active approach to widening participation was taken, principally to ensure that institutional student number and associated financial targets were met, rather than for social justice reasons.

An analysis of the language used in the prospectuses and websites of 3 Old and 3 New English HEIs for the 2007 academic year found Old universities to be much less welcoming and inclusive in their language than New universities, referring to "our university" for example, and caveating invitations to apply to those with "talent" or "academic ability".[137] Further analysis of materials produced by the same HEIs in 2011 indicated a greater degree of convergence between Old and New universities with the former making more mention of under-represented groups and adopting a more inclusive tone than previously, albeit alongside a continued emphasis on the institution's elite status and visual images suggesting that traditional students remained the primary audience.

A case study of one Russell Group university with a very poor track record on widening participation found that its Access Agreement and widening participation programmes in the mid-2010s framed very narrowly the kinds of students who are deemed suitable for the institution. This was evident in the restriction of eligibility to take part in widening participation programmes to "bright" students defined as those "having potential to perform in the national top 5% ability range" and the capacity to make multiple visits to campus over a period of four years.[138] As the author notes, these requirements ignore the impact of structural inequalities on the attainment levels of disadvantaged learners and on their ability to invest the large amounts of time and money required to engage in the institution's widening access programmes.[139]

Similarly, an analysis of the 25 Access Agreements submitted to the Office for Fair Access in 2017 found that many institutions targeted their outreach programmes at schools with high percentages of free school meal recipients; however, the academic entry criteria for participation in these programmes was set very high, typically at least eight A* to C GCSEs including English and Maths, rendering most free school meals pupils ineligible to participate.[140]

Another study of the Access Agreements produced by 8 HEIs in one English region for the 2012/13 academic year found that the widening participation activities of Russell Group universities centred around aspiration raising, and were targeted specifically at a subset of students from under-represented groups identified as 'the brightest and the best'.[141] The Russell Group universities in the sample framed fairness as the admission of the 'brightest and best' students regardless of background, or more specifically of the type of school previously attended. Moreover, Russell Group universities were found to lay claim to being leaders in the field of widening access work, despite their evidently poor performance against widening participation metrics in comparison with New universities and the sector as a whole. The Russell Group universities in the sample played down this poor performance by arguing that

they should be judged against other highly selective HEIs rather than against the sector as a whole. The authors conclude that the Access Agreements of Russell Group universities demonstrate their sense of indifference to and insulation from the call to widen participation.

A critical analysis of text gathered from the widening access webpages of UK medical schools in 2015 found that a traditional meritocratic discourse predominated. Most medical schools in the study emphasised their desire to support highly qualified and motivated applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds in making an application, but few referred to the benefits of greater diversity to patients and the profession, and none mentioned the unique strengths that those from widening access backgrounds might possess.[142]

Conceptions of fairness among university access and admissions staff

A range of studies have explored conceptions of fairness among access and admissions staff at universities in England and the wider UK. In line with the findings of analyses of institutional policy texts, these studies find meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness to be the dominant paradigm.

A survey of senior managers responsible for admissions at UK HEIs conducted in 2008 to establish institutional responses to the recommendations of the Schwartz report of 2004 on fair admissions, and to the resulting changes to the QAA guidance on admissions policies issued in 2006, found that universities had improved the transparency of their admissions practices, publishing Entry Profiles on the UCAS website which list entry requirements, although typically without acknowledging that stated entry requirements might have been variable in practice and that other qualifications are accepted besides A-level.[143] Universities had also improved the consistency of their admissions practices by centralising decision-making or standardising and codifying admissions practices where these remained decentralised. The survey also found that some selective HEIs were using contextual data for the purposes of widening participation at the point of admission, but only for applicants expected to meet or exceed standard entry requirements. Virtually all institutions surveyed agreed that it was important that HEIs had students from a wide range of social backgrounds; however, almost half of the institutions surveyed indicated that they considered it unfair to make a lower offer to some applicants in order to achieve a more socioeconomically diverse student body.

A study carried out in 2008/09 involving semi-structured interviews with admissions and recruitment from staff working at four universities found that, for high demand courses at Old universities, academic entry requirements were set as high as the 'market', i.e. student demand, would bear, and that there was a strong preference for applicants with A-level or International Baccalaureate qualifications as these were deemed to be more academically demanding, as were certain subjects at A-level.[144] Some selectors mentioned prioritising students from low-attaining schools, but for standard offers rather than offers with reduced entry requirements. In relation to both traditional and non-traditional applicants, the primary goal was to "cream off" those applicants judged to be most academically able as indicated in particular by high grades to date.

In-depth interview research with widening participation professionals at 7 UK universities in 2010 found that those who were themselves from widening participation backgrounds, and those whose teams were located in recruitment and marketing rather than part of the central

administration, felt marginalised within their institution and unable to make the case for more inclusive practices.[145] Some reported that widening access successes were met with internal critiques about the declining 'quality' of students, reflecting a misrecognition of structural disadvantage as individual deficit. A follow-up paper drawing on the same set of interviews reported that widening participation professionals were conscious of the difference between the empathy they felt for working-class students as a consequence of their own working-class origins and the sympathy expressed by their predominantly middle-class colleagues who saw the purpose of widening participation as being to identify and 'rescue' the minority of 'able' students from the working-class.[146]

Similarly, an interview study with those leading on widening participation strategy at Northampton University and the Open University conducted in 2011 identified an active commitment to widening participation on the part of senior staff. However, widening participation leads also recognised that widening participation discourses tended to advance a deficit model of disadvantaged students, characterising them as lacking in aspiration and as intrinsically low-achieving, rather than requiring student-centred initiatives to better support their learning.[147]

A study of academic and administrative admissions selectors involved in offer making at a prestigious university in England in the mid-2010s found that although some selectors were personally inclined towards admissions practices which promoted a diverse student body, these personal values tended to conflict with an institutional focus on a meritocratic competition for places.[148] Moreover, it was not unusual for members of the same team of selectors to hold conflicting views. Within the arts discipline studied, some selectors emphasised the need to contextualise attainment and extra-curricular activity information so as to avoid unfairly advantaging applicants from more privileged backgrounds, while others regarded such contextualisation as unfairly penalising applicants for simply having had a middle-class upbringing. Within the social sciences discipline studied, a clash of values was observed between administrators from widening participation backgrounds who were committed to a contextualised approach to admissions and an academic selector from a more advantaged class background who regarded the purpose of admissions to be the meritocratic selection of high attainers evidently likely to succeed on the course. In the physical science discipline studied, where entry requirements were set very high, admissions selectors professing a strong commitment to widening participation spoke of never "having had to" use the discretionary one grade reduction in academic entry requirements for a disadvantaged applicant, regarding even this minimal form of positive discrimination as inappropriate.

A comparison of the data from two studies of admissions staff in two selective universities, one in England and one in Ireland, conducted in 2016/17 and 2013 respectively, found there was ambivalence about reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged learners.[149] Staff preferred to increase the number of offers made to disadvantaged applicants without modifying the entry standard so as to avoid what they perceived to be the unfair displacement of better qualified applicants. In addition, the large reductions in entry requirements typical of foundation year programmes were seen as posing a risk to the university's reputation as a place for high-achievers.

A study involving 75 in-depth interviews with admissions personnel at eighteen universities in Scotland in 2017/18 highlighted the impact of organisational identities on the capacity of

universities to adopt more progressive approaches to undergraduate admissions.[150] The study found that admissions selectors for universities identifying as globally competitive or, to a lesser extent, nationally selective, saw their mission as being to admit only the 'best' applicants, as indicated by high grades achieved in formal qualifications, who could be expected to succeed with little need for support. While selectors recognised that socioeconomic circumstances affected prior achievement, the idea of reducing academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants by more than a token number of grades was regarded as incompatible with the identity of the university.

A study involving 20 interviews and observations of eight admissions decision-making meetings at the University of Oxford in 2005/6 found that, while prior attainment was a key criterion for selection, admissions selectors sought to identify those most likely to thrive on the degree course by contextualising applicants' attainment against that of the average for their school.[151] As such, applicants with A grades rather than A* grades were considered to be poor prospects for admission if they had attended what was known to be an exceptionally good school, but not if it was known that this constituted a strong academic performance relative to a much lower average level of attainment for the school as a whole. Selectors at Oxford also appeared to favour applicants who had already sat their A-level examinations over those (the majority) applying on the basis of predicted grades. There was also an awareness that, in the context of an admissions system in which applicants are routinely interviewed in person, homophily-driven rapport with applicants (or a lack thereof) might unintentionally influence admissions decisions.

Further interview research conducted in the mid-2000s comparing the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom and several 'Ivy League' colleges in the United States reveals what considerations come into play when selectors are determining which applicants deserve a place.[152] A narrow definition of 'merit' is found to prevail in the UK context, as selectors for Oxbridge aim to admit 'the best' applicants as indicated by their formal academic achievements, with intensive interviewing of potential students by the academics who will teach them serving as a further screening tool for judging intellectual ability. While contextual data about the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants are shared with admissions selectors and monitored by the central admissions office, prior academic achievements and performance at interview are still seen as largely objective indicators of individual applicant 'merit', and the bar is set very high for applicants from all backgrounds. Achieving a more socially diverse student body is seen as a laudable but politically difficult goal. For Ivy League college selectors in the United States, in contrast, one key aim is to 'craft a class' of socially and ethnically diverse students who will each make a uniquely valuable contribution to the institution. The 'best' applicants, therefore, are not simply those with the highest academic test scores, but also those with outstanding accomplishments in extracurricular activities such as athletics or music, and evidence of 'leadership' qualities. Working-class and ethnic minority applicants must meet these criteria or at least come close to doing so, and ideally they would 'hook' selectors with a highly compelling personal narrative of triumph over adversity. Also in the name of 'crafting' a diverse class, preferential consideration was given to applicants who hold 'legacy' status by virtue of their parents having attended the institution before them, and to athletes who had competed at national or international level.

Interviews with ten admissions selectors for humanities programmes at Oxford University conducted in the early 2000s found that selectors tended not to voice explicit social biases indicative of what the author terms "organic conservatism" but instead conveyed a commitment

to a "democratic elitism" involving admission on the basis of "the 'amoral elite' criteria of academic excellence.[153] Although selectors recognised the majority of applicants to Oxford were equally strong candidates for a place, algorithms were used to rank applicants as a means of ensuring procedural fairness and a sense among selectors that selection processes were meritocratic. Applicants from disadvantaged social backgrounds were given additional consideration only at the margins, after having "made the grade", where there remained more candidates than places.

A critical examination of admissions to Law at Oxford University in the mid-2010s highlights the limited, discretionary and subjective way in which contextual data was used to inform judgements about applicants' prior attainment. The author argues that instead of providing raw attainment alongside contextual data, admissions tutors should receive *only* contextually-adjusted attainment metrics.[154]

A study involving interviews with admissions tutors at 24 UK medical schools in the early 2010s revealed that selectors endorsed the goal of widening participation on the grounds that the medical workforce should be representative of the community it serves.[155] But whilst selectors understood that restricting admission to medical school to those with very high levels of prior achievement made this goal unachievable, they felt that universities could not be expected to compensate for the perceived deficiencies of the state school system, and that lowering entry requirements for disadvantaged students would be a risk to quality and reputation, increasing the risk of academic failure for such students and exposing the university to claims of unfair 'social engineering'.

A study focused on art and design programmes at five higher education institutions, involving interviews with 10 admissions selectors and the observation of 70 admissions interviews in the late 2000s, found that although admissions selectors were ostensibly looking for potential, they expected applicants to already display a wide range of skills and attributes, many of which were not objectively measurable traits but 'ways of being' (e.g. "wide knowledge of contemporary art", "good at self-promotion") traditionally associated with more privileged groups. Consequently, selectors were more likely to misrecognise applicants from lower social class or ethnic minority backgrounds as lacking in potential.[156]

2.3 Summary

This chapter has outlined two competing theoretical conceptions of fairness in relation to access and admission to higher education: the dominant theoretical paradigm of meritocratic *equality* of opportunity which holds that university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of social background in accordance with *procedural fairness* interpreted as requiring equal treatment; and the meritocratic *equity* of opportunity perspective which critiques the assumption of genuine equality of opportunity to demonstrate merit in societies characterised by high levels of socioeconomic inequality and emphasises the need to judge prospective university students' academic qualifications in light of the socioeconomic circumstances in which they were obtained in pursuit of greater *distributive fairness*. A review of the existing statistical research relating to England and the wider UK shows that access and admissions to higher education generally, and to the most selective institutions in particular, is to some degree fair in the traditional meritocratic *equality* of opportunity sense of being primarily attributable to corresponding differences in prior attainment. However, substantial

socioeconomic inequalities in the chances of access remain even after indicators of 'merit' have been taken into account. Quantitative studies which have explored university access and admissions data from the perspective of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and distributive fairness have evidenced the significant role played by socioeconomic inequalities in the creation of a large attainment gap, and demonstrate that a contextualised approach to assessing academic achievement at school which takes individual socioeconomic circumstances into account can increase distributive fairness without necessarily jeopardising students' achievement at degree level. Finally, qualitative studies which have drawn on institutionally-authored policy documents, material published on university websites, and interviews with university staff responsible for developing and implementing institutional access and admissions policies at universities in England and the wider UK, show that fair access admissions decisions have been framed principally with reference to notions of meritocratic equality of opportunity, with little in the way of engagement with competing conceptions of fairness which recognise and seek to redress the impact of wider socioeconomic inequality on the capacities of individuals to demonstrate merit.

3. Research methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted for this project, which included the collection and analysis of primary data from in-depth interviews with undergraduate admissions personnel, and the analysis of secondary data in the form of publicly available, institutionally-authored policy documents. While numerous large-scale statistical analyses of quantitative data have yielded important insights into patterns and processes of fair access,[157] a qualitative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how admissions policies are constructed conceptually and applied in practice. And while most qualitative studies in this field to date have focused on a single course,[158] a single institution,[159] or a small sub-set of institutions,[160] this study draws on data for a large and nationally representative sample of higher education institutions in England offering courses with high academic entry requirements and a high demand for places, making the study findings both richly detailed and more generalizable than previous studies.

3.1 Sampling of institutions for in-depth interviews

Our primary research involved qualitative interviews with Heads of Admission and with Admissions Selectors involved in the undergraduate admissions decision-making process at 17 HEIs located all over England. Using *Complete University Guide 2018* data on the average UCAS points of entrants we selected a sample of English HEIs with comparatively high academic entry requirements, encompassing mainly Old (pre-1992) but also New (post-1992) universities, and aiming for representation of HEIs from every English region, and an oversampling of those in London and the South East given the preponderance of HEIs in these areas. Of the HEIs originally sampled, four declined to participate in the study,[161] resulting in an achieved sample of 17 HEIs as shown in Table 1. Eleven of the participating HEIs are Old HEIs at which the average home student entered with 487 UCAS points, compared to 413 for Old HEIs in England generally.[162] The other six participating HEIs are New HEIs at which the average home entrant came in with 340 UCAS points, compared to 306 for New HEIs in England generally.

Table 1. Higher education institutions (HEIs) sampled for interview

	All HEIs in England		HEIs included in sample	
Region	Old HEIs	New HEIs	Old HEIs	New HEIs
North East & North West	5	12	2	1
Yorkshire & Humberside	5	5	1	1
Midlands	7	11	1	1
East	3	6	1	0
South West	3	9	1	1
South East	8	9	2	1
London	11	11	3	1
Totals	42	63	11	6
Average UCAS points	413	306	487	340

Note: Data on the institutional-average UCAS points of new undergraduate students was taken from The Complete University Guide 2018, published in 2017.

At each participating HEI an initial scoping interview was carried out, usually with the Head of Admissions. Further interviews were then carried out with Admissions Selectors for programmes identified in the scoping interviews as having high academic entry requirements

and a high demand for places, and also with other relevant professionals such as those leading the outreach teams. A total of 78 interviews were conducted, as summarised in table 2, below.

Table 2. Admissions personnel sampled for interviews

	Old HEIs	New HEIs	All HEIs
Heads of Admission	12	7	19
Selectors for science programmes	12	6	18
Selectors for arts/humanities/soc.sci. programmes	28	5	33
Other related professionals	6	2	8
Totals	58	20	78

Note: Heads of Admission refers to those with a high-level responsibility for undergraduate admissions for the HEI in question and includes one former Head of Admission for a New HEI.
The Admissions Selectors in the sample were selecting for the following Science programmes: Maths x 1, Physics x 1, Chemistry x 2, Computer Science x 2, Engineering x 2, Medicine x 3, Health Sciences x 1, Midwifery x 3, Nursing x 1, Occupational Therapy x 1, and Physiotherapy x 1; and for the following arts/humanities/social science programmes: Law x 7, Economics x 6, Politics/PPE x 4, Sociology x 1, History x 1, English x 1, Languages x 1, Education x 2, Accountancy x 1, Business x 1, Architecture x 4, Film/TV/Journalism x 3, and Art x 1.

Almost all of the interviews took place during the 2017/18 academic year and almost all were carried out by the same interviewer, Dr Mandy Powell. The interviews were intended to be dialogic in nature, with the interviewer seeking to engage university admissions personnel in reflective and constructively critical discussions about what constitutes fairness in the abstract, how conceptualisations of fairness are put into practice at their institution, and what positive and/or negative impacts admissions policies and practices may have on the social representativeness of the institution's student body.

The initial scoping interviews with Heads of Admission (HoAs) set out to explore what higher-order principles informed institutional admissions policies; what criteria and processes were used to select prospective undergraduates; and how the admissions policies and practices discussed related to and impacted on widening participation at the institution. These first interviews also enabled us to gather information about whether admissions was all or mostly centralised or all or mostly devolved to academics within departments in each institution; and to identify selectors for highly academically selective, high demand programmes at the HEI for subsequent in-depth interview.

Table 3, below, summarizes the key features of the institution and admissions system for each HoA interviewed. Six of those interviewed worked at Old universities, with mostly or completely devolved admissions systems, in which academics served as the admissions selectors, and where there was a high demand for places on most (H2, H8, H15, H17) or some programmes (H10 and H16). A further six HoAs interviewed also worked at Old universities, but ones where the admission system was mostly or entirely centralised, and admissions decisions were made mostly or entirely by professional services staff (PSS), and there was a high demand for most (H6, H7 and H13) or some programmes (H5, H9 and H19). Two interviewees represented New universities where only a few programmes were in high demand, but where the admissions system was mostly devolved and selectors were generally academics (H14, H18). The remaining five interviews were with HoAs at New universities with partly or wholly centralised admissions systems where admissions selectors were mostly PSS staff and only a few programmes were in high demand (H3, H4, H11, H12) except in one case where most programmes were in high demand (H1).

Table 3. Characteristics of Heads of Admission interviewed

Institution type	Admissions System	Admissions Selectors	Programmes in high demand	Case IDs
Old HEI	Devolved	Mostly academics	All or most	H2, H8, H15, H17
Old HEI	Devolved	Mostly academics	Some	H10, H16
Old HEI	Centralised	Mostly PSS	All or most	H6, H7, H13
Old HEI	Centralised	Mostly PSS	Some	H5, H9, H19
New HEI	Devolved	Mostly academics	Few	H14, H18
New HEI	Centralised	Mostly PSS	Few	H3, H4, H11, H12
New HEI	Centralised	Mostly PSS	All or most	H1

Notes: Interviews were conducted with more than one current or former incumbent of the role of HoA at two of the institutions included in our sample, resulting in a total of 19 HoA interviews across 17 institutions. PSS denotes Professional Service Staff.

Subsequent interviews with admissions selectors centred on discussions of how 'strong', 'weak' and 'borderline' applicants were conceptualised in theory and identified in practice; and on how admissions policies and practices intersected with the university's widening participation strategy and impacted positively and/or negatively on the admissions chances of non-traditional students.

Table 4, below, summarises some of the key characteristics of our sample of Admissions Selectors. Most of the selectors interviewed worked for Old universities (40/51), reflecting the fact that the New institutions in our sample had fewer high demand courses from which to sample prospective interviewees. Professional service staff (PSS) accounted for a little under half of those interviewed overall (23/51), but closer to half of the sub-sample of selectors working for Old universities (21/40) and less than a fifth of the sub-sample working for New universities (2/11), reflecting the tendency for generally highly centralised New universities to devolve admissions decisions to academics for the relatively small number of high-demand courses they offer. Around a third of the overall sample were selectors for science programmes (18/51), although the selectors at Old universities were much less likely to represent science programmes (12/40) than was the case for selectors at New institutions (6/11).

Table 4. Characteristics of Admissions Selectors interviewed

Institution type	Programme discipline	Admissions selector	Case IDs
Old HEI	Science	Academic	S4, S6, S22, S28, S35, S38, S41, S49
Old HEI	Science	PSS	S25, S30, S36, S44
Old HEI	Arts	Academic	S5, S12, S23, S26, S27, S29, S33, S34, S43, S48, S50
Old HEI	Arts	PSS	S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S20, S21, S24, S31, S32, S37, S39, S42, S45, S51
New HEI	Science	Academic	S2, S7, S8, S9, S46
New HEI	Science	PSS	S1
New HEI	Arts	Academic	S3, S10, S11, S47
New HEI	Arts	PSS	S40

Notes: PSS denotes Professional Service Staff.

3.2 Sampling of Access and Participation Plans for 2020/21-2024/25

In addition to interviewing admissions personnel during the 2017/18 academic year we also collected and analysed the Access and Participation Plans covering the five year period from 2020/21 to 2024/25 submitted to the Office for Students (OfS) in 2019 by the 25 higher education providers in England identified by the Sutton Trust as higher-tariff providers.[163] Eleven of these 25 higher-tariff providers also feature in our interview sample.

Table 5. Characteristics of HEIs included in Access and Participation Plan sample

Institution name	Ratio of POLAR Q5:Q1 students	% of new entrants from state-maintained school	Average UCAS points of new entrants	UCAS points expressed in terms of three A-level grades
Oxford	15.3	60.6	205	>A*A*A*
Imperial	14.8	67.1	190	>A*A*A*
UCL	12.9	65.9	175	>A*A*A*
Cambridge	12.8	65.3	212	>A*A*A*
LSE	11.8	70.9	168	A*A*A*
King's	11.6	77.8	171	A*A*A*
Bristol	11.5	79.8	170	A*A*A*
Bath	11.4	74.1	174	>A*A*A*
Durham	10.0	65.7	192	>A*A*A*
Royal Holloway	8.1	85.2	135	AAB
Birmingham	7.4	79.8	159	A*A*A
Exeter	7.3	64.7	163	A*A*A
Nottingham	7.3	80.4	151	A*AA
Warwick	7.2	78.0	163	A*A*A
Reading	6.0	85.1	126	ABB
Leeds	5.7	81.3	160	A*A*A
Southampton	5.7	87.2	155	A*AA
Surrey	5.4	90.4	148	AAA
Sheffield	5.3	89.1	151	A*AA
York	5.1	82.2	152	A*AA
Newcastle	4.7	76.3	152	A*AA
Manchester	4.7	85.4	167	A*A*A*
Lancaster	4.0	90.3	151	A*AA
Liverpool	3.8	87.5	142	AAA
Leicester	3.1	91.0	133	AAB

Notes: Figures relating to the percentage of students from low participation areas (POLAR4 quintile 1) and from state schools are taken from Table T1 – Participation of under-represented groups in higher education of HESA's Widening participation UK performance indicators series for the academic year 2018/19. Figures for the average UCAS tariff score of new students entering the university refer to 2018/19 and are taken from the Complete University Guide for 2021. These scores are based on the translation of A-level grades into numeric values (A*=56, A=48, B=40, C=32, D=24 and E=16). The totals include the UCAS points achieved by new entrants for all of their Key Stage 5 qualifications, not just those included in the academic conditions of their offers of university places.

Table 5 describes some of the key characteristics of the institutions included in our Access and Participation Plan sample, listed in descending order according to the ratio of new entrants from POLAR quintiles 5 and 1 in 2018-19. Nine providers recorded very high ratios of POLAR quintile 5 to POLAR quintile 1 students, ranging from 10:1 to as high as 15:1. Five institutions had Q5:Q1 ratios of less than 10:1 but higher than 7:1, while the remaining eleven institutions had ratios of 6:1 or less. All providers in the sample drew less than ten percent of their new entrants from low HE participation neighbourhoods compared to a wider population proportion of approximately twenty percent. All admitted proportionately fewer – in the case of seven providers substantially fewer – new entrants from state-maintained schools than the percentage of all pupils who attend such schools nationally, which stands at around 93%. By definition all institutions in the sample are higher-tariff providers, although there is a degree of variation in the average UCAS points of new entrants as indicated in column three and expressed in terms of A-level grades in column four.

Access and Participation Plans (APPs) replace the Access Agreements (AAs) previously submitted annually by providers to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Unlike OFFA, which permitted HEIs to set their own widening access targets, the OfS has set challenging new widening access targets for England's most academically selective universities, calling on them to deliver a rapid reduction in the ratio of young entrants from areas with the highest and lowest rates of young participation in higher education (POLAR quintiles 5 and 1 respectively) from an average of 5:1 currently, to 3:1 by 2024/25, and to 1:1 by 2038/39. The APPs contain individual HEIs' formal responses to this challenge, setting out their widening access targets for the period from 2020/21 to 2024/25 and their strategies for achieving these targets. Our analysis of these APPs therefore provides an up-to-date picture of institutional thinking on fair access and admissions and insights into how this thinking has evolved since our interviews with admissions personnel during the 2017/18 academic year.

Both sets of interviews and the text from the sampled Access and Participation Plans were subject to a systematic thematic analysis using NVivo. The themes were developed inductively via a constant comparison of cases, and the analysis sought to establish the prevalence of each theme as well as any patterns of association between themes across cases.

3.3 Ethical considerations and data archiving

Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Department of Sociology at Durham University. The project adheres to the ethical guidelines published by the British Sociological Association and informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all those who agreed to be interviewed. Verbatim transcription was undertaken by a professional provider in line with ethical protocols. Because admissions policies and practices are politically sensitive topics, interviewees were advised that the audio recordings of their interview would be destroyed after transcription and that the interview transcript would be anonymized such that no individual or institution would be identifiable from any versions of the transcript shared in the public domain. Interviewees were invited to indicate during the interview where they wished any of their comments to be regarded as confidential and thus removed from the anonymised transcript. By committing to anonymise the interviews in this way we were able to encourage interviewees to speak freely and frankly to us. Subsequently, all anonymised transcripts were sent to participants for confirmation that they were accurate records of the conversation and

had been satisfactorily anonymised. Only some participants responded to this invitation to check their interview transcript, and all requests for amendments were honoured.

Interview participants were also asked to consent to the use of selected extracts from anonymised interview transcripts in this report and other materials intended for the public domain, and to the subsequent deposit of anonymised interview transcripts in the Qualidata archive for other researchers to use. The anonymised transcripts will be made available in 2021 at http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/.

4. Findings from interviews with Heads of Admission

This chapter reports on the findings of an analysis of in-depth interviews with Heads of Admission (HoAs) at 17 higher education institutions (HEIs) in England offering courses with high academic entry requirements and a high demand for places. The interviews were conducted during the 2017/18 academic year and sought to gain insight into the principles informing institutional policies on undergraduate admissions. During the course of the interviews, HoAs were invited to reflect on the overarching goal of admissions; the role of prior academic attainment in assessing applications; the meaning of fair access and admissions; perceptions of the socioeconomic diversity of the student body; and the use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions. Our analyses of these interviews considers the links between institutions' admissions policies and the two approaches to fairness discussed in chapter two: the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm and procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment, and the meritocratic equity of opportunity perspective which emphasises the goal of distributive fairness.

4.1 The overarching goal of admissions

Recruiting "the best students"

In line with the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm, most of the HoAs interviewed identified the principle goal of admissions as being to recruit "the best students" possible. One third of interviewees stated that recruiting "the best students" was their sole goal:

My remit is to … achieve the optimal recruitment for [this university]. So not necessarily maximum, but optimal. […] for us it's about making sure that the students we recruit are the best we can really get, because we can't get any more of them because we haven't got anywhere to put them if we take them. (H1, New HEI)

I think the ultimate goal is to ensure that [this university] has got a high calibre of students. (H6, Old HEI)

So we're not tasked with making sure we hit the numbers, I would say. We are tasked with ensuring that we have admitted to the university the students that, I suppose, the academic community have said they need, if that makes sense. (H13, Old HEI)

I think everybody recognises the need for us to get the... for their own benefit they need to recruit the best students, because they're going to be judged on their students. (H15, Old HEI)

A further fifth highlighted that admitting "the best students" was an important goal alongside ensuring that student number and associated tuition fee income targets were met:

The ultimate purpose of admissions is to meet target, but that's too narrow, because it's also about quality, it's about reputation, it's about experience, isn't it? (H5, Old HEI)

So I have got to not screw up my numbers so that I don't turn away good students where we needed them, but there's not that expectation that I will deliver the numbers no matter what. (H9, Old HEI)

I'm tasked with bringing the right quality of students at the right volume. So my key metric is quality, but the volume provides financial sustainability. So you can't do one without the other. […] So rather than a financial target, I've got a quality target. That's the thing that has primacy. (H12, New HEI)

Only two HoAs mentioned meeting student number targets being the main goal without also mentioning the 'quality' of admitted students; in both cases these were New universities with only a few high-demand programmes:

It's the lifeblood of this university because essentially something like… Can't remember the exact percentage, but certainly high eighties percent of our income comes from student fees. (H3, New HEI)

I guess it is about recruiting as many as we can, or to target... (H14, New HEI)

Selecting for success at degree level

The "best students" were equated with those most likely to succeed if admitted to the university. Most interviewees defined success in terms of completing the programme and achieving a degree:

…so the first thing is do we have a reasonable expectation that this person is going to make a success of the degree course? […] It means getting through to the end of the degree course and achieving a degree. It's not about are they going to get a First. That's not something we can predict or justify. (H1, New HEI)

I think ethically we've got to recruit individuals who can succeed. (H10, Old HEI)

I suppose ultimately being able to just progress through it and have something at the end of the course, have had a good experience and have a degree to show for it. […] It's not to say that they would necessarily find the course easy, and that probably is a bit of a waste of time, happy that they would be challenged on the course, but that they would thrive with that challenge and not just feel that none of this means anything to me, this was the wrong decision, I need to leave, and a student choosing to withdraw because it's the wrong course is the worst possible outcome for us, I think. (H17, Old HEI)

In a minority of cases, success was equated more stringently with a high-level of achievement at degree level:

…ultimately, actually, no, it's students who get 2.1 or 1st. (H2, Old HEI)

You want to recruit students who are going to come and be engaged, involved, hardworking and able students. I mean you can say we're trying to recruit the people who are going to thrive on the course. That sort of sums it up, really, because it is people with those qualities who then will come and thrive here. […] I think we would probably quite happily admit 75% of people who apply. They would all be okay. But you're trying to distinguish the ones who are going to be more than okay. (H8, Old HEI)

For a third of HoAs, success was defined as not just achieving a degree but also going on to be successful in the labour market after graduating:

Well, fundamentally, it's in both our interests for that sort of student to make it all the way through university life. Well, as I say, fundamentally, it's what we should be doing. For me,

retention is a waste of a student experience if we lost them on the way. We shouldn't be taking them on unless we think we can get them all the way through a degree and into employment. (H3, New HEI)

It's the right student on the right course, but also making sure they successfully complete and have the career to what they wish to become after graduation. (H4, New HEI)

I think it would be awful if we were going out there, we were recruiting a load of students and they were not passing their first year, they were dropping out at some point, they were not getting good degrees, and, ultimately, dare I say, not getting into a career which allowed them to pay off whatever debt they'd incurred. So I think, therefore, successful is about them getting to the end of the course, doing really well in that course, having enjoyed that course and looking to go into a career which they find fulfilling. (H10, Old HEI)

4.2 The role of prior academic attainment

Selection on '"merit"

Most HoAs reported that, in looking for "the best students" who were those "most likely to succeed", they were looking first and foremost for applicants with the most "merit" as evidenced by high levels of prior and predicted academic attainment:

… that's what we're interested in, obviously, as a higher education institution, it's the merit, it's the academic strengths that they can present to us. That's the first bit that we look at and the last bit that we look at when it comes to confirmation and clearing. (H7, Old HEI)

Our policy is quite clear that we're looking for someone who has potential, and then how on earth do you measure that? I'm sure the traditional view is, well, they've got all their predicted three As at A level and they've got a glowing personal statement. They've done Duke of Edinburgh gold, I don't know, all those historic things. […] In terms of how that's thought of through the admissions process, I think it probably has come down to, these are the criteria that have been agreed with the admissions selector for our subject, and individuals have to fit that. (H10, Old HEI)

Some HoAs pointed to evidence showing that prior attainment is predictive of future success:

…they know that the majority of students who come in and who don't have an A* in maths, so who've come in without an A* in the past, do struggle. And we've done quite a lot of research into how students perform on the quant and qual subjects with certain mixes. Now, it isn't impossible for a student with a B in maths to do well, but it is far more likely for a student with a B in maths to do less well than a student with an A*. And of course, we have A* math students who fail, but very, very few of them. So we've got quite a lot of research. (H6, Old HEI)

I suppose it's our main... it's based, I suppose, on looking at the grades the students have come in on with A levels, and then how they achieve once they're here. So if you look at retention, if you look at achievement, then it all... it's the evidence to tell us that this is the level that we need to be at. (H15, Old HEI)

Others, however, indicated that it was simply assumed that those with high prior attainment will continue to do well:

So, I suppose we use qualifications as a crude measure. I suppose if someone's done well at GCSEs, someone's done well at A-levels, or reasonably well at these things, you can make a natural presumption that they will continue to... On one trajectory. (H11, New HEI)

It's interesting, because one of the things I would like to do, and I've never had the opportunity to or never been able to interest anybody, is, is there any correlation between what offer we make, what grades they come in with, and then their progress on the course. (H18, New HEI)

All five HoAs at institutions where only a few programmes were in high demand reported that relatively high entry requirements served as essentially the sole criterion for admission for lower demand programmes:

So as I said before, we've got very clear criteria on the tariff that we're looking for. […] And because of the recruitment position that we're in, we don't look very far beyond their ability to achieve that qualification level. (H3, New HEI)

Mostly, it's a relatively straightforward thing, so you know, we, we'll get the application. Based on predicted grades, we make an offer. (H12, New HEI)

So, check that the person is taking those qualifications or can possibly meet those entry requirements. And then, they would get a conditional offer. (H14, New HEI)

Similarly, most HoAs at institutions where only some courses were in higher demand reported that applicants for lower demand courses would most likely to be offered a place provided that they met the relatively high academic entry requirements:

… realistically, we have about 140-ish programmes. […] Of those, maybe 25 are highly selective and a good 100, realistically, if someone's being turned away, there's no case for them having a place here. So within those contexts […] it does almost become a: You know what, if you can get the grades we get at A-level, you can self-select onto the course. (H9, Old HEI)

But yes, I admit, we have, you know, a grand idea of the student we want, but we're in a position where we have to recruit a certain number of students a year. And if I only recruited students who were going to be the next entrepreneurs, I would have half my departments without students because that's the… We're fortunate enough at [this university] though that we still recruit a very high grade level, but in some departments we are in a position where we will make offers to everyone who's likely to obtain those grades because of the competitive nature that we're now operating in. (H16, Old HEI)

With a lot of courses if they meet the entry requirements, they will get an offer. But then we'll have courses where they are interviewed where it is actually a selection interview as opposed to, come and visit us and have a chat with us. So there will be some selection for the more selective courses, the higher applications, but a lot of courses will make offers if you meet the entry requirements. (H19, Old HEI)

Suitability for the programme or profession

At institutions offering high-demand programmes providing training for entry into regulated professions such as nursing and teaching, academic qualifications were important but less so than being able to demonstrate real understanding of and genuine interest in the course together with a compatible set of personal values:

So you know, you are looking for a genuine interest, someone that can participate in the subject, someone that's got an inquisitive mind. So in nursing, which is, that's more, I say, more about value base. And there are people that are better positioned to talk about exactly what happens at the interview. But ultimately, you know, the professional, they're not just wanting somebody who's just, you know, wanting somebody who's got very sound academic qualities, but doesn't really care for people, yes, can't get on with people—those sorts of things. That would not be good for, you know… For the nursing community or society as a whole. (H12, New HEI)

At institutions offering high-demand programmes in creative fields such as art, design, music and architecture, grades in formal qualifications achieved at school might be deemed less important for applicants displaying exceptional talent and skill in their portfolios or auditions:

…there's some kind of exemptions should an exceptional applicant provide a great portfolio or audition as well. So if they come to the [music programme] and they've done really great auditions, the academics might ask to lower the entry requirements. Or when we get the level 3 results where we'll take the interview and the portfolio into consideration because they had provided a strong portfolio, a strong audition. But it's a rare occasion. So usually first, academic ability, are they ready? (H4, New HEI)

Strong, weak and borderline applicants

At institutions where some or all of the programmes are in high demand, HoAs reported that for high demand courses applicants with high levels of prior and predicted attainment would be the first to receive offers of places:

A green would be somebody who's predicted three A's, the course is an A and two Bs as their standard or typical offer. Everything looks absolutely spot-on, there is no ambiguity whatsoever within the application form, offer done. It's a quick turnaround on that. (H7, Old HEI)

So somebody who looks like they've got three A*s and got 100% in their personal statement, 100% in the UKCAT and 100% interview, they're generally going to be number one. (H13, Old HEI)

So we know from historic data, etc., that for round one [the highest achieving applicants], you're always going to be good enough to get an offer. Nobody is going to come through [who is better]. We always have enough offers to make, which would mean that they will get an offer. So those offers could go out. (H16, Old HEI)

Subsequently, the 'cut-off point' in terms of prior attainment is determined by the field of applicants that year and data for recent admissions cycles:

With the more selective courses, it does vary by what the departments want and we'll do kind of chunks of gathered fields, so we'll have very detailed criteria. Then it might be, well, we've got to November, so we'll score what we've had so far. We know the definite make offer, we'll know the definite reject. And then there will be the group in the middle, so we'll hang on to those. That happens throughout the process and then about now [near the January UCAS main deadline], we'll start looking at those middles and see where we need to draw our lines. That takes us a while actually, it's done quite carefully. (H5, Old HEI)

…what you'll say is based on last year actually, anyone achieving 90% you can just send their offer out. That's not a problem. And anyone below 50%, you can send their rejection. […] And then what you've got is that pool in there, and what you find is, okay, we're now at Christmas. We can see that we can drop that… Or maybe we're at November. We can drop that to 80% now. We can see, and now we can drop that one to… using arbitrary numbers. And then when it comes to the end of March, you can say actually for this one it's 78%. So anyone below that is rejected, anyone above that has got an offer. And that's where I think the selector experience and all of the data… Our data around that is getting better based on previous years, but that still feels quite a dark art at times. (H13, Old HEI)

…depending on the competitive nature of the programme, they will be put into rounds at that point, and what we do is we work our way down the rounds essentially. So somebody who's got super-duper [predicted A-level grades], you know, clearly an excellent student, an offer might go out very early to them. They'll be in round one. We know they're always going to get an offer. Anyone who is round one always gets an offer. And then you just go down the rounds […] So depending on how many people have been made offers in round one, it might then be that somebody in round two will have to, right, wait around until March. (H16, Old HEI)

Applicants with less than stellar levels of prior attainment were deemed too academically risky and would tend to be rejected quickly:

If someone's got three Cs, and they're a WP [widening participation] student, with the best will in the world, they're probably not going to get in. But if someone's got three As and they're a WP student and the requirement was A*AA, chances are they will get in. It depends again on the WP-ness of the student and the extent to which they have missed their grades. There's not much we can do with a three C student no matter how dire their circumstances. (H6, Old HEI)

A red would be, it's a three A offer and somebody's predicted B, B, C. Their AS result show that they got C's at their AS certificate. They'd cashed them in. Their personal statement is maybe three, four lines and the academic reference says yes, this person attended the school. That is a very clear cut that unfortunately, this is a red, a reject. (H7, Old HEI)

Likewise, you know, if somebody applies with three Cs, they're never coming to [this university]. So they can get rejected straightaway. (H16, Old HEI)

Qualifications other than A-level

Applicants pursuing BTEC or other 'non-standard qualifications' tended to be judged less likely to succeed at degree level than applicants studying for A-levels:

We had at one point when I started. I can't remember which programme it was but one of our programmes. It didn't even call it a non-standard qualification. It just, it basically pretty much called them second rate qualifications on our website: We will interview candidates if they are taking borderline, I think they were called borderline qualifications. So there's stuff like that that's not very good to look at. (H9, Old HEI)

So, we have a lot of initiatives around this. And so, the reality is that we know students who come in with BTECs don't achieve as high. I mean, it's a common sector-wide problem. (H11, New HEI)

And thinking about the BTECs, the Cambridge Technicals as well, there are pockets in the university who will accept it and there's pockets in the university who won't accept it.

Because they just don't see that the applicants who come to us, are ready for university study, particularly in engineering subjects and that they haven't got the background because of that course. So some of our engineering courses and maths and things like that are asking for, even if somebody's doing the full three A-level, equivalent BTEC, A-level maths on top of that and to me that seems unfair. But I can understand why you wouldn't want to accept somebody who is just not going to be able to progress and succeed in the course and setting people up to fail. (H19, Old HEI)

However, some HoAs were keen to counter that perception:

So anyone with A Level or IB, we'll make a decision. If they're doing BTEC or access to HE diploma then the tutors may want to interview in some cases or at least look at the application. That's something I'm trying to stamp down on. Because, well, because I'm suspicious it's based on prejudice rather than reality and particularly with BTEC with quite a few changes being made for BTEC qualification. And when you drill down into these things, they're so often anecdotal: "We had five students took BTEC and two of them failed this paper that was crucial" and we were: "Well what is the failure rate for the A-level students, 35%, right okay." So there's that kind of risk there. I'm not convinced we have the robust rationale for doing so. (H9, Old HEI)

My background was from an institution where it was more BTEC than A-level. So I was quite shocked when I came here at how few BTEC applicants there were. But we have really got to turn it around and make sure that our staff understand the value of those qualifications. Particularly when somebody's got a mixed set of qualifications that they have still got the potential to succeed. And we look at the right things on their application. (H19, Old HEI)

Over-estimation of A-level grade predictions

Despite the primacy given to prior and predicted academic attainment at A-level as a key indicator of future academic performance, it was widely recognised that the predicted A-level grades on which most applicants were judged were unreliable and often overestimated:

And I think also, in the very febrile atmosphere we're working in now, in terms of the pressure on schools to over-predict, that's become... that's not giving us very... well, it's giving us very little information... (H15, Old HEI)

And we know from all the research that UCAS have done that predicted grades are sometimes two grades out, and in some institutions, again it's anecdotal, but there's anecdotal information about parents putting pressure on staff to bump up the predicted grades so they will get an offer. (H18, New HEI)

We used to have some AS grades to give us a clue. But they've gone. So then essentially you got a teacher telling you how good you think the student is, and of course they want that student to get in. So they're going to overrate it. (H3, New HEI)

More than half of the HoAs interviewed acknowledged that the tendency for A-level grades to be over-predicted meant that academic entry requirements were often relaxed in August for "near-miss" applicants who had failed to achieve the grades stipulated in their conditional offer of a place. This practice was commonplace at institutions where few courses were in high demand:

So, I suppose the strategy we adopt is that we know, come confirmation, the chances are for some courses, that we won't get enough people with the published entry requirements, and we will have to drop our requirements. That's currently the practice. (H11, New HEI)

We do have that flexibility [on grades] when the results come in anyway. […] at the confirmation [stage]. Yes, I think the attitude is, we would rather someone who's committed themselves to us, who's chosen us as their first choice and who has maybe dropped a grade or a couple of grades. We would rather take someone like that than just take someone with the same level in clearing who's not got that commitment. (H18, New HEI)

And also we're quite generous on evaluation. Because fundamentally we know it's quite likely that we will go into clearing with a lower tariff level than the published one in the cycle. (H3, New HEI)

However, acceptance of "near-miss" offer holders was not restricted to recruiting institutions, but was also practiced at institutions where some or most courses were in high demand:

…there is a certain practice in the sector now in schools, where they are actually predicting, over-predicting to try and get the students an unconditional offer or at least get them an offer to then hope that, although they will not actually achieve the offer, all they have to do is achieve the offer. Because they are still holding an offer, they will still be accepted as a near miss. (H2, Old HEI)

Or what might also happen… And this happens every year. We have a number of the flagged students who we make an offer who then don't make the grade. And then we have a conversation. There's always a number of offers we can make to the marginal fails. It happens at every university. It's just a question of whether we are under or over target at the end A-level selecting, by how much and in which departments. (H6, Old HEI)

What we tend to do is we will have, I don't know, a standard near-miss process, if you like, but it won't apply across the board. It will apply by individual programme. So it might be […] For French, we ask for AAA with an A in French. If somebody gets the grades on the day and they've got AAB, as long as one of the As is in the French and we've got space, they'll be in. As is the case with some modern languages, it could be actually, no, it's ABB. We might go down to… That might be what we set ourselves as the standard, if you like, and then that would be applied across the board if we need to. (H13, Old HEI)

4.3 The meaning of fair admissions

When asked what was meant by fair admissions at their institution, most HoAs pointed to the importance, first and foremost, of the procedural fairness principles of transparency and consistency, but also spoke secondarily to distributive fairness concerns arising from an awareness that socioeconomic inequality impacts on attainment at school:

For me it's about being upfront about how we consider applications; how we process things; what our selection criteria are; what the entry requirements are and actually applying them fairly and consistently to every applicant. But also, as we are moving towards this differential-offer scheme, making sure that applicants that have been at a disadvantage have an opportunity to come to [this university] and benefit from being a student here. (H19, Old HEI)

Procedural fairness and transparency

The importance of transparency was highlighted by two thirds of those interviewed. Transparency was taken to mean clearly spelling out the institution's selection criteria and processes to prospective applicants in advance:

So there is a piece around fairness about giving people information, so that they have a fair crack of the whip, and if they were to look at it, they would know whether they had a great or a lesser chance of being admitted to [this university] with the qualifications that they've got. (H6, Old HEI)

What does fairness look like? I guess, to my perspective, the fairness is, you know, if we're clear and upfront and transparent to start with, so that there is no hidden agenda for an applicant. They know from the start what [this university] is about, what [this university] needs and what you will get as a result of studying at [this university]. (H7, Old HEI).

I suppose this is where the transparency comes in. We try to make it clear what it is that we're looking for […] We have people talking all the time in schools about what we are looking for and what we're not looking for. […] You try and make the process as transparent as possible in terms of what it's designed to achieve. And they respond pretty well to it. (H8, Old HEI)

And so that is the other test I use for [the] fairness thing. I am quite insistent on. If we do it, we put it online. We put it out in the open. If we don't want to put it out in the open, I mean not every minute detail, just the broad strokes. If there is some reason your application should be rejected, you should be able to find out that could be a reason before you apply. And if we don't want to do that then we need to ask ourselves why we are unhappy using that criterion in the first place. (H9, Old HEI)

…I think previous because [this university] was quite criticised, I think, previously about who is selected and who get… whatever. So it went sort of completely the other way, I think, and then put everything out there to say, well, this is what we're asking for. This is what we'll look at. This is how it will work. So I think all of that clarity really on fair admissions is out there. (H13, Old HEI)

Transparency was also equated with being able to provide unsuccessful applicants with a clear and helpful rationale for their rejection so that queries and complaints could be dealt with effectively:

And make it transparent, so our admissions policy is on the website, accessible by everyone. Once we receive the application, every applicant gets a copy or link to our admissions policy, so it's very transparent. And it also explains the appeal. So if they're unhappy with the service or unhappy with the decision, they can appeal or go down to complaints team's level. (H4, New HEI)

So I think, for me, the fairness is about that process and the ability to complain about the process if there's a perceived lack of fairness there. But also being treated as individuals, as customers. You know, the, sort of, John Lewis versus another kind of store, I suppose, in a way. It's in our interests, it's absolutely in the applicants' interest, and the data that's out there in the public, sort of, gives us a hint as to whether what we're doing is fair or not. Even though we might have some concerns about some elements of what it says or doesn't say. (H10, Old HEI)

Two HoAs highlighted the lack of transparency around the acceptance of "near-miss" applicants:

If we're trying to... I mean, I suppose if the... I mean, I think, ultimately, presumably, the government will actually force UCAS to probably put data on its website about what entry points we will actually... We actually do accept. And whether we can continue to, as a sector, get away with advertising one product, when we ultimately know that confirmation... And especially when we're making unconditional offers. So, based on that selective group of students with those predicted higher grades, are selected for an unconditional offer. So, I think that's just the common practice across the sector. (H11, New HEI)

…on a national basis, you'll know that you'll have, for example, quite stringent entry requirements for medicine in some universities, and, but you'll also know that during clearing, you know, universities drop their grades quite significantly to fill their spaces. Is that fair? I don't know. No. So you can argue that, you know, if you're changing the requirements through the process, that's less fair than having a transparent process at the start. (H12, New HEI)

Procedural fairness and consistency

Consistency was also highlighted as a key tenet of fair admissions by almost all HoAs. Consistency was defined as systematic decision-making unaffected by error, idiosyncrasy, or unwarranted bias towards particular individuals or groups:

But besides the [internal widening participation programme], we're not positively or negatively discriminating against any socioeconomic group. So we don't look at an application form and go, All right, that person is from group X: yes, we should, we should look at giving a better offer for that than over Y. (H12, New HEI)

I suppose, again, it's that idea of if you put something like the WP issue around it, knowing that you're looking at the same criteria for every single applicant, at least you can guarantee an element of consistency. (H16, Old HEI)

We don't really have conversations, I don't think, about fairness. We're very standardised and I think that's sometimes taken as a proxy for fairness. (H17, Old HEI)

I think it's looking at, if you are recruiting to a specific subject or to a suite of courses, it's making sure that the applicants are treated consistently and equally. (H18, New HEI)

…it is really difficult to get consistency in the way that applications are dealt with and that is the biggest thing. Because everybody has their own ideas about how to do things and we are a fairly older university, a huge university. In terms of applications the most popular for undergraduates. So there's a lot of people involved in the process and making sure that it is consistent across all those people, is quite difficult. (H19, Old HEI)

Eight HoAs pointed to the consistency benefits to be had from having a centralised, rather than a devolved, admissions system:

I've not yet, with this [centralised admissions] team, ever had to go to an individual and say I don't understand you, you're not consistent, I don't agree with… You know I've never had to do that. You point out the individual coding errors, but that's not what I'm talking about at all. (H1, New HEI)

You have our standard admissions officers doing the day-to-day work, fairly rigid set of rules. It's really important, consistency is key, you've got to be fair, you've got to be equal. (H9, Old HEI)

Centralised admissions systems were seen as valuable for consistency purposes in that they eliminated the risk of "weird and wonderful decision-making" by academic members of staff:

So I quite like centralisation. You don't… You don't get the same customisation…Of view on the student. But I would also suggest you don't get the same possible bias that you might get within a more localised area. So I would prefer that as far as possible we should centralise the decisions. (H3, New HEI)

But it makes it a lot easier if you've got centralised selection because then you can get a room full of people, an office full of people all adhering to the same policy and all the same principles. We could never have done this if we had 25 academic selectors across 25 departments. It wouldn't have… We just couldn't have done it. They wouldn't have toed the line. Yes. You would've always had at least one person who just wanted to select the people that they want to select. And actually what's been really good is the feedback from the departments about centralised selection. It's been really positive. (H6, Old HEI)

And I work very closely with admissions tutors in making, on special cases, making sure that any decision-making processes are, again, within policy guidelines, that they're not doing any weird and wonderful decision making. But where they are having to make special decisions because it's not a standard applicant, they are very clear in the practices that they're using to make decisions. (H7, Old HEI)

But in templating out the decision-making, that obviously also means the academics have to justify some of their more interesting methods they were using before. And that was to remove and question and challenge some of the less fair practices that were perhaps going on before they had to write everything down and justify it. So I think we have a much fairer system than we had there certainly ten years ago, and it's been evolving continually since then to the point where we're at now. (H16, Old HEI)

Two HoA's remarked that consistency provided some protection against the criteria and processes not being quite right:

Currently, I think that we apply the same process and the same policy and the same assessment criteria to all of our applicants. One might argue that they're wrong, but if that's the case, they are consistently wrong. (H6, Old HEI)

I don't know that I could put my hand on my heart and say that we're assessing potential in the best possible way. What I think we are doing is assessing it consistently, whatever it is we're doing. (H10, Old HEI)

Distributive fairness

Two thirds of HoAs also spoke of fair admissions as requiring not just transparency and consistency but also recognition of structural inequality and the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on prior achievement. As such, a commitment to meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural fairness was frequently held in tension with a concern for equitable opportunity and distributive fairness. For these HoAs, this entailed recognition that not all applicants have enjoyed the same advantages at school or at home:

Okay, so I suppose it's [fairness is] about making the people who make the decisions, whoever they are, aware of issues such as inherent advantage. And not assuming that just because the majority of people whose applications you might see have a certain you know level of advantage, that that's everybody's experience. Or that that's the minimum that you should accept. Trying to make people aware that you know there is more to life than A-level grades, but as I said before, because those grades have other functions, that can be difficult. (H1, New HEI)

I think it's [fairness is] making sure that you know about the context and making sure you have the information, making sure that your [admissions selectors] are aware of all contextual data flags of the educational background. […] so they will have that sense of where that person has had challenges and that sort of thing. (H8, Old HEI)

But there's so much built-in unfairness in a way in terms of the level of support required and the level of support provided by different schools, different students. (H9, Old HEI)

…what we're looking at is asking ourselves that question, but what is fair? And what is fair when someone's had this opportunity versus that opportunity? And that's the bit we are trying to address actively, and I think we've done different things year on year. (H13, Old HEI)

Well, I think it's… If you take… It depends whether you include the WP element into that. Now, fair is… In my view, there's two sorts of fairness. There's fair in that you're giving people a fair crack of the whip, as it were, but that doesn't mean they've had equal opportunity to get to you. So how far we've got at [this university] is that we've managed to create a fairness within the system is that… I don't think we have any bias in our admissions system. So if you come with three As for X programme and that's what we require, you will receive an offer from us. Now, that doesn't mean it's fair in the sense that these people have had, yes, equity of chance in life, and that's the challenge we now have. We've spent a few years trying to address that, so, almost under the radar. (H16, Old HEI)

Many HoAs interviewed explicitly acknowledged that the grades of socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants might not do justice to their ability and potential to succeed in higher education:

…we also know… We have this discussion all the time. Somebody that's got a B and two Cs at an awful comprehensive [nearby], okay, he's probably got… He's probably the same calibre of a student from a private school with three As, yes. So how do I judge that? So that's why I go back to the show us you can. And partly we can do that because we never are in the luxurious position of [selecting] to a particular programme. (H3, New HEI)

It's when you look at an application and you can see that they've been on a journey. You can see that, yes, they might not have got 12 A*s. I mean, it's nice if they did, but they might not have had 12 A*s at GCSE, but they have applied themselves, and they have moved from a good but not brilliant position at GCSE to a potentially brilliant position at A-level, and that shows that, you know, they've got more potential to give. You can see from someone's personal statement that they have overcome some difficulty in their educational life and possibly their personal life. (H6, Old HEI)

Yes, making sure that you know about people's context so that you can assess their academic profile in that context. We all know that four A*s at GCSE can mean very, very different things for different people. And then making sure that the rest of the process helps to draw out whether they've, again, got the ability and the potential. (H8, Old HEI)

…we know that having a bunch of A*s at GCSE can be easier at some schools than at others. And that what it indicates about potential doesn't seem to necessarily pan out. (H9, Old HEI)

Students with seven A*s, and one of them comes from a school where the average is 13, it's a different story to somebody where the average is two. Or zero. (H15, Old HEI)

4.4 The socioeconomic diversity of the student body

Limited socioeconomic diversity

At universities where some or most programmes were in high demand, HoAs typically recognised that the student body was not very socioeconomically diverse. However, some HoAs were keen to highlight that while the student body was not very socioeconomic diverse on some measures, other metrics painted a more favourable picture:

At undergraduate level, it is dominated by, probably white middle-class, but one of the things that people are very surprised about at [this university], we are very much a state school institution. (H5, Old HEI)

Others were keen to point to recent improvements in relation to socioeconomic diversity:

Well, with the [internal widening participation programme], it's growing. That's one of the things that we are… We are high on that. We're doing really well on them. And we are quite proud of how we've grown in that area. I think that the [internal widening participation programme] has been seen as a flagship, we have got a really good WP route. A successful route. (H7, Old HEI)

We are very skewed towards POLAR Group 5 as all the Russell Group is. We have made huge strides on POLAR Group 1 since the contextual policy came in. (H10, Old HEI)

Even though we've made some good headway on, kind of, the widening participation, I think previously we were just looking at schools that people attended and whether they are aspiring state schools or something, and now we've kind of increased other key widening participation indicators. So I think we've made quite a lot of headway there, but we still need to continue with that as well. And I know mature students. Again, all these numbers are increasing, but they're still… got some way to go. (H13, Old HEI)

In contrast, HoAs at New universities where few courses were in high demand typically considered their student bodies to be socioeconomically diverse (an objectively accurate assessment):

So again, as I say, more than 80% of our student population comes from the local region. […] And we, in terms of widening access as well, we over-perform in terms of widening-access students we take in too. (H3, New HEI)

I think because we've got a very diverse student body, in terms of WP, for want of... Or underrepresented groups, etc. […] And whether our percentages are directly reflective of the general population, that's what I don't know. I don't know the detail of it. But I think we don't feel there's any... Our admission process is, select the students fairly. And through that process, we get a fairly representative community of the general population. (H11, New HEI)

Barriers to greater socioeconomic diversity

HoAs identified a range of barriers to achieving a more diverse study body. Some mentioned that students from under-represented groups don't apply to some subject areas offered by the institution, or don't apply to the institution generally:

At an institutional level, we're probably where we should be, but that flexes across the institution with the differential contribution that each area makes. […] Certain subjects attract, certain types of applicants and certain backgrounds. And so that's quite a complex piece. (H7, Old HEI)

It's a competitive process with a limited number of places. You're never going to make everybody happy, of course. But certainly, we keep a very close eye on the data and the process and try and make sure that you are attracting applications from bright people out there who the courses would suit. I think it's a shame if the perception of the university is what puts them off rather than the reality. (H8, Old HEI)

Others mentioned that applicants from under-represented groups might be offered places but not accept them:

Admissions can be seen as a kind of instrument of social engineering, but the way it's set up in this country, you can only go so far with that and it's still hit-and-miss. Even if you had a completely gathered field, and you made you know your 200 offers, you don't know which 50 are going to accept. If it's all the 50 from the same group or 25 or 20 from different groups or whatever, you know. (H1, New HEI)

And I think one of the problems that I still see is that we're doing okay on the offer making side but students are not choosing to accept us from different backgrounds. (H10, Old HEI)

HoAs at Old universities where most courses were in high demand identified the socioeconomic gap in prior attainment as a key barrier to achieving a more diverse student body:

So you have this limited cohort or student who have that level of achievement, and whether or not you discount still, there is still a limit in that, you know. So you do take context into it that might grow that group, but still there is a limit to the size of that group. (H2, Old HEI)

Yes. I mean, there are certain programmes where we will always struggle to get 70%, and there are some programmes where we're up in the 80s or 90s for state schools. We have no interest in forcing the 55% department. […] We don't set a hard target for a massive 90%, so that philosophy can, you know, be 55%, because that means that you're not recruiting the best students. You will always end up shoehorning some state school students into your intake who shouldn't actually be there. (H6, Old HEI)

4.5 The use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions

All of the HoAs representing Old universities reported that the institution operated some form of contextualised admissions policy. In contrast, only two of the seven HoAs representing New universities reported having any sort of contextualised admissions policy; however, these were all relatively socioeconomically diverse institutions with few high demand programmes where most applicants who met the academic entry requirements for their programmes would be offered a place.

Extra consideration of contextually disadvantaged applicants for standard offers

A little over half of the Old HEIs in the sample used contextual data to enable extra consideration to be given to socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants for places but required such applicants to meet the same demanding academic entry requirements as their more advantaged peers:

> …if you're a POLAR3 quintile 1, it's almost, like, well, what's the reason to reject the student. It's not I need to find a reason to accept this student. It's almost what would be my reason for rejecting the student. If they meet the predicted A-level requirements. If they meet that, they are quintile 1, and their personal statement is good enough, why would I reject that student? And that is a change from what we would do five years ago. (H6, Old HEI)

> We look at these things [indicators of contextual disadvantage] but in a relatively light touch way. So, it's more of a safety net. If someone more than meets the criteria for an offer, they just sail through. But if someone is at risk of being rejected and we have some indication that their grades, their personal statement may might not tell the whole story, that's when these extra procedures might kick in to say: Well, hang on a minute, let's take a closer look. Rather than just wholesale assuming: Let's let them in anyway. (H9, Old HEI)

> So there's another [internal widening participation programme] where they are looking at the candidates who perhaps they would... without the post-offer support, they perhaps would not have selected them, but they are given offers on the condition that, once they get their A levels, and they have to meet the requirements of the standard offer for the subject they want to study, but then they come here for [pre-sessional programme] that helps them, I don't know, to improve essay writing, or build... plug gaps in grammar for modern languages, or more maths. (H15, Old HEI)

Institutions which *didn't* make contextual offers to the general applicant defended this on the basis that do to so would be setting students up to fail:

> So you can't really be cavalier about it, and you can't anyway if you feel you represent an organisation or university that has standards, and without wanting to get too particularly sort of pious about it, you know there are standards, and sometimes you have to say to people sorry, you don't meet the standard. (H1, New HEI)

> And economics at [this university] is very, very mathematically based, so they do have to have the A* in maths. (H6, Old HEI)

> …we want to make sure that the applicant is choosing the right thing for them and they will succeed. And it's in the interest of both parties, at the end of the day, that we recruit the right people that want to study at a research-intensive university. It is cutting-edge stuff, it is tough, it's hard work and that they're well-prepared for that next step of moving from A-levels and either colleges or sixth forms; and they're ready for that transition into quite an intensive next stage of their academic journey. (H7, Old HEI)

> Yes, I mean we will talk about making fair decisions. I know your project is about how to define which is fair. And for us, that's being able to identify those people who are going to thrive and being able to assess their performance so far fairly and in context. We do place quite a lot of weight on where people are coming from and what sorts of educational backgrounds they've had. But I suppose there's almost a bottom line that the courses here are challenging and do require very often a high level of prior knowledge and understanding. What we can't do is compromise standards. Because actually, it's

fundamentally unfair to take students who aren't suitably qualified because they will not cope here. Even the best qualified students sometimes don't cope here. It's about making sure that you are going to take people who are going to come and then do really well and get the most out of it. (H8, Old HEI)

I think it's particularly something with the rise in tuition fees. We need to be a lot more thoughtful of… What we don't want…   This came up in a Medicine meeting that I was at the other day. If we let students onto the programme who aren't really equipped to succeed. They're allowed to fail the first year twice in Medicine before we kick them out. So suddenly it's £27,000 that they've spent, probably £30,000 and they've got nothing. Because we don't have any credit transfers. And they're not taking away: Well at least I've got one year of a degree. (H9, Old HEI)

We don't [reduce entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants], but we don't have very high standard offers, compared to other highly-selective universities, partly because we're not going to climb down when people don't meet them, but also, because it allows us to say three As, it's not massively demanding in this area, but if you have less than that you probably would struggle. (H15, Old HEI)

Reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants

A little over half of all Old universities in the sample had begun (usually quite recently) or were planning in the near future to reduce academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants whose predicted grades were lower (but not too much lower) than the standard offer:

So we've taken it a step further this current year. We're carrying on our principle of using contextual information and then viewing applications on the basis of that. And what we're now doing is we are making guaranteed reduced offers to applicants who have two flags from the following, so at least two flags. (H2, Old HEI)

But also, our introduction of the contextual data offer-making, we hope, goes some way to ensuring some parity between people in different circumstances. And I know that it's probably fairly crude, we use five indicators and if two of them are true, it's flagged. Then we will make an offer which is usually one grade lower, I think in some cases actually it might even be two grades lower than the standard offer. […] so you might make a three B offer instead of a two As and a B. But if they were predicted by their school, at that point, not to get that, for it to be lower than that… They will likely be rejected. Because you can only go on the information you've got. (H5, Old HEI)

More recently we've introduced the contextual admissions policies. When I came here I was rather surprised that we didn't have an explicit policy, and we have that in place now, which in most subjects will be a grade off the typical offer. (H10, Old HEI)

If they're in the, on the borderline, I suppose, of whether we're going to be able to make an offer or not, that will be where the personal statement and the reference really is absolutely valuable. And our policy for most subjects is that if they're predicted up to two grades below our standard offer they would get the standard offer from us or they'll get the contextual […], whatever they're eligible for. So we're not saying, if they don't, if they're not predicted for three As, for a three A course they won't get in, but if they're predicted more than two grades below they're probably unlikely to get the grades we're looking for. (H10, Old HEI)

So there's a new scheme that we're just starting out now. It's in pilots at the moment. It rolled out across all departments for 2019 entry, which is essentially a drop to grade our

offer scheme. And we can put that in a prospectus. It's very clear, and all the categories around that will be evident. And so we think… And it's something we've been pushing for for a couple of years. It's something that the VC is very much behind. So that's a sea change for us at [this university]. So that's good. (H16, Old HEI)

Five HoAs reported that contextually disadvantaged applicants could be admitted with lower academic entry requirements via participation in a pre-entry widening participation scheme or a year zero foundation programme:

So students who have done our [internal widening participation programme], which is our flagship WP programme, are eligible for an offer two grades below the standard requirements anyway. So a lot of them actually sail through the process because they don't need to be predicted their high grades to get an offer. (H9, Old HEI)

So we, you know, we discount grades. We have, I think we call [internal widening participation programme], so we'll… If people then enter that and we'll have a programme whereby we'll, you know, work with… [students from] you know, demographic areas that are less wealthy, and […] But again in that, you know, we, it's interesting. We'll discount the offer based on that, so we'll make them an offer at, you know, a grade or two less in some cases. But the, those students tend to perform as well in exams as other students. So actually when we get them in, they're the same quality as the rest, so, by entry points. (H12, New HEI)

We have lots of applicants who say: "Yes, I haven't done as well as I was hoping to. What options do I have?" And then we say: "Well, we have this integrated foundation year. And this is now becoming widely common." (H4, New HEI)

We've got a foundation year. Now that is a post-application type of outreach activity where they are... they have a foundation year. They go through the admissions process and they then are here for a year. There's a programme of work they go through, and if they pass that, then they're taken onto the first year. (H15, Old HEI)

Three HoAs reported that their reduced offer making strategies were informed by research evidence:

…behind that [guaranteed reduction in entry requirements for successful contextually disadvantaged applicants] is some analysis that I've, that we've done within the organisation around achievement based on school type in degree studies. And that actually said that you could actually take in some subjects, like, say, sciences, I think it was, you could take a state school student two grades below an independent school student, and they would perform the same, you know, typically, 2.1 or 1st, you know, though without differential. So there is, there is some evidence base behind that. (H2, Old HEI)

… [our internal research] findings showed that if we brought somebody in on a whole grade lower, they would stand the same potential as anyone with more opportunity. So that's how we brought in our one-grade contextual offer. I don't think we actually did any additional work on the two-grade, but we just said, well, if they could do one, why couldn't they do two grades? So just let's give it a go. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but we don't want to set anyone up to fail. That's absolutely key, but we want to give people the opportunity. So it is really striking that balance of the two. (H13, Old HEI)

Two HoAs reported that there were plans to develop the evidence base around contextual offer making:

We've got the intake data. As I say, they admitted more applicants than any other on a contextual offer, both proportionately and in absolute terms. What we don't have and I think is really important for getting genuine institutional buy-in is we don't have their exam results, and I think once we've got that, end-of-year-one exam results, that's the thing that people are interested in… Because that's where we would hope to be able to demonstrate parity, that they're all coming out with the same. Yes. It feels quite high stakes, because if it doesn't go according to plan, then… (H17, Old HEI)

In common with institutions that *didn't* reduce academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged learners, many of the institutions which *did* make contextual offers were also concerned that reducing entry requirements too much would risk setting students up to fail:

There's nothing worse than taking somebody in and then them not succeeding. They're struggling and dropping out. The impact on the individual of that, you know, is considerable. So it's really difficult because you have a social responsibility there as well. So you can't just open up the doors and say, yes, we think you're all going to do really well. Somehow you still have to find the gems because not every WP student is going to be brilliant. So it's difficult, and we're still trying to find ways around that and trying to feel our way through that. How do you judge that somebody has that potential? (H16, Old HEI)

Then, even on that guaranteed reduced offer, actually them achieving those grades or near enough to those grades that we can fairly still say, You can come and… By fairly, I mean, actually not setting them up to fail, you know, not saying we… Yes, we could say we can take them all. But, actually, if that means they will come in weak and not being able to cope with the demands of the programme, that then is not fair on them at all and obviously doesn't help the programme's reputation either. So we've had a bit of a problem there. (H2, Old HEI)

Well, I think the role of an Admissions Office, despite, you know, we've got the strategic side of things to bear in mind, but what, I think ethically we've got to recruit individuals who can succeed. We could go out there and recruit a load of students very straight forwardly, they wouldn't succeed at this university even if they might succeed elsewhere, and that wouldn't be the right thing to do for them. (H10, Old HEI)

Our ideal applicant would academically be able to succeed on the course. I think that's really important. We don't want to admit somebody if we feel that we're just going to put them in a situation where they're going to struggle… (H17, Old HEI)

More than half of the HoAs interviewed at both Old and New HEIs reported that there was some resistance to contextual offer making from some academics on the grounds that such students would be likely to fail at degree level:

…the appetite, I'll use the word appetite, within our academic departments to deliver on that wish, that ask [to give additional consideration to contextually disadvantaged applicants], it was actually an ask, you're asked to do this, is patchy. (H2, Old HEI)

I mean I talk to colleagues at other universities who aren't allowed anywhere near admissions decisions. It just wouldn't work here because everyone does have that vested interest in the process. And I suppose the flipside to not allowing people that involvement is that people say, well then, I'm not going to teach these students. I don't have that vested interest in looking after these people anymore. Why do you need me? (H8, Old HEI)

But also I think there's a challenge around, these tend to be the students that maybe perhaps need the most sensitive contextualised consideration. And I generally found with our admissions tutors, they tend to go in the opposite direction. I think it's partly the challenge because we're doing most of the assessments. So we'll send an academic an application. We have a recommendations system. They can log into the same portal we use but it will be moved into a folder with a name. They'll get an email alert and the admissions officer would have written a question essentially. And sometimes it's even: We're 90% sure we should do this. Just let us know. But it may be, for example: Are you happy that qualification x fulfils the subject requirements? And we'll get a response saying: I think we should reject. This personal statement's not very good. And that's when we have to step in and go: You need to read a few more of the A Level students' personal statements before you make that decision. (H9, Old HEI)

All the academics' fear about us recruiting the wrong students, the dropout rates… you know, the standard arguments that come up around this sort of thing haven't come to pass. Obviously, they haven't come to pass. And we were quite rigorous in our testing of it as well to try and give the academics some assurance that the change wouldn't negatively impact and we would make the same decisions that they would tend to make. (H16, Old HEI)

The one ongoing argument I have in here is why do you need GCSE English to do a computing course? But they are insistent, and I have fought that battle for five or six years. I can see why they would need maths, but English? And given that a lot of them are doing BTECs where they've got to write anyway, if we thought that people…[…] but they are adamant that this is what has to happen. But yet at clearing they will take applicants who haven't got English, and that's the argument we've tried to use, but if at clearing you are…You're taking people maybe with lesser qualifications anyway, and you're also saying that they don't have to have the GCSE English, then why? But we keep going back to it. (H18, New HEI)

Teaching and learning support for contextually disadvantaged students

Many of the HoAs at Old universities also highlighted the current lack of support for bridging the academic knowledge and skills gaps of contextually disadvantaged students as being a key barrier to the development of more ambitious contextualised admissions practices:

But the first year is a hurdle, and especially in some of our programmes actually the first year, because of the way the programmes are designed and the type of subject they are, are extremely challenging. […] I think there is some work in the organisation we could actually do to make it less challenging. I think some departments have set that bar too high for the first year. They almost don't allow students to have a sort of transition period of, you know, struggling for a bit before they do that. They're going to have… […] they will have to start looking at, I think, their curriculum, because it's not necessarily keeping up with the shape of the cohort. They're going to have to look at the design of their curriculum and actually, for want of a better word, become more inclusive, you know, not your typical A-level student who's been to a strong-performing school. It's designed around that, and you hope that the other students can cope with it. (H2, Old HEI)

…you get into this vicious cycle where, if you enrol students who are really not good enough for the programme, and then you don't adjust the programme to provide the additional support they need, then the students have a crap time. Your NSS scores go further down the league tables, and then you can't recruit the students. (H9, Old HEI)

I think some of it probably was a resource issue, but I think it was also a culture issue. So we traditionally had a very, a very much high achieving A level cohort and were starting to

attract some students with maybe BTECs or lower A level grades. With a, you know, another university would be geared up to make sure the first year in particular would take that cohort and make a success of their learning such that they could go on to get a two-one or a first, whatever. And perhaps our degree courses hadn't evolved at the same pace as the student cohort. (H10, Old HEI)

Workload, yes. [Department] is a good example of that. They're almost proud that they work their students into the ground. It's almost a badge of honour for them, and all their students are becoming frazzled, and they don't have many WP students at the moment. They would like to have more. They've got aspirations around that. So these are students who have been fortunate to have very good educations, etc, enormous self-confidence, and [Department] can reduce them to a blubbering wreck by their third year, and they're quite… It's almost, yes, a test. It's, like, if you survive that, you'll do well. And of course, they just throw back at you. When they start to get challenged… Yes, exactly. This is what the world of [profession] is like. (H16, Old HEI)

And then, of course, it's about support on programme as well. You can't just let them in and then go, oh, there you go. Off you go. You have to make sure… And that worries me in that are we prepared at [this university]? With our [internal widening participation] scheme, are we fully prepared for the ongoing support through the first year that these students may need? (H16, Old HEI)

Over the last two years, we have refocused slightly. We're moving money around to ensure that we have some core student support there. […] But my own feeling is that more needs to be done around study skills, also around student support and well-being on, sort of, the mental health support, as well because, you know, certain departments at [this university], it's really challenging. The expectations are huge, and that takes its toll on your mental well-being. So we have to ensure that all that support is there as well and accessible. (H16, Old HEI)

In contrast, HoAs for the New universities reported that support services and interventions were in place to help students who might be at greater risk of under-achieving or dropping out:

So again we're looking at the moment as to what we can do with that particular group of prospective students and students [white and Black Caribbean working class males] when they arrive. Because again their performance in terms of retention and achievement are lower than some of the other groups as well. So we're looking at that at the moment and what interventions we can make to improve their performance when they get here. (H3, New HEI)

There was discussion at one point about they'd identified that… It was to try and stop people dropping out early, and I think they'd identified that students coming in with BTEC qualifications were more likely to drop out. And at one point, there was a discussion about we need to do this with BTEC applicants, and we said, you can't do that, you can't say, oh, well, the people coming in with BTECs have got to do this and people… I said it would have to be at a course level. They went away and had a rethink. There was that. It's certain courses. They'd identified the courses where they'd come in with lower grades and there was maybe a higher dropout rate. But I think because it's been so successful, they're looking at maybe extending it, not necessarily across all… Maybe eventually across all courses. (H18, New HEI)

So, we have a [academic support] project here, which is all about identifying different groups of students who may not be doing as well. We're trying to put the support in place for them. So, one of them is in the BTEC champions group. Another group of students is our... From our progression colleges. So, despite that they can do very well at our feeder college,

it's sometimes they seem to struggle when they get here. And I think often that's actually seen as a perception of the quality of the student, the teaching that they've had. And I don't think that is the reality. I think it's a very different style of teaching and institution. So, actually, it's often a transition. And I'm sure there's all different sorts of reasons. But, sometimes the data doesn't really stack up the perception. (H11, New HEI)

We're looking for potential, yes. I think we see it's our responsibility to help students through… We make sure they complete the first year, and it's our responsibility to grow the individual to and ultimately get to an employment outcome that they desire. So that's the kind of partnership… (H12, New HEI)

4.6 Summary

Analysis of the data from interviews with Heads of Admission indicates that the HEIs at which these HoAs worked framed fair access and admission largely with reference to the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm. These HEIs were seeking to admit the "best students", defined as those most likely to succeed at degree level, and seen to be evidenced first and foremost by high levels of previous and predicted academic attainment in school examinations. Though institutions relied heavily on predicted A-level grades as indicators of 'merit', it was widely acknowledged that A-level grades were often over-predicted, to such an extent that many HEIs admitted a substantial number of offer holders as "near-misses" during the August confirmation period. In practical terms fairness was defined primarily with reference to the procedural justice principles of transparency and consistency. This emphasis on meritocratic opportunity and procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment was held in tension with a secondary commitment to the competing paradigm of equitable opportunity in pursuit of distributive fairness. All of the Old universities in the sample had some form of contextualised admissions policy in recognition of the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on prior academic achievement. However, only half of these institutions routinely reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants, and where entry requirements were reduced this was typically by just one or two grades. Most HoAs at both Old and New universities reported resistance by some academic staff members to reducing academic entry requirements for socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants on the grounds that doing so would set those students up to fail. Many HoAs also indicated that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate to the task of ensuring that contextually admitted students would be appropriately supported to fulfil their potential at the institution. An overhaul of academic support for contextually disadvantaged students to enable them to translate their potential into achievement once at university would clearly be needed in order to resolve the tension between interviewees' adherence to the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm on the one hand, and their sympathy for competing arguments in favour of distributive fairness on the other.

5. Findings from interviews with Admissions Selectors

This chapter presents the findings of our analysis of interviews with 51 admissions selectors, drawn from the same 17 English higher education institutions offering courses with high academic entry requirements and a high demand for places from which our sample of Heads of Admission were drawn. The interviews were conducted during the 2017/18 academic year and the sample included a mix of selectors for Science programmes at both Old (N=12) and New (N=6) universities and for Arts and Humanities and Social Science programmes (hereafter referred to as Arts programmes) at both Old (N=28) and New universities (N=5). Building on the interviews with Heads of Admission, which explored the ways in which institutions framed and justified their admissions policies, the interviews with Admissions Selectors focused on the day-to-day practice of admissions decision making, exploring how selectors used prior and predicted academic attainment data, personal statements, teachers' references and in some cases portfolios of work or performance at interview to determine which applicants to "definitely accept", which to "definitely reject", and which to scrutinise further as "borderline cases". Findings are presented separately for Science programmes and Arts programmes where selection tools and rationales differ. The findings of our analyses are presented under four main headings: the setting of standard academic entry requirements; the use of contextual data to assess applicant merit; the assessment of other applicant attributes; and accounts of how the selection process unfolds.

5.1 The setting of standard academic entry requirements

Standard A-level entry requirements

Standard academic entry requirements for Science programmes at the Old universities in our sample were typically expressed in the form of three A-levels at grades set at a very high level, at AAA (N=3), A*AA (N=7) or A*A*A (N=2). For Science programmes at the New universities in the sample, standard entry requirements were lower but still high compared to the requirements typical for other courses at these institutions, at BBB (N=3), ABB (N=1) or AAB (N=2), although New HEIs were more likely to accept other types of qualification such as BTECs. The standard academic entry requirements were also set very high for most but not all Arts programmes at Old HEIs, at ABB (N=3), AAB (N=5), AAA (N=9) or A*AA+ (N=11). For Arts programmes at the New HEIs in the sample, entry requirements were lower at BBB (N=3) or AAB (N=2).

Nearly half of all selectors for Science programmes at Old universities and a quarter of selectors for Arts programmes at Old universities reported that their academic entry requirements had increased significantly over time:

I mean over the years, of course entry requirements have gone up, but I think every department's done that. You know, I can remember when years ago we'd take three Bs and then it went to three As, but I think in the much earlier days you had a little bit of flexibility. If a student was predicted AAB, you'd think well actually they're a good student; we can make them an offer. But of course we don't have that luxury anymore. You've got to put a big case forward for an offer that is not a standard offer. […] And I think the quality of the students coming; the grades that they were predicted were much higher than three years generally, so we thought let's put it up. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

About five or six years ago, no, more than that, somewhere in the last ten years, I can't remember exactly when, for example, Economics decided we wanted to have rather more

stringent criteria than we had had before. And we went to this body; and the university there and then decided yes we could do that and the University Prospectus was changed; the Admissions Prospectus, to make it clear that candidates would now be expected to have this higher level qualification. (S27, Arts, Old HEI)

Three Science selectors and two Arts selectors for Old HEIs reported that entry requirements had been increased in order to reduce applicant numbers to a more manageable size:

It's how we manage supply and demand. So, we get, last year, for instance, we got nearly 1,800 applications, and we took on 320 students. Just from experience, obviously, if we make someone an offer and they get those grades, we have to take them on, regardless of whether we've got too many people for the lecture theatres or labs and stuff. So, the only way, the lever we have on those numbers, is the offer grade. It's evolved over the years as, just as a response, if you like, to the math. That's essentially it. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

Two Science selectors and one Arts selector for Old universities whose entry requirements had been very high for some time also reported that this was a means of reducing applicant demand for the course to manageable levels:

Yes, so putting it higher gives us the flexibility I think to manage or control the numbers. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

And also we'd get far too many applications to be able to process if you had set a low-entry tariff. (S17, Arts, New HEI)

In contrast, two of the Science selectors for Old HEIs reported that academic entry requirements had been increased with the explicit aim of increasing the quantity and perceived 'quality' of applications:

My predecessor had been advised and I agreed to raise our offer from two B's and a C and we then spent the next X years going from two B's and a C to A*, A, A. I don't know how many years. Probably ten years. I can't remember at what point we got to A*, A, A. We didn't quite go up at one grade per year but we went up a grade and the answer is that we did experiment which is demonstrated if you advertise a higher offer you get more applicants, they're better qualified and if we made a higher offer than certain competitors then students perceived that we are better than those competitors and they chose to come to us. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

Okay, so that [raising academic entry requirements] was definitely was the right thing to do. Because when we raised our grades, we got more applicants. […] And in the last year, we actually dropped our offer in response to lower than expected numbers of applicants last year. And it has had no effect on applications. It hasn't increased them at all. So, we're going to move it back up again next year because of that. So, the normal sort of. […] Because we want to increase the number of applicants that we have. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

Half of all selectors for Science programmes at both Old and New universities, but few selectors for Arts programmes, reported that their A-level entry requirements were set with those of competitor universities in mind:

So, in terms of how we go about setting our offers. That is, to some extent, market-driven. And that's an important thing to have in your mind. What sort of offers are your competitors making? (S41, Science, Old HEI)

And certainly, you know, if somebody was saying that we're thinking of putting our offer up, we're thinking about going up to an A, or you know, two As and a B, for example, that would be discussed. And the impact on other universities, because if you've got most universities offering one thing and then if you're offering a little bit less, then the feeling is - whether this is accurate or not - the feeling is that applicants will go, well, I'm not going to apply there, because they're clearly not very good because they've not got the same offer as there, so they must be desperate for people. […] So it tends to be a bit of an agreed, not a formal agreement, but informal agreement, that generally speaking, we tend to keep to the same kind of entry criteria. (S46, Science, New HEI)

Two Science selectors at Old universities, two Science selectors at New universities, and four Arts selectors at Old universities, mentioned that the setting of standard academic entry requirements was done with a mind to position in university league tables:

And your position in that and as your average tariff intake increases, that increases your place on the league tables […] So we definitely made a big push to get ourselves up the league tables as a school in terms of all the metrics. Our then director of student education looked at all of the metrics and really did that huge push to improve our position. (S25, Science, Old HEI)

No idea [why entry requirements are set so high]. Yes, I do know why. Because it's targets the university has. Isn't it? Apparently, you're higher up in the league tables, the higher your entry criteria. So, that's sad. But it's the truth. (S9, Science, New HEI)

This is the word that's used to describe the students who arrive with better A-level results, it's quality, and that's explicitly part of the university's policy, is to promote quality in research and quality in teaching and quality in admissions, and quality in admissions means A-level grades and the points that are attached to that which were also then linked to league tables. That's what drives a lot of the decisions that are made about offers… (S34, Arts, Old HEI)

One Science selector for an Old university and one for a New university indicated that they would like to increase their academic entry requirements, but couldn't because of their position in the 'market' of HEIs:

That's partly the function of our competitive position nationally because the broad thing to do [to reduce demand to more manageable levels] would be to go to A*A*A as the offer level, right? That would be the big thing but we can't do that. We're not competitive enough. We can't move up to the level that [other university] has. So there's a market-forces reason that we can't make that move. (S25, Science, Old HEI)

It really depends which angle you come to it from. I mean ideally I would like to be able to put them [entry requirements] up, but when you look at the score of the university as a whole within the league tables. There's also an argument for saying actually you're not in the position to be able to put them up, but there are other universities that have put them up and have had a considerable increase in the number of applicants they get as a result of this. So it's a little bit counterintuitive the way it works and I don't think everybody gets that. (S2, Science, New HEI)

A-level grades as a predictor of success at degree level

Almost all Science selectors at Old universities, half of all Science selectors at New universities, and half of all Arts selectors at Old HEIs, reported that applicants' A-level grades – typically teacher-predicted A-level grades at the point of application – were their main indicator of an applicant's likelihood of succeeding on the programme:

> *We are looking for people that we think will succeed on our course, progress. And the single best predictor of that is A Level grades. (S38, Science, Old HEI)*

> *A Level predictions, or A Level grades, because it's about the only indicator of that sort of merit that we have to go on. I find that if I could actually take an applicant aside, and talk to them for three hours, each one of the 3000, I could probably tell how good they are academically. But A Level grades, that's what A Level grades do for us. (S12, Arts, Old HEI)*

These selectors spoke of the need for students to have strong A-level performances in order to be able to cope with the rigours of the degree course:

> *If someone hasn't actually demonstrated that they're able to work to a certain academic level, is it fair to then say come and do a BSc on this course whilst working in practice and learning to be a student midwife, which is intrinsically hard? It's about while it feels like a kindness to make your typical offer very bespoke to that person, actually there does need to be a line, and what we've found is that the one we have at the moment does work in terms of the academic side. (S9, Science, New HEI)*

> *If we're looking for a cohort of strong applicants and clearly there is a requirement that they must be able to do what we're going to throw at them in the first year. In other words we are trying to make sure that anybody entering the course should be able to do what we're going to ask them to do. On the basis that some other universities do have to different entry standards and overseas they just take anybody into university and they let them sink or swim in the first year, whereas clearly for the most part the better universities of the UK I think will make sure that actually the applicant can do the course. (S35, Science, Old HEI)*

> *No, it wouldn't be fair to say that [grades don't trump other elements of the application]. They do trump it. […] because we tend to find that students who… Because it's a hard programme to achieve, and so it's a real balance between. […] Because it's academically demanding, and it's 45 weeks of the year, so you'd have seven weeks off in the year, which means that working is really, really difficult. […] For me, it's a real balance between giving everybody the opportunity to do the programme and not setting people up to have a really awful experience and fail. Because actually if you invite someone on the programme that academically you know isn't strong enough to do it, then the chances are they won't succeed, and then it's a very difficult situation for them. (S9, Science, New HEI)*

> *And I think probably a lot of academics would think that three As is the kind of level that you would as a minimum, you would be thinking people should be performing at if they're going to be able to do well on the course. (S50, Arts, Old HEI)*

> *How can we create a cohort that's teachable, that doesn't have these very high-achieving students and what you often hear described in education as a long tail, and is this an opportunity to nip in the bud what could be a potentially big problem for us as teachers but more so a big problem for that student potentially, that they arrive at a place and fail, really, to find their feet? Because we've found that students who've arrived, having missed the offer substantially, don't always make the best transition. And part of what you're doing at*

that stage, I think, is thinking about those potential problems for the future. (S34, Arts, Old HEI)

Some Science selectors pointed to evidence from the institution's own past experience which indicated that A-level grades on entry were predictive of subsequent success on the programme:

…we have lots of experience of how success, or A Level grades, correlate with success in this programme. So, obviously you could, we think it's the best and most practical way of judging ability to succeed on that course. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

A couple of years ago the university here did quite a big mapping exercise across all subject areas, looking at entry tariff and exit award and for us in health sciences, physio and midwifery were as expected, they came in on a high grade, they exited on a high grade. They did well. We have other subjects which have a lower grade entry, which are three Bs and previously we would have taken people that had a C grade, two C grades, and there was a significant difference in attrition and attainment for those. It seemed to be three Bs was a very clear cut-off point to succeeding on programme, which was interesting. (S36, Science, Old HEI)

However, around a third of all selectors for Old universities acknowledged that A-level grades were often over-predicted:

I think, well predicted grades are a problem anyway and we all know that predicted grades don't really work. (S44, Science, Old HEI)

I personally take a holistic approach to the form. So, you know, I think there is a perception - and I don't know if it's accurate or not, because I can only talk about me - but I think people we just look at predicted grades, okay? And yet, the statistics show, and experience shows, they're just an indicator. They can be wrong. They can be under-predicting; they can be over-predicting. (S33, Arts, Old HEI)

In particular there was an awareness that the schools attended by applicants from advantaged backgrounds might be more likely to over-predict their students' A-level grades:

I know that there are some schools that are very careful to make sure that they're right and I know that there are some schools, because I've spoken to teachers, I have a colleague on the staff who used to be a teacher at a local school who would suffer from parents… It was a local fee paying school where the parents would come in and tell the headmaster what the predicted grades were to be. Because my son needs to be predicted these to get into X. And I've got colleagues who've done correlations with predicted grades against achieved grades as a function of the school and therefore we know how good schools are at predicted grades. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

Well I don't know about our student cohort, but if you look at all of the applications from independent schools, they're all predicted… But you know, as to how well these students actually do or not, because I think those schools are under tremendous pressure from parents to give the right predicted grade so they get the offer from the right university, and then they just hope the kid can meet those. I think there's pressure on those types of schools. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

I think one of the concerns, as well, when we're talking about people playing games, that teachers know that if they want to apply to [this university], or any institution that has a high entry tariff, that they're not going to be made an offer unless they're predicted the entry

tariff. So I think there's a bit of playing the game there, and when you don't have things like AS levels to gauge, it is quite a risky step to take, not to make aspirational offers. So in the past, for law, we have made offers to students predicted A A B. […] Yes, they had a solid background [at AS level], but we were looking at that, but the sheer volume of applications this year has led us just to make offers on predicted A A A. (S26, Arts, Old HEI)

Pre-requisite subjects at A-level

Three quarters of selectors for Science programmes at Old universities and a third of Science selectors at New universities indicated that their entry requirements included pre-requisite subjects at A-level. For Science courses at Old universities not leading directly into a vocation this was usually Maths at grade A or A*, often accompanied by a high grade in a second science subject. For medical degree programmes at Old universities, high grades in A-level Biology and/or Chemistry were required, together with a high level of performance in one of the national assessments for entry to Medicine (i.e. the UKCAT or BMAT). Some programmes leading to other health professions overseen by the NHS at New universities stipulated a B+ in a Science subject at A-level or equivalent as a pre-requisite for the course, and/or evidence of competency in Maths and English as evidenced by GCSE grades and/or passing a test in these subjects if invited to interview.

In contrast, selectors for Arts programmes rarely reported required subjects, with the exception of Economics degree programmes which typically stipulated that applicants required an A or A* in Maths at A-level to be eligible for entry. Some selectors for Law programmes at Old HEIs mentioned that applicants were also required to sit the Law National Aptitude Test (LNAT).

However, seven selectors for Arts programmes at Old universities indicated that there were preferred (as distinct from required) subjects at A-level, typically academically-oriented, essay based subjects:

We exclude a few subjects altogether […] They're more practical-based and less academic content. So, textiles, general studies, practical music, practical art, sports. Yes, sport sciences. Because there's a, there's less focus on those sort of soft skills that we're looking for, for law students. And it's also based on the experience of students coming in with that sort of profile and then having a really horrible, miserable, unsuccessful time, and finding the whole transition to higher education just really difficult. (S33, Arts, Old HEI)

We have a list of preferred subjects which we need at least two of them of, so there's a bunch of A levels which are a bit more practical and vocational, and we will take one of those, but not more than one of those. (S26, Arts, Old HEI)

For Science selectors and Arts selectors for programmes requiring knowledge of mathematics, high academic entry requirements in the pre-requisite subject of Maths were deemed necessary to ensure that students would be able to cope with the high academic level of the course from the outset. Some Science Selectors made reference to the level of prior attainment in Maths and/or allied subjects in terms of the pedagogical minimum needed to succeed on the course:

But we do have some feel, I think, for what our pedagogic minimum is. And that is that, for students who are starting Chemistry, if they are getting lower than a grade B in Chemistry, or lower than a grade B in maths, then they will struggle to do Chemistry at university. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

Because there is also, the reason we are asking for A Level Maths and A Level Physics is, basically, we also require certain ability in those areas. And, that's how we judge it. We do it through the grades in A Level Physics, A Level Maths. Because I think if you, even if you went to, looking at the Physics courses all across the UK, one of whom don't have the same high-level grades, they're not with anybody who's asking for less than a B in Maths and Physics. Because I think that corresponds to a, even those who are struggling to recruit are asking for B's, because that's recognised as a minimum level of understanding of knowledge in those subjects you need to then successfully do a Physics degree. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

We look particularly for an A in Mathematics. We've taken students with Bs in the past across the faculty and we've then looked because periodically we do quite careful correlation of entry standards versus first year academic performance and there is little correlation between anything from about ABB up to three A*s in terms of A Level entry standard. There's little to correlate first year performance against any of that range of entry standard. But one thing that we did find on doing it, on having taken quite a number of students with B grade mathematics some years ago was that there was a correlation between a lesser performance in the first year and the B grade math so people just started to make the decision that they must have an A in mathematics. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

…we also know what works in terms of what will allow a person to succeed on our programs and what won't, and what we've found is that in our experience there's a very distinct cut-off. If you've got somebody who has grade A in Maths and Bs in two other subjects, this is speaking in terms of regular students, then they can succeed on our programs. If you drop below grade A in Maths, they won't, they will fail stuff, they will end up being required to leave or needing to do a supplementary year to make up a unit or something like that. And it is actually quite a stark jump as you go over that boundary. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

For other selectors, however, the required grades in pre-requisite subjects such as Maths were clearly set somewhat above the pedagogical minimum:

But we have to set a line somewhere. We do and make a decision on it. We could start saying well we'll start to take those that have been scored a high B, because we can see their point for example. But then how far do you keep going down? […] There has to be a line somewhere and for the most part, no we don't need to in order to get a good cohort of students. We don't need to do that. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

So things like you've got to have the A* in maths or physics… It's just one of those things that we've put in to have a caveat so that we can cut higher than we need to. Academically it is better, it's stronger students but also it has helped us to put an element of control on our numbers so we can actually deliver on our teaching commitments. (S25, Science, Old HEI)

Vocational qualifications

Qualifications other than A-level were rarely mentioned by selectors for Old universities, but where these were mentioned BTEC qualifications in particular were identified as providing insufficient preparation for programmes requiring proficiency in maths:

So one of the things that we've done in the last, five years ago now actually, is say that we won't take people with BTEC qualifications unless they've also got A-level maths. Because we did a study of everyone coming through with purely BTEC-based mathematics and you could cleanly separate the group at the bottom of the grade scale in the first year. They were just failing the first year. And so it was a… A big chunk of them were failing and the rest were doing really poorly, struggling. So it was almost a responsibility move on our part.

Actually we could go two ways with this: we could change the course fundamentally so that we're doing foundation level A-level maths for them, repeating A-level maths or we could say we require them to have a good A-level maths qualification on the way in. And we went for the second one. (S25, Science, Old HEI)

We don't accept BTECs, which probably reduces our numbers much more. […] Historically, students haven't done that well, especially on the quantitative courses that we offer. So they really struggle to get through the first year, then second year. […] We've had a lot of failure. (S37, Arts, Old HEI)

In contrast, Science Selectors for New HEIs were more likely to accept BTEC as sufficient preparation for courses requiring proficiency in other pre-requisite Science subjects such as Biology following reform of the BTEC curriculum and assessment regime:

So for me, I find it a challenge, but I find it a real balance that we… It's not okay to set students up to fail. Does that mean that it's been hard to get onto the programme? Does that mean that? But equally we have a lot of students who come to us through access courses, BTEC, so we're not demanding A-levels. (S9, Science, New HEI)

So the biological component for us is really important, that they have strong Biology to be able to cope […] So we previously found our BTEC students in the past would struggle, generally would struggle. So we stopped taking those quite a number of years ago. But with the new curriculum being a little bit more robust in their assessment, we started taking them [again] this year for the first time. […] So I think the new BTECs are proving…, it will be interesting to see how the results come out and how those students then fare going on down the line. But I'm hoping that that will be helpful, because I think it seems more suited to the way that we teach. (S46, Science, New HEI)

Some universities filter out BTEC Science. We made a decision, because we're a local university, most of our students tend to come from locally. So, we made the decision as a department to accept, based on a widening participation view, to accept people with a BTEC if they got merit or distinction. Some schools, don't do GCSE Science anymore and we felt that morally speaking that was very unfair if they've been filtered out at 16, that's not their choice, do you know what I mean? (S47, Arts, New HEI)

Achievement at GCSE

Half of all Science selectors at both Old and New universities, and three-quarters of Arts selectors at Old universities, reported using achieved GCSE grades in addition to predicted A-level attainment to inform admissions decisions. Fifteen selectors across both Old and New HEIs reported that a minimum level of performance at GCSE in Maths and/or English (typically a grade B or C) constituted a formal academic entry requirement for entry to their programmes.

However, nineteen selectors, principally for programmes at Old universities, reported that GCSE grades were used *informally* to help distinguish between applicants with uniformly high A-level grade predictions. GCSE grades, and sometimes also performance at AS-level, were valued as an informal indicator of applicant merit since they represented actual attainment and were considered a good guide to assessing whether applicants were likely to achieve their predicted A-level grades:

The analysis has been done certainly in Maths and I think it's probably been done in Chemistry. If you got a B at GCSE Maths and you want to get an A* at A-Level, you're not

going to achieve it. Statistically that's pretty unlikely. Only 1% of people with B's [at GCSE] manage to achieve an A* [at A-level]. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

So I'll look at the list of GCSEs and there's a list of grades, and I just skim down them, because what you're looking for and I suspect most other departments are looking for, is As and Bs at the very least. Anything when you start seeing Cs and Ds, you already begin to build up an academic profile. […] You might see this whole set of GCSEs with nothing but Cs and Ds. You see ASs with Cs and Bs and then all of a sudden they're predicted four A*s. You think, the chances of that happening are pretty slim. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

So, normally like you'd be liking As and Bs, things like that. More As than Bs. And then, yes, I think that can show… It shows academic merit and it shows their… It does show their academic potential to deliver on their A level results as well, you know, You might want to be checking as well like if they got a C say in GCSE and they've been predicted an A* in mathematics, you know, and they succeed, you'd want to think a little bit more about. So, you're looking at those kinds of things when you're looking at previous grades. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

Achieved GCSE grades were used not only to judge the reliability of predicted A-level grades, but also to differentiate between applicants where the highly competitive nature of the field meant that there was an abundance of applicants who met the A-level entry requirements:

And also it's because a lot of the applicants that we get they're really strong. They're all really strong. So, we're just looking for the minutia of differences between them unfortunately, and that's why we use something like the GCSEs, because it's just a little bit more information that we have to help distinguish between, you know, candidates that look very, very alike. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

But the big problem that we've always had, and that I had when I was an admissions selector, is that the vast majority of the applicants satisfy the A Level criteria. (S12, Arts, Old HEI)

Many selectors at Old HEIs who used GCSE grades as an informal, typically unadvertised, selection criterion explicitly indicated that they were looking for a high standard of performance at GCSE, expressed by some as "As and Bs at the very least" (S4, Science, Old HEI), "more As than Bs" (S5, Arts, Old HEI), "a good smattering of As" (S50, Arts, Old HEI), "the number of As and A*s" (S30, Science, Old HEI) or "the number of A*s" (S31, Arts, Old HEI; S12, Arts, Old HEI):

So we'd be looking at the, the overall academic profile, and then we would assign a score for that part of our assessment, depending on the grades that they've achieved. […] So we look at the top eight GCSEs and then it's a sliding scale, so depending on the grades that they've achieved. They'd get a higher score if they've got more A*s or A grades compared to somebody who's maybe got mainly B or C grades. (S13, Arts, Old HEI)

Around half of all selectors using GCSE grades to differentiate between applicants with similar A-level grade predictions were mindful of the need to assess GCSE grades contextually, with reference to the average performance of pupils in the applicants' school or from a similar socioeconomic background:

So if they've got like good GCSEs compared, you know, likewise to another student, you can use the, well, they were in a below average school and they still performed this well

compared to someone who was in an above average school. And you can say, well that candidate has got more potential potentially than the other one. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

There'll be information on the candidate's school and typically information on GCSE. For GCSE grades, we have not just the individual candidate's GCSE score but also the average score for the school. So we can say, this candidate has done outstandingly, relative to the average for that particular school. And that's often a rather useful indicator. (S27, Arts, Old HEI)

I think basically that's going to vary between different kinds of schools, and so I think if it's an independent school, then you're going to be thinking they should be pretty much A*s. And, if it's not an independent school and particularly if it's a school where GCSE attainment is normally lower, you wouldn't be scared… you certainly wouldn't expect everything to be A*s. I think you would want to see a goodly smattering of As. I think anything lower than that you might start to query, unless there were particular reasons to think… (S50, Arts, Old HEI)

5.2 The use of contextual data to assess applicant merit

Three-quarters of Science selectors and two-thirds of Arts selectors at Old universities reported using contextual data to inform admissions decisions in some form or other. In contrast, virtually none of the selectors for New universities had formal contextualised admissions policies, reflecting the fact that these institutions tended to attract a more socioeconomically diverse set of applicants and tended to offer places to most applicants who met the standard academic entry requirements.

Flagging contextually disadvantaged applicants for consideration for standard offers

For one third of Science selectors at Old universities and half of Arts selectors at Old universities, contextualised admissions practices involved flagging up contextually disadvantaged applicants for more careful consideration for places subject to meeting standard academic entry requirements. This was done, for example, by allocating extra points to such applicants to ensure that they were ranked higher than they would otherwise be; by seeking to admit contextually disadvantaged applicants in proportion to their number among applicants meeting standard entry requirements; or by ensuring that borderline applications from contextually disadvantaged students were considered more closely:

So, different programs will choose different weightings of A-levels, GCSEs, and then reference, personal statement. So, those will be given different weights, so essentially, an application will have a number of points. Now, in terms of that number of points, when it comes to [unclear] WP applicants, so by which I mean somebody who goes to an aspiring school, they will be treated as having the same number of points as somebody predicted an A-level grade higher. So, in other words, if somebody is predicted A A B, then they'll rank alongside somebody A A A who goes to a regular school, and it's purely the points will be determined on that basis. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

One thing that we try to do is map the number of… or map the percentages of the independent and state school students compared to the number of applications we receive. So we're trying to give some balance there but I guess we don't try to give it so much that the independent students who are excellent miss out completely to [unclear]. It is a difficult balance to strike but that's one thing that we look at. (S31, Arts, Old HEI)

So we have a policy that if a student has a WP flag, they cannot be rejected unless the form has been seen by [colleague's name], the head of admissions, and approved that it can be rejected. So even if the applicant had poor predicted grades, like really poor, like DDD, for law, they couldn't automatically reject them without [colleague] having seen it and signed it off to say, yes, we can reject this. […] If they think it's a clear cut, like we're definitely not, but we just need to check, it will go straight to [colleague]. And then if [colleague] thinks, let's consider them anyway, [they will] pass it back to me. Then I would keep hold of them until we decided. […] I would have a look and then probably not much because it's way too low [DDD at A-level], and we'd just reject it. (S16, Arts, Old HEI)

Selectors for programmes that took contextual data into account without reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants recognised the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on achievement at school and sought to take this into account when assessing applicants' merit:

So it's not reasonable to compare a candidate that's had every possible opportunity in life with another candidate that's had very few opportunities and make a judgment on which one is likely to be the more successful or the better applicant. So you need to take what they've done in the context of what opportunities they've had and the environment in which they've been doing it. (S28, Science, Old HEI)

Even though I'm not aware of any WP agenda being forced onto us by anybody, the admissions officers are all aware of WP and fairness and they will bring it up with their course leaders for these programs. I think because for healthcare you're looking at an application as a whole, I used to get quite demoralized looking at an academic part of an application with a grade C in English and yet you've seen what they've overcome in their life to get to where they currently are. It just didn't feel right. If a lot of emphasis is put on the personal statement and someone is exceptionally strong in that area, then are you prepared to take somebody with a grade C over a B for what else they can bring to the profession? (S1, Science, New HEI)

And then for home students as well we do look to see if they're from a low participation neighbourhood, and it kind of goes into the holistic assessment. So low participation neighbourhood, and if they've been a school with a below national average A level achievement. And then that can help us when we're looking at the predictions and the different bits to say, well, yes, maybe they're not predicted quite as high as the student over here, but they haven't had quite so much advantage in terms of their teaching so they're doing really well for where they are, so we might want to bear that in mind when we're making a decision. (S24, Arts, Old HEI)

Reduced academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants

For two thirds of all Science selectors for Old universities and half of all Arts selectors for Old universities, contextual data was used to flag applicants for receipt of offers subject to reduced academic entry requirements. These reductions were typically of an order of magnitude of 1 to 2 grades, although in some cases bigger reductions were available for those who had successfully completed the institution's widening participation programme. Some selectors at Old universities indicated that contextual offer making practices were not yet in place but were in development:

I mean we've always had the policy of we will pay special consideration to your application if you've got a WP flag, but we've never been in a situation where we were able to make a

lower offer on the grounds of that. Whereas now, going forward we are and I'm actually quite pleased about that, I think that's progress (S39, Arts, Old HEI)

…something that is coming in, however, is that the university from next year is moving to a slightly reduced offer for those students with WP Plus Flags on their UCAS forms. So, I guess that is a recognition that people from WP backgrounds might have more potential than other students that get the same grades. (S38, Science, Old HEI)

Selectors for programmes that reduced academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants indicated that they did so because they recognised the difference between achieved merit and future potential:

Merit is easy to achieve because you look at what they've achieved in GCSE profile and that's probably actually the point where GCSE profile is the measure of merit. Potential […] it's defined as a student who has ability to benefit from being at [this university] and also where [this university] can benefit from the student being at [this university] and that was as much as anything. So it's about a student who having been in an academic environment where they haven't been able to flourish come to [this university] and they can flourish, that's the justification for it. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

Merit is what you've already done; what you've already got, so that's your GCSEs or your ASs, so you've got that sort of merit behind you. And potential is the fact that almost reading this application, you can see the potential in this student to do better, but that kind of flies in the face of the fact that if you've got so many applications, you end up going on the grades. So potential is… I suppose that's why the contextual offers might come in; the fact that if a student's doing okay in difficult circumstances, they do have the potential in the right place and everything that [this university] hopefully offers them, to actually blossom. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

These selectors recognised that equal grades did not necessarily mean equal ability and potential given the variation in applicants' socioeconomic circumstances:

I think it's really important to make contextual offers and to not think that oh, it might be insulting, yes. […] No, it's not lower, it's what you would achieve if you were, had a middle-class background and were at a posh school. (S43, Arts, Old HEI)

Well, yes, like is it fairer that we give more offers to state than independent? Like I have a… Personally from my own perspective I think yes, because I believe about all the, you know… Evidence is clear that if you go to an independent school or a private school you're privileged, you've got a lot more support than someone from a disadvantaged school. So, from my perspective I think that's fair. I think it's fair that we even the playing field. I think that's important. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

I think there's fairness in terms of treating all applicants the same, taking them through the same process, asking the same questions. […] It [also] means not allowing people advantage because of the particular school, the particular environment, the parental advantages, and that sort of thing. So I suppose the different levels, there's a level of treating everybody the same, there's also the level of looking at every case and treating individual's rights in their own context and trying to balance those two things. (S26, Arts, Old HEI)

Foundation programmes

A third of Science selectors at both Old and New universities and a minority of Arts selectors for both institution types mentioned there being a Foundation Year route for contextually disadvantaged applicants who did not meet the standard or contextualised academic entry requirements for the course:

> *For those people who have far missed, we have offered them a place in our Foundation program. To see, sort of… Taking their education and putting it in a completely different context. Putting it to a university context. And giving them a year at university on a foundation programme fixes this sort of academic achievement that they haven't managed to demonstrate yet at A-level. So, we've just started doing that for half a dozen students this year. We're waiting to see how that pans out. (S41, Science, Old HEI)*

> *So without specific entry routes, I know that even by doing all the intervention and support work in the world, we have to have alternative entry routes that allow people to demonstrate potential in different ways. And the easiest way, really, is by having an F0, a foundation, or another type of course that then feeds in, with much, much lower grade attainment to allow them a point of entry. And if we don't take those risks with students, then we're failing. […] It is about risk taking, but actually it's also about, providing we've got robust selection processes that are there and support mechanisms. Because the last thing is, well, I don't want to select somebody onto a course they will fail. […] But you do have to take risks, and it's about taking calculated risks, and it's about making sure the right type of support to help in that transition. If you're doing the right type of support, by the time they're midway through the course, you should not see any difference. (S22, Science, Old HEI)*

Supporting contextually disadvantaged learners to succeed at degree level

Only 2 of the 12 Science selectors for Old universities, and only 3 of the Arts selectors for Old universities, reported providing on-programme support to help bridge gaps in academic subject knowledge and skills:

> *In the work that we do to recruit WP students. I think the contextual offers are fantastic and I wish that they'd existed when I was in a really crap state school you know. And the [internal widening participation programme] is absolutely fantastic. The WP team are brilliant. And I just think the, I just think that our whole attitude is so much more forward-thinking than other universities. […] But I think that [this university] really cares and also the attitude of these students need, our supporting these students, have the potential is something that some universities haven't caught up with yet. (S44, Science, Old HEI)*

> *…the attrition rate on the course is really low. […] Partly that is, I think, we do have really intensive support for ones that require it. You know, there is a lot of support both in programme, across the faculty, and the university. You do everything to make sure that people get through. It's actually quite difficult now to have somebody leave, isn't it? (S22, Science, Old HEI)*

> *Yes. So, there would be academic tutors, which are lecturing staff. All students are given them. They operate differently across different programs. Depending on the size of the programs. There are support… I mean there are a lot. There is a surprising number of support, in terms of some… I think something came out the other week, actually saying that there were about 50 different messages around supporting our mental health and stuff. So, in some ways, it's kind of overwhelming. You know, there is a real desire to do stuff. Actually it's quite, leave me alone. […] You know, so there is a lot, actually. Yes, there are student support services you can kind of go to. If you… Yes, so yes. There are. And there*

might be… And there are dedicated teams around money or mental health or academic support, or anything like that as well. You know, we should use the lot at this university. (S10, Arts, New HEI)

One Science selector and one Arts selector for programmes that reduced academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants reported that contextually admitted students were doing well academically on a programme which was providing support for their learning:

It's a strange thing. Because, actually, when you sit down and explain things to them, they get it. So, there is a knowledge gap. But there isn't an ability gap. That's the way that I'd put it. […] And so, if you're delivering the teaching in a, sort of, tailored way that is actually […] It's the maths that you need alongside that to make a success of doing Chemistry at university. And here's the physics that you need to do alongside. And so, the tailored nature of it. And the getting used to the way in which university learning is delivered is something that they… Not all of them. Alright? It's not a complete, sort of, across the board 12 out of 12 success story. But a majority of them have adapted well to. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

What we know from that evidence-base is that you can drop one grade and you will get people who will perform at the same level. What we're trialling is dropping two grades to see, well, actually, if you do drop two grades what happens. Are you getting people who are actually the same standard? Traditionally, we've had a range of grades that we might offer according to how good we felt the individual students were, and so we have the evidence-base of that one grade drop. What we don't have, simply because we haven't given enough offers, is what happens if you go down two grades, so that's the thing that we're building, an evidence-base on that, but it's through giving it a try to see what happens. […] The two grades below is very new, so I don't think we've had our first graduation cohort yet. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

A small number of Arts selectors at Old HEIs reported that they were beginning to think about how best to adapt their pedagogical practices to better support students who were less well prepared for degree level study:

And it's difficult, because you can't be too prescriptive about that, because otherwise you end up with a kind of Oxbridge approach, where you're saying well, this is how we teach, and we're going to select people who fit our teaching method, and that sort of thing, which we wouldn't be able to afford to do, but we wouldn't want to do, necessarily. So we do do a lot of thinking about how we adapt our teaching to fit changing cohorts of students as they come in. But yes, I think being able to work independently and being able to handle large amounts of reading, being able to communicate effectively, those sorts of basic things. Some school teachers use the word teachable, which I hate, but I sort of know what they mean by it, that you've got the raw material to come in and find ways of learning with what we have to give you. (S26, Arts, Old HEI)

So, within the new contextual data, because we're being encouraged to look at our GCSE results requirements as well, we've already been talking to Economics about what we can do to support the students when they come in, because the first year is quite a very quick trajectory into high level maths. So it's not that the students… We know that it's not the students' fault, it's not about them not being bright enough, it's just that have they had the appropriate background in that subject and the confidence to do it. So we've been talking to economics about what we can do to support them pre-enrolment, and then once they're here in the first year. (S37, Arts, Old HEI)

Two Science Selectors at Old universities acknowledged that the curriculum structure would need to be substantially revised in order to support learners with gaps in academic subject knowledge; something for which there was little appetite within the institution:

It's not impossible to do. But it is… But it would involve, sort of, root and branch upheaval of our curriculum in order to achieve it. If you want to do it properly. And you can do it properly. It takes an awful lot of work to get there. And the foundation, to some extent, is an easier way. A much easier way of getting to the same endpoint. […] Because there are, you know, wildly different ranges of abilities of students coming in, just between sort of grades of A* down to B. But it's not something that is designed, sort of, into our curriculum yet. And I have my…forces of conservatism would make it very, very difficult actually to achieve that in anything like the medium term, let alone the short term. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

I think we either have to be confident that they've done it and that therefore they can do and understand things that we're going to give to them or that they would maybe go away and really put in the time and self-study maybe to actually be... The alternative is that we provide some kind of remedial mathematics. So I think that we feel that if we were to take applicants with B maths for example, we would have to give those students probably some additional classes of some kind to actually be confident that they could then actually do. […] It's something that clearly we have considered. We have thought about if we take students with B math we'd need to do these things. We could do that obviously it's that we've got to create those modules and there's a degree of effort, time and cost to the university. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

In contrast, half of all Science and Arts selectors at New universities spoke extensively about the support for learning they provided in order to help fill gaps in subject knowledge and academic skills more generally:

But if we take people with different entry criteria, we're looking at, certainly, the first year, study skills advice and the role of the personal tutor, both in terms of academic counselling and pastoral counselling being greater than in other courses. We have a 42-week academic year, half of which is on placement and half of which is in the university. (S7, Science, New HEI)

Where we're supporting the absence of academic merit, I think we're a very good programme for that, to be quite honest. I think we have academic tutors who are allocated to students who would quickly identify students who need academic support. […] So, we can quickly identify people who we think need support in that area and we'll schedule meetings for personal tutors with them all in the first two weeks, two to three weeks. […] It might be that doesn't come out until their first assessed piece of writing. (S8, Science, New HEI)

And I think that's something that we're quite keen on here is having a quite supportive approach to our teaching. Again, that's something that we value in terms of our cohort size. Some of our competitive universities have much bigger cohorts than us. […] So I think for us it's having that smaller cohort means we know our students better and that transition. (S46, Science, New HEI)

5.3 The assessment of other applicant attributes

Suitability for the field or profession

Almost all Science selectors for programmes leading to Medicine and other health professions, and most Arts selectors for programmes leading to professions such as teaching and journalism, indicated that they were looking not only for evidence of academic merit and potential, but also for evidence of specific skills and values required for successful performance in the profession. Selectors for Arts programmes leading to professions such as journalism and teaching were looking for applicants who displayed a high level of literacy:

That lively and inquiring mind for a journalist and student is essential. The ability to write is quite a good idea, if you're able to write good English. Because I don't think at this level we should actually be teaching basic English grammar. Writing for journalism, yes, but basic English is actually something that you would expect them to have. (S11, Arts, New HEI)

So, I look at the personal statements, first thing I do is disregard any with bad English, bad grammar, poorly written, because I'm mindful of the teaching standards and teaching standard 3 says, that they have to have a kind of… […] Sorry, yes, I'm looking for all of that because teacher standard 3 talks about their command of standard English, and they've got to be able to use standard English. (S47, Arts, New HEI)

Similarly, good communication skills were particularly valued in applicants to Medicine and allied health programmes:

We're looking for communication… evidence that they are able to communicate, that they are compassionate and kind, that they understand what dignity and respect is, that they can demonstrate leadership, that they… What else are we looking for? Communication, those kinds of things. (S9, Science, New HEI)

Well, there are a huge long list, but then we get to which are measurable? So for us we have communication skills is assessed across every single station. That is partly because I come from a general practitioner background, but communication is the key to medicine. And actually, if you look at the doctors in difficulty, the highest percentage of where things have gone wrong has to do with communication problems. (S22, Science, Old HEI)

A large emphasis was also placed on applicants for Medicine and allied health programmes demonstrating values in line with those of the caring profession they would be becoming qualified to enter:

We're working with what's called values-based recruitment, as set out in the NHS constitution and what's called the six Cs of nursing, set up by the chief nursing officer. Which are compassion, caring, etcetera, etcetera. So, we're trying, during the selection event and looking, to some extent, at the application forms, to look at who's got the sorts of values and attitudes that we're looking for from nurses of the future? As well as have they got the academic ability to actually pass the course? (S7, Science, New HEI)

The thing that I look for the most, the thing that I want to see the absolute most is someone who is kind and respectful of others because if you are a kind person, and you truly understand what that means, and that you don't judge people, we can teach you the rest. People who don't demonstrate kindness because it's not an intrinsic part of who they are, then I can't teach you that. I can only develop it. So the values mean so much more to me than the experience. If I get a personal statement and someone's done ten million exciting

things, but they don't really demonstrate any values of midwifery, or they don't even seem to understand what they are, that shows less potential to me than someone who's never left [local city] but can demonstrate that they know the attributes of a midwife and that they've… that they can demonstrate them in their own life. That trumps… Grades aside, once they get to me those values trump experience. (S9, Science, New HEI)

Well, in some ways, they match the sort of values that any other healthcare profession is looking at. Caring and that sort of thing and having a sense of the need to empower people, because occupational therapy is all about facilitating people to recover lost occupations. (S8, Science, New HEI)

Personal statements

Only half of all Science Selectors at Old universities, but almost all Science selectors at New universities and most Arts selectors at both Old and New HEIs, read applicants' personal statements as part of the selection process. Personal statements were primarily used to assess applicants' interest in the particular degree subject in question:

So we'll go qualifications, checking if they meet or predicted. Then we look at their personal statements to check they're relevant to the programme, and that they're basically what we want to see and they're not completely about English or whichever. So we want to see that clear medical or dental enthusiasm. (S30, Science, Old HEI)

It's very rare you get a poor personal statement so even that is hard, I think, to judge someone by. The only thing you can use it for is if someone says, oh I've always wanted to do physics, and I think well obviously they don't want to do computer science or they're not that keen, but you don't get very many of those. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

They would have to have made quite a large omission for me to reject them [based on the personal statement] and that large omission is not to mention the profession, which believe it or not, a lot of people do. (S9, Science, New HEI)

It's demand and supply really. We don't have enough places for the demand, so it's [assessment of personal statements] a rationing device really, to make absolutely sure that we're selecting people who know what accounting and finance is, can demonstrate how they're going to benefit from the experience. Talk about what they're going to bring to the course because we have no shortage of applicants, but we only have 100 places and we have, I don't know, 1400 applications. And it's also very popular with the international students as well. (S23, Arts, Old HEI)

Personal statements also helped selectors to gauge applicants' levels of understanding of and motivation to study the subject in question:

So, for the personal statement we've got a set of things that we're looking for, and primarily we're looking for them to clearly express their academic interest in the course that they've applied for. And there's various different things that we might be looking for, so have they critically engaged with academic research, maybe legal theories, legal issues? Looking for things like their engagement with experiences outside the classroom and how that's contributed to their development of their interest in the course. Thinking about legal theories in context, as well, so quite a lot of students might talk about cases in the news. (S13, Arts, Old HEI)

It really is, I think, showing interest in the subject area. You know, going beyond just what's in the newspapers and actually showing an academic interest as well and writing about it in

a meaningful way as well. I oftentimes look to see, are they passionate about something? It may be the case as well that they're quite passionate in Politics, like they're active in local politics, or whatever it may be. That's something that can be quite nice as well. It shows that they're thinking about the subject beyond just what they're learning in the classroom as well. I also like to see that sort of enthusiasm, I suppose, for the subject. That for me is quite important as well. (S20, Arts, Old HEI)

For Science programmes leading to health professions, personal statements were used to assess applicants' understanding of the profession, ideally evidenced by first-hand experience of work experience, but not necessarily in a health-related setting:

I guess we are looking for people with commitment, people who've got a realistic idea of what it is they're letting themselves in for, but also people who'd done... You know, so work experience is important, so not necessarily work experience in the health sector, but somebody who's at school who's had a weekend job in a restaurant, say. Again, they've taken on extra, they know what working shifts is like, they know what working antisocial hours is like, you know, that is all relevant, isn't it? (S2, Science, New HEI)

One of the other things that we ask for is some sort of experience within the health and social care landscape. That can be paid or voluntary, and it really doesn't need to have been a big commitment. It's just evidence that people understand what health and social care is in the world. We have a real diverse amount of things that people apply to us with. We have students who go to Tunisia with Gap Medics and do some work over there. We have people who volunteer in local breastfeeding support groups or preschools or… We have people who do the A&E friends scheme where they go and sit with people who are sitting in A&E on their own. It's a real myriad of things, but we ask for something. (S9, Science, New HEI)

Similarly, for Arts programmes leading to professional roles in fields such as teaching and journalism, selectors used personal statements to identify applicants with first-hand experience in similar roles:

And I read personal statements really carefully, because I'm looking for people with experience with children, preferably in school. (S47, Arts, New HEI)

I would also look for some work experience. So if they've done something, because that kind of suggests to me they want to be a journalist. You know, in my summer holidays I went and worked for the Weekly Bugle. That suggests to me they want to be a journalist rather than it looked really good on the web. (S11, Arts, New HEI)

Among Selectors who assessed personal statements, there was awareness that access to relevant work experience opportunities depended on applicants' social backgrounds and schools:

I'm not really that interested in people who have had a lot of opportunities given to them. I'm really interested in people who maybe haven't had any opportunities at all, but they still have a voice. They still have something to say, and they still have passion and interest. I think that that is… It's demonstrative of more because actually if you can… If you've got no money, and you work in Tesco, and you've got children to bring up, and you're busy, and you're still passionate, and you still go and volunteer somewhere, then that speaks so much more to me than people that go on an expensive gap year or. (S9, Science, New HEI)

A lot of the students would put down on a personal statement that they have, you know… They've done work experience in a law firm. And I tell them, don't use that to show merit

because that doesn't mean you're good at law. That just means that you've got connections that are able to get you. Rather you use it to show your passion, to show that you're interested in it. So that does potentially show potential, but again it's how you use it. And then I always tell the selectors too that, well, at the same time you shouldn't give priority to someone who has necessarily done work experience over someone who maybe has a part-time job in a shop, because again you need to think about the different privileges that has gotten one. And again the person who is working in a shop, that potentially shows that they're driven because they've got their own part-time job, they're 17, they're earning money to try and work and get them through school. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

It's interesting, they get very anxious about whether they've got work experience, and work experience in a solicitor's when you're 16 or 17 is largely pointless; you largely just make the tea and look at files, whereas actually working in retail as a Saturday job can give you a lot more, actually. (S26, Arts, Old HEI)

So some of the strongest personal statements can talk about a Saturday job, or a sport or something, and how that relates to law and their academic interest, and that can be stronger than someone who lists five or six experiences in a London law firm, but doesn't tell us what they've learnt from it. So I think that's one of the good things about the criteria, that we're looking at that overall picture and not ticking a box to say yes, they've done this experience, they've worked in this law firm, and things like that. (S13, Arts, Old HEI)

There was also widespread awareness that some applicants would have received considerably more help in preparing their personal statements than others:

But we have had some discussions around widening participation and I think we're still very much trying to figure out how to do that best practice, how to do that particularly thinking about assessing personal statements. And the fact that if you go to a high-performing school and you have loads of support to write your personal statement and potentially lots of advantages to go to lots of work experience and do lots of extra-curricular activities and you're not held back by other constraints, then your personal statement is wonderful. Whereas how do you weight that against someone that hasn't had very much help with it, hasn't had three shiny work experiences? (S25, Science, Old HEI)

I mean, obviously, it's quite difficult to tell from a UCAS application, because it's not always the author's own original work. You know, some schools support it a lot. Some of the parents are doing a lot of this. Some people just have a go on their own. So, you're kind of having to do what you can with the information. (S33, Arts, Old HEI)

I mean it's pretty obvious the ones who've had the extra help. I mean I know where I live, I live near two very prominent public schools and one of them has a staff of 12 to deal with their university applications. When I was doing it it was me and the woman in the office so it was, you know, things like that. And you know when people have been over-prepped to the death and they cover the similar things across the board, they've all done the same competitions, they've all read the same books, they've all done this and that. (S21, Arts, Old HEI)

I know part of the caution around personal statements was that we never really know who's writing it and then one of our heads of department would say, well, you know, I've got a daughter of a friend who had an excellent personal statement. I know, because I wrote it. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

Teachers' references

Only 3 Science selectors for Old universities and 2 Science selectors for New universities mentioned using teachers' references to inform admissions decisions. Similarly, few Arts selectors for New HEIs mentioned references. In contrast, Arts selectors for Old HEIs typically read references as part of the selection process, although often quickly and as a means of sense-checking other parts of the application including the likelihood of the applicant achieving their predicted A-level grades:

> *Oh, yes, I'm very keen on the reference revealing potential. The reference sometimes from an applicant school, which I would call a genuinely widening participation applicant, rather than the ones that in our definition can, okay, can actually tell me. I can believe a teacher who will for instance tell me this person's GCSE grades are not great, but he or she is now blossoming at A Level, and will go far. Again, the honest answer is that you can only really get to this by interviewing the applicants, and we don't interview anybody. (S12, Arts, Old HEI)*

> *References can be very, like very important to explain disparities between previous grades. And also just contextualising because sometimes you will see things in references or in personal statements about a particular hardship that an individual has grown through that might explain past performance, or might explain why it has been predicted very good future performance. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)*

Where references were mentioned by other selectors, they were often deemed to be "all very similar" or "invariably good". There was recognition, however, that references from teachers in state schools tended to be less good than those from teachers in private fee-paying schools simply because of large differences in the resources available at these schools:

> *And then of course the references from the schools are usually really good, but I'm also very conscious that a reference from an independent school is usually much better than a reference from a state, because those state teachers haven't got as much time to spend on writing a fantastic flowing reference, that they do in independent schools. So I'm also very, very aware of that. (S4, Science, Old HEI)*

> *Yes, and I mean that's, again it is variable depending on the school and how well they know the students. I think it's quite difficult when you go to maybe a really large sixth form college in terms of who's writing the reference, they probably have a few people, different subject teachers put their input in and it's much more generic than if you go to a smaller school and they all know each other. So, yes. (S24, Arts, Old HEI)*

Portfolios

Virtually all of the selectors for Arts programmes involving art and design skills considered portfolios of work that applicants were invited to submit following receipt of their application or to bring with them to interview. For these selectors, the quality of applicants' portfolios were often valued more than their academic achievements:

> *You know, somebody might not be as academically able but the Architecture say, having an amazing portfolio might just have that different mindset and different skill set that somebody wouldn't have. And I think that's why we do look at applications as a whole and not just academic achievement or skills ability or portfolio ability. I don't think there is an ideal*

student or applicant for anything these days. And I think it would be pretty boring if there was. (S40, Arts, New HEI)

Yes, we like to do our own thing because, you know, the course that we offer is not the same as history or maths or anything like that and therefore we should be allowed to recruit in a way that makes sure that we get the best candidates, regardless of possibly what their A-level grades might be. (S51, Arts, Old HEI)

…every year also, there's quite obviously students from the [state] maintained sector who are brilliant, who are just obviously wonderful portfolios. And then it's a no-brainer, there's not even discussion, it's you make that person an offer straightaway. Whereas for the independent school students I've also had to make a case, a very, very clear case where this person is totally outstanding and must have an offer. (S29, Arts, Old HEI)

Selectors assessing portfolios were generally aware of and tried to take account of the socioeconomic group differences in access to the kinds of resources needed to create a strong portfolio:

I think that the students that go to… From a more privileged background that have had the opportunity to go to open days where the parents might have looked carefully at the admissions pages or the teachers have done that for them, they'll get that, they'll just look at the information that's there. GCSE level and say don't take the fine art course, or don't… If there isn't a good art programme in your school, then go to live drawing classes, go to exhibitions, keep a sketchbook… (S29, Arts, Old HEI)

So I think, from what I understand from observing the process over the last three years, is that a student from a school that… Doesn't have the same resources, will have taught them art, but won't necessarily have had the resources to teach them about mounting, or presentation. So… (S14, Arts, Old HEI)

Interviews with applicants

At both Old and New universities, interviews invariably formed part of the selection process for Science programmes leading to Medicine and other health professions, but were typically not used to select students for other Science programmes. For Science programmes leading to health professions, interviews were seen as playing a key role in enabling selectors to assess applicants' understanding of and enthusiasm for the subject, and possession of the communication skills and caring values needed for success not only on the degree programme but also in the subsequent line of work:

Sometimes there are questions to see how they describe things, whether they describe them correctly. Obviously, in a career like that you need to be able to rather than making assumptions. Some of them are just about kind of the general enthusiasm to study such a programme, work experience they've done to show their dedication and things like that. (S30, Science, Old HEI)

These are things that make a candidate incredibly strong and successful at interview. A candidate that's demonstrated they understand the breadth of the subject area for physiotherapy. They've perhaps had experience working with children, or with respiratory conditions, so they've really understood it's not just about sports injuries, it's about working with people with dementia, or older people. Someone that's got that real ability to demonstrate an understanding of the wide nature and the breadth that the profession has to offer. Because they're more likely to succeed on programme, because they're not coming in

thinking, it's all about this. […] Someone that's been able to really reflect and demonstrate they've worked with children, as well as older people, so they've got that great ability to reflect on what communication differences you might need, or what's the same. They make excellent candidates. (S36, Science, Old HEI)

Arts selectors rarely interviewed applicants, except for courses leading to the teaching profession or for courses involving artistic skill where applicants would be invited to discuss their portfolios of work at interview.

Selectors who interviewed applicants were often aware that applicants from better resourced schools and families were more likely to have benefitted from advice and guidance on how to approach being interviewed:

I think that can be the difficulty with the face-to-face interview, is a lot of it is very prepared. They're coached. And if you come from high achieving, or an affluent area, your college is really preparing you for those interviews. Like they do with their personal statements, they give you lots of time to prepare, and I think you can get some really great students come across there. And then equally, if you're looking at students that have done so well in their situation to be sat in front of you, but haven't had the time to prepare, how do you compare that? (S36, Science, Old HEI)

5.4 How the selection process unfolds

Proportions of applicants receiving offers of a place

Three quarters of the Science programmes at Old universities, and half of those at New universities, were highly numerically competitive with offers of places made to only a small fraction of all applicants. A quarter of the Science selectors at Old universities made offers to most applicants, but this was because the applicant field had already been deliberately narrowed by the setting of very high academic entry requirements:

Chemistry is what we call a recruiting department. So, we are in a position where we can make lots and lots of offers without worrying too much. As long as we've got a reasonably high standard offer and WP offer in place. We're not going to be worried too much about going way beyond our target at confirmation time. And we're always in a position where we fill the target with near miss applicants […] as long as their predicted grades are in the ballpark of where we need them to be. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

I suppose the main criteria is predicted grades. They can offer based on A-level performance, and we made offers on almost every application. I've forgotten how many offers we made now. I think we made 800-plus offers off it's around 1,000 applications. We weren't rejecting that many. (S34, Arts, Old HEI)

Half of the Science selectors at New universities also invited to interview and/or subsequently offered places to a high proportion of applicants who met the entry requirements, due mainly to a decline in applicant numbers in recent years and the consequent need to make a high number of offers in order to meet their target intake:

…the application forms are seen by colleagues in [name's] department in admissions, who look at have they either got the entry requirements or could they get them by the start date

of the course? If they have, or almost have, they then pass them to me to look at personal statements and their references. If they're all okay, then we invite to a selection event. (S7, Science, New HEI)

I only really see them if they don't automatically, with predicted grades, meet our bottom line quite seriously, do they just get invited to interview straight away. The files only come to me if there's something to consider, if they're not quite a standard entry that our admin can go, yes, they've predicted A B B, yes we can invite them. (S46, Science, New HEI)

Ranking of applications

Over half of all Science selectors for Old universities and a third of those for New universities reported that they ranked applicants based on their academic attainment profiles. The highest ranked applicants would be the first to receive offers of places, or invitations to interview where these were used:

So people always ask how do you deal with all the students who are bordering? And actually as far as I'm concerned, you start at the top of the stack and work down and if I know I've got 300 offers to make, once I've got 400 forms or even 301 forms then I can start from the bottom on the jetty. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

So I have a column with… I mean it's mainly A level. Two As, A*AA. And then I'll put the subjects next to it, like maths, computing. And I literally then just sort in order so that the more A*s go to the top. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

I'll say I've got like 50 offers to make and I have 30 absolutely definitely excellent ones, that's fine, that's great. You know, things like grades, grades and predicted grades and that kind of, you know. Read the personal statement or references to make sure there's nothing there that I'm missing and that they'll get the offers (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

… we don't really do so much of a gathered field approach so we do make offers as we kind of go. I suppose, and this is linked into, kind of, our 20/21 day turnaround time, and trying to make decisions within three weeks. So for… so we don't really want to hold up decisions where we don't need to. The approach, I suppose in capacity of areas where scoring is easy, I mean, for example, if it's management and related programmes, we'd make offers to very highly scoring students initially and then start to look at the next group of… the next best scoring students to kind of keep ticking over to our target. (S31, Arts, Old HEI)

Academically weak applicants, would generally be rejected quickly:

… we will tend to place a lot of weight on A-levels results and use that to thin the herd, so to speak. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

…everyone on my list now, is already predicted the entry or above. Because unfortunately at that point, because I knew I had far too many; anyone who wasn't predicted the right grade, excluding these contextuals, I ended up just having to reject them. […] As long as they're not a contextual, I do. But I do think that if anyone's predicted an A and two Bs, I just think you're probably a good student but quite frankly, you're not going to get an offer. So let's just get the reject out there. (S4, Science, Old HEI)

We look at predicted grades and we wouldn't take them any further if they were below a certain threshold. Say if they were predicted three Bs, we wouldn't take them any further. We would say our published entry requirements are… Therefore we're unable to make you an offer. (S25, Science, Old HEI)

So before we get it through the assessor team have had it, and they've kind of done a cull of anyone who doesn't have the right predicted grades and has terrible personal statements. They sift them out, so we only get the ones that are viable. (S16, Arts, Old HEI)

Well, straight-away rejections are if, first, they don't meet the entry requirements. They don't… […] Which is they might not meet the GCSE requirements, the A-level predicted grades or achieved grades are not what we ask for or the qualification is not acceptable to [this university], if they come on with a non-standard qualification. (S19, Arts, Old HEI)

So, anybody predicted two grades below, if they're not part of one of the access schemes, would go straightaway. So, if they're WP, we'll give them an offer with one grade drop, but everybody else will be rejected. We don't make any aspirational offers for anybody but to WP students. (S37, Arts, Old HEI)

Like I said, my personal way of doing it is to reject first, so if whatever the offer target is, is to make sure that you've got enough applications that have come in to cover that, and then start rejecting from the bottom. So if it's 140, and I've got 200 applications, I can comfortably get rid of 40 of the ones that I consider to be the weakest. And then once you've got a good pool, then you can identify the ones within that who are the strongest overall and make offers. So then you're sort of working from both ends. (S17, Arts, Old HEI)

In some cases, rejected applicants would be offered places on allied programmes at the university where the quantity and/or perceived 'quality' of applicants was lower:

We can either make an offer or we often make course change offers. So, if a student has maybe demonstrated, in their personal statement, interest in a slightly different discipline or their academic performance is maybe falling a little bit below and they don't quite meet that threshold. Then the academic departments and the course selector may suggest, actually, I think they may be better off suited towards this course instead. Otherwise, once we've got the final, final thresholds, it may be an unsuccessful decision, as well. (S15, Arts, Old HEI)

A third of Science selectors for Old universities identified that early applicants – those meeting the Oxbridge application deadline of 15th October in the annual admissions cycle beginning in September of each year – tended to be the strongest applicants in formal academic terms, and were highly likely to be offered a place, although selectors were mindful that it was necessary to ensure that all applicants meeting the UCAS main deadline for applications of 15th January be given equal consideration:

…before the Oxbridge deadline all we see is A*s and Cambridge Pre-U qualifications which is private school A-levels. (S44, Science, Old HEI)

it's still the case that the forms that come in before about the 1st November, November 5th as it used to be in the days of paper forms, would be… They're going to be statistically where the Oxbridge applicants are and they are going to be the ones that are going to be predicted twos and threes and four A*s and with 8, 10, 12 A*s at GCSE. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

So essentially you get this first batch through [the Oxbridge deadline ones] and it's very hard to reject any of them, because most of them are real high flyers. But you can't, all of a sudden, throw all of your offers at this one group, because we have to make sure we have enough for fair consideration by January. But that first batch is quite difficult not to make offers to, because I don't quite know how I justify not giving someone who's predicted four A*s; how I reject them, on what grounds? (S4, Science, Old HEI)

Normally the earlier applications are going to be stronger. I've noticed that very clearly. They're going to be stronger because they are the students who are applying to Oxbridge that come in very early. And very often the ones that come in, you know, quite later on in the cycle, they can read as quite rushed, or students maybe haven't put in so much thought. […] So it's not so much you have a better likelihood of getting an offer if you apply earlier, but it is the case that the applications earlier are going to be better quality. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

After making offers to a selection of academically strong early applicants, selectors would "hold" borderline applications for consideration later, when the extent of the applicant field (quantity and 'quality') became clearer.

So we make unconditional offers where we know the grades or maybe reject them. And there would be some green lighting there for the people coming in that have got very high grades that we would give them offers and then other people we would hold. But you would notice there's no grade cut-offs on here and there's an equally no numbers because we don't know how many people we put in this category and this category A until we get the data back from this cycle to know about conversions… (S25, Science, Old HEI)

Well, it depends where… I suppose, we don't necessarily know the borderline cases until we get the final thresholds through because obviously, we are just literally scoring and putting in a number next to the application. Borderline cases can be students that have scored maybe, slightly below the typical offer for their academic grades. May not necessarily have scored… Their personal statement is good but it's not outstanding. I think those students may fall into the borderline cases. So, I would say the way our weighting is, that if a student is maybe academically slightly below our typical offer but has an outstanding personal statement, they can certainly be made an offer, very, very quickly. But I think it's where a student may fall down slightly in every criteria, they'll end up being the borderline cases. (S15, Arts, Old HEI)

Most Science selectors including virtually all of those admitting students to programmes leading to health professions reported that it was necessary to "hold" borderline applications for consideration later because of the need to avoid "over-recruiting" to programmes that had strict upper limits on places due to constraints on lab space or the availability of work placements that formed an integral part of the course:

You get to that borderline some day in the middle of February and you haven't actually been processing the rejections and then you go back and you actually have to just type R into box and put justifications in. You think ah well this student could study Chemistry at [this university], this student could study Chemistry at [this university] but I've got 101 spaces to get one student to turn up I've got to make three and a half offers that means I've got so many offers to make. And this student's perfectly capable of studying here but I don't have the offers to make. Now is that fair? That's probably not. They don't think that's fair but I have a limit on the number of spaces that I can fill and that borderline has of course changed over time as the number of applicants […] has moved. (S6, Science, Old HEI)

I mean just the parameters and just the sheer number of applications we get and the few spaces that we have, I suppose I am forced to prioritise someone who is more likely to get A*AA over someone who isn't, regardless of how amazing the person's statement is or the reference. Because I've had ones where it's been like they've been predicted let's say AAA, so it's not been predicted A*AA. So previous grades were not great, but then you read the personal statements and you read the reference, and you read what they've been through, and they've been through like the wringer in terms of their own challenges they've faced in

life, like horrible things, and you just cannot give them an offer. Like you could maybe give them an aspirational offer, but they're not going to get it. Yes. And then you're just like I can't, you know. As much as you would like to make the offer to them and hope that, yes, but you just can't because you don't have that flexibility. (S5, Arts, Old HEI)

And because I have plenty of applicants, because I only have 25 places. Because places are allocated to teacher training through the government. So, I again, the university would love me to have a hundred, but I'm limited. So, last year it was 22, this year it's 25. So, I'm a little bit like bear hunter, can't go over it because we get fined, I can't go under it, because we lose numbers, so I have to try and hit it which is nearly impossible. (S47, Arts, New HEI)

Acceptance of near-misses

Half of all Science selectors at both Old and New universities and a quarter of all Arts selectors at Old HEIs reported that during the August confirmation period they would typically accept a significant number of "near-miss" applicants who had narrowly missed the academic conditions of their offers:

So, in that way, a department like ours is operating in a way that it concentrates much more than you think on actually recruiting people according to the results they've achieved rather than the grades that are predicted for them. You know, so it's the way that I sort of explained. The way that the process works. […] At confirmation time, yes. After the A-level results come out, who have missed the offer by one or two grades. And you say, okay, you can come here anyway. (S41, Science, Old HEI)

So at confirmation we're normally trying to recruit to a certain target number based around trying to recruit a reasonable number of students and based on the number that we think we can reasonably manage to cope with [….] and we're trying get to a known faculty target. That means that in some years we have held almost on the offer at confirmation: so we've confirmed down to A*AA and then no further. […] And then there are other years where the university where we might be struggling for applicants say the last year where we've actually confirmed down to ABB. […] But it would A in mathematics yes. So we are actually taking some students at Bs but not often very many but there will be some that have a B in the science subject and a B in the third element. (S35, Science, Old HEI)

We get the results on the Sunday afternoon. On the Monday morning, the [member of senior university management] will drop our tariff. They always do. Anybody who's met either their original tariff or whatever the [member of senior university management] has dropped it to, and I'm guessing what that will be this August. I'm 99% sure I know what it will be, will automatically get confirmed. (S7, Science, New HEI)

So, we've got a plan for what we expect to happen in the rest of the year and we also build in a buffer for what if it didn't turn out the way you've predicted, so that, really, we're aiming to undershoot that confirmation so that we can then fill up with near misses. If things turn out with higher conversion rates than expected, well, hopefully the buffer is big enough to deal with that. (S42, Arts, Old HEI)

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5.5 Summary

Our analysis of interviews with Admissions Selectors conducted during 2017/18 has shown that selectors were seeking to identify applicants with most potential to succeed on the degree programme. This was evidenced first and foremost by high levels of prior and predicted attainment in line with typically high formal academic entry requirements at A-level, often coupled with similarly high informal expectations regarding attainment at GCSE level. Many selectors were also looking for evidence of applicants' understanding of, motivation towards, and suitability for the degree programme in question. Most but not all selectors voiced a concern for distributive fairness, and sought to evaluate applications with a mind to the impact of applicants' socioeconomic circumstances on their opportunities and achievements to date. Correspondingly, three-quarters of Science selectors and two-thirds of all Arts selectors at Old universities reported using contextual data to inform admissions decisions in some form or other, involving contextually disadvantaged applicants being flagged for more careful consideration for admission to the programme subject to meeting standard entry requirements, or on the basis of a contextual offer involving a small reduction in academic entry requirements. Few selectors reported the existence of, or scope to develop, teaching and learning practices that could support contextually disadvantaged learners to bridge gaps in their knowledge and skills in order to successfully complete their programmes. This, coupled with the need to select a small number of applicants from a large and highly qualified applicant pool, meant that concerns for ensuring equitable opportunities in pursuit of distributive fairness tended to be outweighed by the dictates of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm.

6. Findings from Access and Participation Plans for 2020/21 to 2024/25

This chapter presents the findings of an analysis of the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) covering the period from 2020/21 to 2024/25 submitted to the Office for Students (OfS) in 2019 by England's 25 higher-tariff higher education providers.[164] APPs replace the Access Agreements previously submitted annually by providers to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and set out providers' responses to the challenging new widening access targets set by the OfS which call on higher-tariff universities to deliver a rapid reduction in the ratio of young entrants from areas with the highest and lowest HE participation areas (POLAR quintiles 5 and 1 respectively) from an average of 5:1 currently, to 3:1 by 2024/25, and to 1:1 by 2038/39.[165] In order to achieve these unprecedentedly stretching new targets, the OfS has encouraged universities to engage in a process of "rethinking how merit is judged in admissions",[166] requiring a move away from the traditional model of meritocratic equality of opportunity and procedural justice in which university places go to the most highly qualified applicants regardless of socioeconomic background, in favour of a contextualised approach to assessing merit and potential in pursuit of a greater degree of distributive fairness.

The purpose of analysing providers' APPs was to establish how institutional thinking on fair access and admissions has evolved since we interviewed admissions personnel during the 2017/18 academic year and in response to the challenge laid down by the OfS. The findings of our analyses are presented under four main headings: the development of more ambitious widening access strategies; the shift towards a more structural understanding of prior attainment; the wider adoption of contextualised approaches to admissions; and the improvement of support for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to realise their potential at degree level.

6.1 The development of more ambitious widening access strategies

Widening access targets for 2024-25

In their APPs, all 25 high-tariff universities had committed to reducing their POLAR Q5:Q1 ratio substantially by 2024/25 in contribution to the OfS target of a ratio of 3:1 by 2024/25. Figure 1, displays each provider's baseline ratio and self-declared target ratio for 2024/25.

Nine providers were starting from very high baseline ratios of POLAR quintile 5 to POLAR quintile 1 students, ranging from 10:1 to as high as 15:1. Five universities had baseline ratios less than 10:1 but higher than 7:1. The remaining eleven had baseline ratios of 6:1 or less. Seven of the eleven providers with the lowest baseline ratios had committed to reducing their ratios to 3:1 or less by 2024/25, as had one university with a very high baseline ratio of 10:1. Most of the other providers had committed to reducing their baseline ratios by about half, except for three providers with very high baseline ratios (Imperial, UCL and King's) which had set more modest targets.

Figure 1. Baseline and target ratios of entrants from POLAR Q5:Q1

■ Baseline   ■ Target for 2024/25
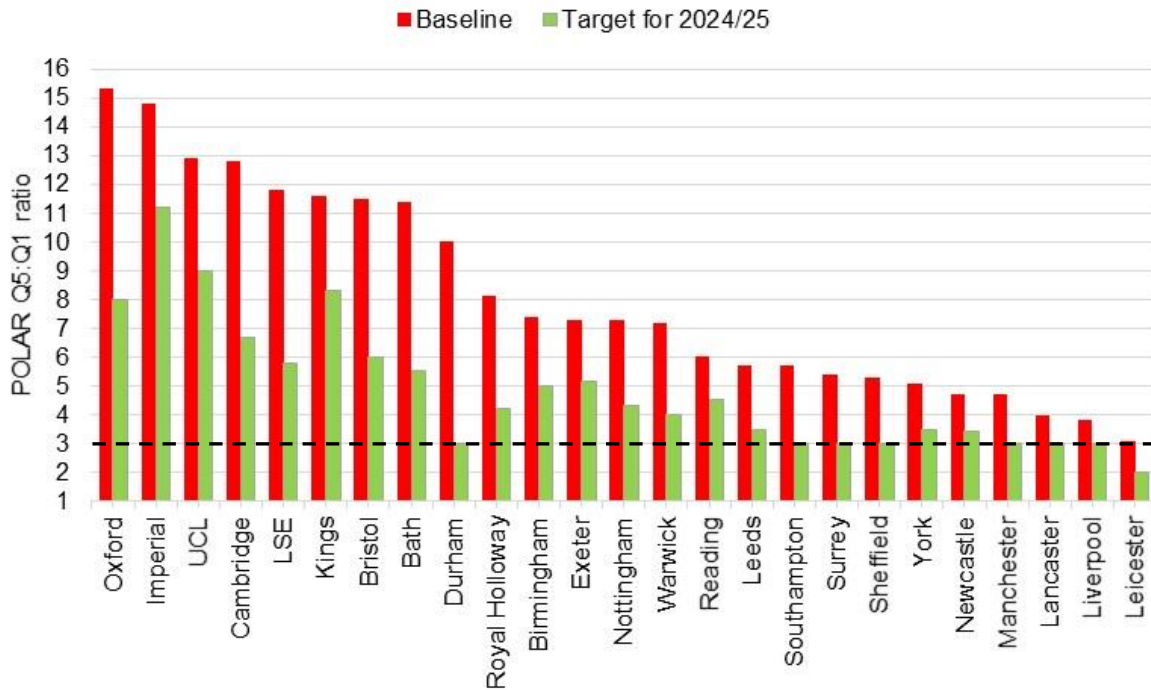
Note: Baseline figures are for 2018/19 for Oxford, LSE and Durham, 2017/18 for all other institutions. Targets figures for Imperial, King's and Exeter averages of upper and lower bound estimates; target figures for LSE, Bath, Royal Holloway and Leicester are point estimates.

Although the targets set by Imperial, UCL and King's were not as ambitious as those set by some other universities with very high baseline ratios, all three providers expressed a commitment to working towards the OfS's longer-term goal of achieving perfectly equitable access to higher tariff universities:

> *Over the five years of this APP, the College will seek to increase the numbers of students from quintiles 1 and 2 combined for POLAR and quintile 1 for IMD to levels that are consistent with achieving the 20-year OfS goal to achieve equality of opportunity within a generation. (Imperial p8)*

> *…eliminate the gaps in access between the most and least represented groups by 2038-39 […] reduce the ratio of POLAR4 Q1:Q5 students entering UCL to 1:9 by 2024-25 (UCL p11)*

> *Aim 3: Eliminate the gap in entry rates between the most and least represented groups (OfS KPM) by 2038/39. (King's p8)*

In contrast, while Cambridge and Royal Holloway have set relatively ambitious targets for 2024/25, they signalled that their anticipated position by 2038/39 would not be perfect equality of access:

> *…we will make all reasonable endeavours to deliver on these objectives and by 2035 we expect that one third of our intake will be drawn from the most under-represented and disadvantaged groups (defined at this point by the bottom two quintiles of the POLAR and IMD measures)… (Cambridge p1)*

> *We have set a long-term ambition to halve the current gap from 38.1 to 19.1 percentage points by 2038-39. (Royal Holloway p8)*

Concerns about the POLAR metric

All three of the providers that had set more modest targets for 2024/25, and both of the providers signalling that they did not expect to reach perfect equity by 2038/39, accounted for this stance by referring to the serious shortcomings of POLAR as a widening participation metric, especially in London where comparatively few areas constitute POLAR quintile 1 areas:[167]

> …POLAR4 has not been a measure which the College has used to measure its outreach performance given the accepted limitations of POLAR in London. For example, in London, 45% of local areas are classified as POLAR4 Q5 compared with only 1.3% classified as Q1. (Imperial p1)

> We recognise that our target to reduce our POLAR Q1:Q5 ratio to 1:9 does not reflect the OfS's national ambition for this target. However, we believe that aiming for a decrease from 1:14 to 1:9 in our ratio is ambitious given our London context [see section 3.1.6]. We have seen our access gaps for other key groups (IMD Q1, disability, black students) begin to narrow over the last five years. However, despite prioritising POLAR Q1 in our work over the same period, we have made no progress in this area. We believe this is because of the low proportion of POLAR Q1 areas in London. (UCL p12)

> …[POLAR] measures HE participation and summarises data at a Middle-layer Super Output Area (approximately 3,245 households). Therefore, in London participation rates are much more localised than POLAR4 can capture. POLAR4 Quintiles 1&2 account for approximately 7% of the London population. (King's pp9-10)

> There is, for example, a level of reliance on POLAR, which has been shown to be a less effective measure of under-representation in some geographical areas, particularly in London which forms a significant applicant base for the University. (Cambridge p2)

> It is, however, worth noting that, "there are very few areas of London that are POLAR4 quintile 1 or 2" [source: OfS website FAQs]. This has implications for Royal Holloway as internal data shows that 42% of our students between 2012-13 to 2018-19 were based within 25 miles of the College, with a large proportion coming from London. (Royal Holloway p1)

This concern about POLAR was also identified by two other providers that recruit heavily from the London area:

> The development of POLAR4 has significantly changed the classification of postcodes nationally, with almost half (45%) being in a different quintile to POLAR3. 35% of postcodes moved up or down by one quintile. Within all quintiles the median young participation rate is higher in POLAR4 than POLAR3. London therefore looks very different to the rest of the country with generally higher participation rates. For every POLAR4 quintile 1 area in London there are 34 quintile 5 areas. (LSE pp1-2)

> Meanwhile, POLAR is recognised as limited for certain parts of the country, such as London, a key catchment area for the University and a focus for our widening participation work. (Exeter p4)

In contrast, four universities, three of which are located in the North of England, considered POLAR to be a suitable metric in their area.

Across the Merseyside region, there are many areas of low participation, represented by POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2, with higher participation classed as being within quintiles 3, 4 and 5. […] (Liverpool p3)

We believe that POLAR 4 data reliably reflects disadvantage in our area. (Newcastle p4)

Universities located in London indicated that it would be necessary to launch outreach initiatives targeted at Q1 students living outside of their primary London catchment area, and so progress towards the POLAR target would necessarily be slow to begin with:

In order to make any significant impact on the participation of students from this group, the College will need to launch new programmes outside of London. Since this is new activity, and since our activity will be focussed on long-term engagement in order to raise attainment, we expect the increase in numbers to be slow at first. (Imperial p9)

We recognise that our target to reduce our POLAR Q1:Q5 ratio to 1:9 does not reflect the OfS's national ambition for this target. […] However, during the life of this plan we will be implementing the results of our attainment research (see section 3.1.4) and will have increased our national collaborations and outreach (section 3.1.6). We expect the results of these will be modest during the life of this plan, but more significant in future years. (UCL p12)

We acknowledge the OfS has placed POLAR4 as a national KPM and provide a five-year target to set trajectory. However, it will take time to scope, design and build activity to increase access for students from PQ1&2 outside London. […] As such, the target we are setting now is a continuous improvement over the first five-year phase with an acceleration in the latter half of the time period. (King's p8)

To ensure that we work with and positively impact as many widening participation pupils as possible, the new widening access team will target additional schools that we have not previously engaged with that are within POLAR4 Quintile 1 postcode areas and IMD 1-3 decile areas. […] It is our ambition to eliminate this gap over time, however, our predominantly regional (rather than national) recruitment limits our ability to recruit students from POLAR4 Q1, meaning that it will take time to be able to eliminate this gap completely. (Royal Holloway pp8-9)

Universities critical of the POLAR metric also emphasised the need to ensure that those from quintiles 2 to 4 were not unfairly "squeezed" by the focus on quintiles 1 and 5:

Also of note is the fact that the proportion of Q3 students has declined over this period. This is also true of the POLAR3 area students. We need to mindful of the 'squeezed middle' as we develop policies and processes to ensure equality of opportunity for all. (LSE p3)

We are conscious that in decreasing the gap in our POLAR Q1:Q5 ratio we risk seeing a fall in our proportion of POLAR Q2 students. […] We have committed to reviewing the scheme annually in the first years to evaluate for impact and as part of this we will be monitoring our POLAR Q2 intake and considering whether we need to make any adjustments to the scheme. (UCL p12)

We propose to have targets relating to admission from Q1 and Q2, but also internal checks in relation to Q3 and Q4 to ensure that any progress made on other quintiles is not at their expense. (Cambridge p3)

We are also keen to ensure that students' from P4Q2 are not further disadvantaged by the emphasis on P4Q1 students. (Birmingham p13)

All universities set widening access targets using the POLAR metric as required by OfS, but many indicated that they would also use other area-level metrics they considered more suitable for the purposes of targeting and measuring the success of widening access initiatives. Seven universities – all London based or recruiting heavily from the London area – identified the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) as an important additional widening access metric, making explicit its superiority over POLAR in that IMD is a measure of socioeconomic disadvantage whereas POLAR is not:

> *Our outreach has instead focussed on IMD as a more appropriate measure of deprivation for our local context. The gap in Access using IMD does remain but has been falling steadily from a high of 29.6% in 2014-15 to 24.8% in 2017-18. (Imperial p1)*

> *We will use IMD as a more granular and effective means of defining disadvantage than POLAR alone and which, unlike Acorn, is a publicly available dataset. We have made substantial and consistent progress in closing the gap between IMD Q1 and Q5 over the previous five years, shifting from a gap of 15.7pp to 5.4pp. As such, we aim to close this gap completely by 2024/25. (King's p8)*

> *OfS has made clear that it expects HE providers with the largest access gaps to include POLAR4 as an access measure in their APPs. We have therefore included a POLAR4 enrolment target in our 2020-25 APP and will look to use this metric in all of our access work, but particularly in our work outside London. Alongside other London HEIs, LSE has reservations about the validity of using POLAR 4 as a widening participation target in the capital. As an institution which typically enrols over one third of its UK undergraduate student body from London, the POLAR4 measure of underrepresentation is not as effective a tool, in our opinion, as IMD or Free School Meal data for the London region. (LSE p15)*

> *Any target for closing the gap in socio-economic attainment could usefully use the IMD measure, as it may reveal multiple measures of socio-economic disadvantage, (beyond POLAR4's singular focus on progression to HE). (Liverpool p5)*

Five universities identified ACORN as an additional widening access metric they would be using because of its superiority over POLAR as a measure of socioeconomic disadvantage:

> *The University has used both POLAR4 and ACORN for the purpose of measuring under-representation and socioeconomic disadvantage. ACORN is widely regarded as being one of the most effective proxy measure for disadvantage, in the absence of readily available data on individual applicants' circumstances. It is particularly strong in helping to identify candidates in some target groups, e.g. BAME and Asian applicants, who may live in urban areas where individual disadvantage can be masked by area-based high levels of participation in Higher Education. (Oxford p3)*

> *LSE has begun to use Acorn data in our outreach work, as its granular and specifically categorised postcode-level dataset offers a more detailed classification of socio-economic background, especially in densely populated urban areas. (LSE p3)*

> *Acorn is a longstanding means of defining disadvantage that has more relevance and is more effective in London due to its higher level of granularity. It is also used by other providers across the sector. (King's p9)*

Eleven universities expressed a desire to use individual-level metrics in order to better capture the socioeconomic circumstances of individuals – most notably receipt of free school meals – and lamented the current unavailability of this data during the admissions cycle:

We are particularly eager to undertake further research relating to Free School Meals (FSM) eligible students; FSM eligibility forms the basis for allocation of Pupil Premium funding in state maintained schools, and has been identified in recent academic literature as having particular promise as a contextual admissions indicator of disadvantage because it is "one of the most comprehensive and accurate measures of [socio-economic status] available". We have been asking our applicants to self-declare this information as part of our Supplementary Application Questionnaire since the 2018 Apply Cycle, although it is often not possible for us to verify this information. The ideal would be access (at the point of application) to each state-maintained school student's full FSM eligibility record held in the National Pupil Database, as this information is verified and, in addition, it is useful to know exactly when and for how long a pupil has been FSM eligible. (Cambridge p16)

We are pleased to note that 'the OfS is actively exploring the use of Free School Meal and household income data' [Source: Regulatory Notice 1, paragraph 104] and would value the opportunity to revisit these targets once this data has become available, as although we recognise the validity of the POLAR4 measure we are aware that individual-level measures of contextual disadvantage would give a more accurate picture of underrepresentation. (Royal Holloway p29)

Whilst we recognise the shift in OfS focus to closing the gap in access between students from low (quintile 1) and high (quintile 5) participation neighbourhoods, evidence suggests that Polar data, in isolation, is a very limited measure of disadvantage. It is a single-dimension methodology (based on allocation of postcodes only) which does not reflect the complex and often intersectional nature of disadvantage; indeed research has shown that only 13% of students eligible for Free School Meals live within P4Q1 areas of the country. This is supported by evidence from our own institutional data which shows that nearly 10% of students from low participation neighbourhoods come from high-income households. (Birmingham p1)

We need to work across quintiles as POLAR is not a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage, for example 57% of our students in Q1 are from a low income household but so are 20% in Q5. While the proportion of POLAR Q1&2 students is increasing, the percentage of students from state school has remained steady and the percentage from low-income households has decreased. (Exeter p4)

Ultimately, the University would prefer to target underrepresented students using a metric based on the individual, Free School Meal eligibility for example. Until this metric, or similar, is available at the point of application and for outreach activities, we will continue to use the best proxies available to us, whilst understanding their limitations. (Nottingham p8)

We will work with policy makers and the OfS to lobby for better access to data to ensure we can be more robust in enhancing access and participation for the most disadvantaged groups, including students entitled to or in receipt of Free School Meals. (Warwick p9)

Several providers also expressed a desire to use other individual-level markers of socioeconomic disadvantage in addition to FSM status, including first in the family to attend university, from a low income family, and care leaver status:

We will focus our key interventions on improving access for all underrepresented groups, with particular focus on those from low-participation neighbourhoods (but also "first in family", free school meals recipients, low family income, etc.), BAME and care-leavers. (York p11)

The University recognises the importance of supplementing POLAR4 based geographical measures of disadvantage with indicators of individual circumstance. We will therefore continue to target, record and monitor supported outreach projects and progression to HE

with supplementary intersecting measures of underrepresentation such as Free School Meals, Pupil Premium and Care Experience. (Liverpool p4)

University self-assessments of recent performance on widening access

Whilst committing to unprecedentedly ambitious widening access targets, all but one of the 25 higher-tariff universities were keen to highlight some of the more positive aspects of their current status and recent trajectory on widening access. These statements were similar in tone to those in the Access Agreements submitted historically to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access. Six institutions highlighted that their current performance in relation to the representation of students from low participation areas (POLAR Q1) was in line with the institution's HESA benchmark which adjusts for location, subject mix and entry requirements:[168]

While the [POLAR Q5:Q1] gap is large, the proportion of students from POLAR Q1 is in line with UCL's HESA location adjusted benchmarks, and has remained consistent over the past five years at around 4%... (UCL p2)

The University has made concerted progress in increasing the number of LPN entrants outperforming our access agreement milestone again for a second consecutive year in 2017/18. HESA data also corroborates that we have achieved our benchmark for this group admitting 6.5% of entrants from a LPN in 2017/18. (Warwick p1)

Although Surrey's rate is below the sector average, this LPN HESA KPI is broadly in line with our benchmark (i.e. the rate for institutions similar to us). (Surrey p1)

In HESA's recently released Experimental Statistics: UK Performance Indicators (PIs) incorporating POLAR4, we perform well against our sector benchmark with 8.1% of young new entrants from LPNs against a benchmark of 8.2%. We perform less well against the location adjusted benchmark of 10.7%. (Newcastle p3)

Six universities highlighted that they were outperforming other high-tariff or Russell Group comparator universities:

Although we have a wider gap than the sector average we do slightly better on the POLAR4 measure compared with other higher tariff institutions, however we still have very low proportions in the bottom two quintiles and a high proportion of students from the top POLAR quintile (quintile 5). The gap in POLAR access between the top and bottom two quintiles is 34 percentage points, and there has been no narrowing of this gap over the past five years. (Bath p1)

In line with other high tariff institutions, we have a gap in access (KPM2) where we perform behind the sector. (Southampton p1)

As a high tariff provider, we perform well in terms of widening access among our peer group and have been on track to achieve our current Access Agreement target of 10% new students entering the University from POLAR3 Q1 areas by 2020. (Sheffield p1)

…the [POLAR Q5:Q1] ratio has reduced from 6.3:1 to 5.2:1. The University still has fewer quintile 1 entrants than the sector as a whole (12% in 2017/18), and although significant, this gap has reduced over the last five years. Based on the most recent HESA WP PI data for 2017-18, we rank joint 5th (out of 20) in the English Russell Group for the proportion of entrants from POLAR4, Quintile 1. (Manchester p1)

A further nine providers pointed to the progress they had been making over time on widening access in relation to POLAR.

> *Cambridge has made faster progress than the sector in terms of increasing the proportion of students from Q1 and Q2; Table 2 shows that the ratio of Q5:Q1 entrants has reduced considerably over the last five years from 22:1 in 2013/14 to 14:1 in 2017/18. (Cambridge p2)*

> *…the proportion of POLAR3 quintile 1 students increased from 2.6% of entrants in 2011/12 to 6.6% in 2017-18 (peak 7.1% in 2015/16) as evidenced in our HESA KPI data. This represents a 150% increase over the period. (LSE p2)*

> *For 2018-19 intake, the ratio between Q1 and Q5 is approximately 10:1, significantly larger than the 2024-2025 KPM target of a 3:1 ratio. However, this has improved over the past five years from a ratio of over 16:1 in 2014-15. (Bristol p1)*

> *We have made sustained improvements in the recruitment of students from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR4 LPN), rising from 12.7% (Q1/Q2) in 13/14 to an estimated 15.3% in 18/19. (Exeter p3)*

> *The University has made some progress in the recruitment of students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN), the proportion of students having increased by 1.54% over the last 5 years. One of the biggest increases over the last five years is in the subject of Medicine, which has more than doubled the number of LPN students (16 to 38 students from 2013/14 to 2017/18). (Leicester p7)*

Three providers indicated that they were performing better on measures other than POLAR, notably IMD and ACORN:

> *The gap in Access using IMD does remain but has been falling steadily from a high of 29.6% in 2014-15 to 24.8% in 2017-18. The gap in POLAR4 however, remains significant and has grown over the last five years from 51.2% to 54.2%. (Imperial p1)*

> *In recent years we have worked hard to increase the proportion of students from ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) categories 4 and 5, rising from 7% in 2012-13 to 13.4% in 2018/19 (internal data). (Durham p1)*

> *The gap between POLAR Q1 and Q5 entrants to the UoR has also widened to a ratio of 1:6 in 2017/18 from 1:5.8 in 2013/14 albeit with some positive progress in the middle of this period (1:4.9 in 2015/16). […]. The pattern for IMD shows more positive progress with the Q1:Q5 ratio reducing from 1: 7.8 in 2013/14 to 1:5.9 in 2017/18. (Reading p2)*

Nevertheless, virtually all providers acknowledged that they had "a long way to go" to achieve the OfS's target of fully equitable access by 2038-39 and indicated that they could and would do more:

> *Our new ambitious targets […] engender a new ambitious chapter of our approach to widening participation and social inclusion. (Warwick p9)*

> *We recognise that we will still have a long way to go to reduce our gap further if we are to meet our longer term objective by 2038-39. (UCL p12)*

> *We have made significant progress towards this across a range of measures but acknowledge that we have more to do. We are transparent about our record and have published relevant admissions statistics since 2004. We recognise, however, the challenge*

set by the OfS in its guidance to the sector, and the important part that Cambridge should play in making further progress. (Cambridge p2)

However, our assessment highlights areas of access where we still lag behind the sector and some unexplained gaps in attainment which we need to address. (LSE p14)

Our target over the course of this plan represents a significant shift in ambition relating to POLAR based on performance to date. (King's pp8-9)

However, despite the progress made in recent years, we are clear that we have not yet realised our ambitions. We need to move further, faster to ensure that all those with potential are supported to access, succeed in and progress from our university. (Bristol p9)

We recognise we can go further to be more representative of the wider population for the benefit of the region and the diversity of graduates in the labour market. (Exeter p2)

Whilst we are making progress, we know that we are not progressing as quickly as we would like, and that the gap between the proportion of Q1 and Q5 students (mean average of 37.2%) remains wide with fluctuations. We have taken steps to accelerate our progress… (Leeds p1)

We however recognise the importance of accelerating efforts to reduce entry barriers for underrepresented groups and our role within this to support the OfS national key performance measures. (Sheffield p2)

We recognise the need to be ambitious to contribute more fully towards the national target. (Liverpool p3)

However, a minority of universities were notably circumspect:

We recognise the considerable gap in participation rates between the most and least represented groups. This reflects inequalities in the education system in the UK which contribute to lower prior school attainment among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We believe that the University's selection criteria are right for successful study at Oxford. We also believe that a vibrant higher education sector should contain a variety of providers, including high tariff institutions. Our objective, set out in the Strategic Plan (2018-23), is to attract and admit students from all backgrounds with outstanding potential and the ability to benefit from an Oxford education. Within the period of this plan, we aim to admit students from groups currently underrepresented at Oxford at least in proportion to their representation in the pool of candidates achieving AAA or better at A-level. (Oxford pp10-11)

The University is committed to widening participation, and to achieving an intake that is reflective of UK society and providing equality of educational opportunity for all those who study at Cambridge. Our ultimate objectives are to admit a student body in which no identified priority group is under-represented, and to eliminate gaps between such groups in continuation, attainment and progression. There are many social, economic and educational factors which mean that the population from which the higher education sector draws is already unequal and which have limited and will continue to limit this ambition, and there are significant uncertainties ahead in terms of funding for both higher education institutions and for students which will inevitably affect progress. Nonetheless we will make all reasonable endeavours to deliver on these objectives and by 2035 we expect that one third of our intake will be drawn from the most under-represented and disadvantaged groups… (Cambridge p1)

We believe that this is a most ambitious programme; these targets have not been achieved previously by other providers with entrance requirements matching those of the University of Bath, particularly those in years 4 and 5. We believe that the scale of this ambition is only feasible if there is demographic growth of UK school leavers entering university from the 2021 entry cycle onwards. […] These targets are also predicated on having a period of stability with no significant reform of pre-University qualifications, and also greater clarity on student funding, both for the sector as a whole and for individual student maintenance. The targets are only feasible if alternatives to residential university studies or other causes do not reduce the pool of applicants to high-tariff UK universities. Adverse changes to the above will lead to lower target levels only being feasible. (Bath p11)

Commitment to equality of opportunity

Nevertheless, virtually all providers presented their Access and Participation Plans as being underpinned by an organisational commitment to equality of opportunity in the pursuit of a more diverse student body:

Oxford is a highly selective university that provides a rigorous, intensive and personalised education for all its undergraduates. Our aim is to provide fair opportunities for all to benefit from an Oxford education. We are determined to improve equality of opportunity at each stage of the student journey… (Oxford p10)

The University is committed to widening participation, and to achieving an intake that is reflective of UK society and providing equality of educational opportunity for all those who study at Cambridge. Our ultimate objectives are to admit a student body in which no identified priority group is under-represented, and to eliminate gaps between such groups in continuation, attainment and progression. (Cambridge p1)

The University of Exeter is committed to the principle that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher education should have equal opportunity to do so. We believe that fair access to higher education is a fundamental enabler for social mobility, improving life opportunities and outcomes for individual students, while benefiting the economy and society as a whole. Increasing equality of opportunity for students at all stages is a priority for this University. (Exeter p2)

Our overarching strategic goal is to seek to ensure that individual background has no profound impact on the ability to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education through providing equality of opportunity and outcomes for all students across all stages of the lifecycle. Our strategic aims are: 1. To remove any systematic and structural barriers to access to, and participation at Warwick, and in higher education (HE) in general …
(Warwick p8)

Our aim is to provide opportunities to those who are equipped to benefit irrespective of background or personal circumstance. (Reading p1)

Embedded into The University of Manchester's strategic plan are a set of principles and values that commit us to identifying and attracting the most able students, regardless of their background, and providing a superb higher education and learning experience. The commitments set out in this plan are part of a much broader strategy reflected in our three fundamental goals of world-class research, outstanding learning and student experience and social responsibility. (Manchester p11)

Some providers expressed this in terms of equality of opportunity in the pursuit of diversity as being core to the identity and purpose of the organisation:

Access and participation are central to UCL's philosophy and ambitions. Access is one of the principal themes of UCL 2034, UCL's 20-year strategic vision, which outlines UCL's objective to be a university that reflects its community, ensuring equality of opportunity for all those wishing to enter and succeed. (UCL p14)

Our APP aims and objectives are grounded in the School's strategic vision for 2030, that "All that we do will reflect the importance we place on equity, diversity and inclusion, ensuring that LSE is a stimulating and supportive environment for work and study, and recognised as a place for serious debate where diverse viewpoints are respectfully but rigorously contested." (LSE p14)

Diversity and inclusivity are cornerstones of the University's mission. Our Vision and Strategy Plan articulates our commitment to be an institution fully integrated within the communities we serve, viewed as a destination of choice for learners of all backgrounds, delivering a world class education and ensuring all students reach their potential. (Bristol p12)

UoS is committed to ensuring that all our students have equal opportunity to succeed. This commitment is reflected in the core values expressed in our University Strategy, which makes clear our commitment to equality of educational opportunity based on merit, irrespective of background and socio-economic context. Our governance structure has been designed to deliver on this commitment… (Southampton p13)

The University's commitment to access and participation is recognised at the highest levels. The University Vision and Strategy, launched in October 2018, makes a public commitment to the values and principles of social justice, equality, diversity and inclusion, which are threaded throughout the University's core strategies. (Newcastle p12)

Lancaster's overarching strategic aim is to be a richly diverse and fully inclusive learning environment. A place where all our students and staff are supported to succeed in all they do and reach their potential. For our students this includes ensuring equality of opportunity across all aspects of their student lifecycle, regardless of background. (Lancaster p6)

Three providers among those with the highest Q5:Q1 ratios indicated that they saw it as incumbent on them to play a leading role on relation to widening access:

The University recognises that it along with the higher education sector as a whole must play a leading role in supporting the Office for Student's (OfS) commitment to social mobility… (Cambridge p1)

We understand that our position as a highly selective Russell Group institution with an international profile places extra responsibility on us to deliver continued improvements in access to, and success within, the School for those groups currently underrepresented at LSE and in the wider HE sector. (LSE p1)

Widening access and improving participation across the lifecycle is a fundamental part of King's mission. In Vision 2029 we set out our commitment to "lead the UK Russell Group in terms of social mobility and widening participation". (King's p11)

Seven universities, all with medium or low Q5:Q1 ratios, were keen to highlight widening access as being a longstanding tradition at their institution:

Ensuring equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education has been at the heart of Royal Holloway, University of

London since it first began, being one of the very first institutions in the UK to give women access to higher education. (Royal Holloway p1)

The University of Birmingham has embraced widening participation and fair access since its foundation. (Birmingham p1)

We have a longstanding commitment to widening participation and fair access, not only to our own programmes of study, but also to HE in general. […] This strongly reflects the University's Mission, Vision and Identity and the foundation on which the University was built: The University of Sheffield has roots going back to 1828 and was founded formally in 1905 via penny donations from the local citizens. The aim was to bring higher education within reach of the children of the people working in the great industries of Sheffield… (Sheffield p3)

For over 20 years, Newcastle University has worked to provide fair access to an education for life, leading to strong retention and employability outcomes for all our students, and with the support of this Plan, we will work with the sector to address gaps in access, success and progression for under-represented groups. (Newcastle p1)

At the University of Liverpool we have a long-standing track record of improving the social mobility of our students by enabling access to and participation in Higher Education. (Liverpool p1)

The University was founded as Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland University College in 1921. The ambition was to create a university or university college to provide access to higher education for young men and women who did not have the financial means to move away to study at the established universities across the country. The University is proud of this heritage: social mobility and widening participation remains at the heart of its work today. (Leicester p1)

Six universities, most with comparatively modest Q5:Q1 ratios and most located in the North, linked their strong commitment to widening access to their self-identified role as civic universities serving their local communities:

Work to improve access, success and progression and the measures set in this APP form two of the major themes of Vision 2029: 'Educate to inspire and improve' and 'Serve to shape and transform', alongside our aim to be a civic university in the heart of London." (King's p11)

The University retains a strong sense of civic responsibility. This is demonstrated, amongst other ways, through the broad ranging initiatives we deliver with schools, colleges and other local HE providers in order to widen participation in higher education. (Leeds p11)

The University is the second largest employer in our local area and we understand the importance of our civic responsibilities to engage with, and support, our local community - a community which encompasses a diverse range of social backgrounds, from city, costal and rural communities. Through our role as a civic university we can provide additional support for under-represented, or disadvantaged, students and the communities in which they are based. (Lancaster p10)

As a Civic University based in a distinctive world city, our success is indistinguishable from that of the people we serve and the many well-developed educational and charitable partnerships we already invest in to realise our access and participation aims. (Liverpool p1)

For other providers, including three with high Q5:Q1 ratios, there was acknowledgement that their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion had been "significantly bolstered" more recently:

> *The College has significantly bolstered its commitment to integrating equality, diversity and inclusion in all its operations. (Imperial p13)*

> *We have just appointed a new Head of Access and Participation who will bring a new focus on delivering a step change in the access and outreach work we have been doing. Better collaboration and integrated working across teams such as our Admissions and Recruitment Teams with our academic departments as well as our marketing, senior management, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Teams and other University-wide teams will deliver a stronger response to widening access. (Bath p10)*

> *The pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion should inform every aspect of Durham's educational offer. They are essential to the realisation of our strategic goal: welcoming talented students from all backgrounds and enabling every one of them to thrive and excel. (Durham p8)*

> *As access has been identified as our most significant area for improvement, we have made a commitment to taking direct action to improve equality of opportunity for our prospective students. The University of York understands that we need to make our student body more diverse because it is just and fair that everyone with the potential to do well at university has the opportunity to do so, but also because a more diverse student body makes for a better educational environment, allowing students to be challenged by different ways of thinking, to learn from people from other cultures and backgrounds, and to be encouraged to be critical and empathetic. (York p14)*

6.2 Towards a more structural understanding of prior attainment

Attracting the "brightest" and "best" students

Seven providers, including the five providers with the highest Q5:Q1 ratios, continued to indicate that they were looking to attract the "brightest" and "best" students regardless of social background:

> *Oxford's courses are academically demanding, fast moving and intensive. We believe this is essential in order to challenge and stimulate some of the brightest minds in the country, and to produce graduates equipped with the high level skills and intellectual dexterity that society and the economy needs. (Oxford p3)*

> *The College is committed to providing timely, clear and accessible information to prospective applicants so that the best prospective students from disadvantaged groups are encouraged to apply to the College. (Imperial p20)*

> *At undergraduate level, we seek to recruit and retain the academically brightest students who will thrive in the rigorous teaching and learning environment that UCL provides. (UCL p1)*

> *The principal aim of the admissions policy of the University is to admit, via processes that are transparent and fair, students of the highest academic calibre and potential to succeed in their chosen course, irrespective of financial or other non-academic considerations. (Cambridge p1)*

Embedded into The University of Manchester's strategic plan are a set of principles and values that commit us to identifying and attracting the most able students, regardless of their background, and providing a superb higher education and learning experience. (Manchester p11)

Fifteen providers attributed their poor record on widening access to date in part to the dearth of POLAR Q1 students who meet the university's high entry requirements:

This gap reflects acknowledged inequalities in the education system in the UK, which contribute to large differences in prior school attainment. Oxford is a highly selective university. Our lowest conditional offer is AAA. The majority of our intake achieve higher grades; in 2018, 68% achieved A*A*A or higher, with 42% achieving A*A*A* or higher. A very small number of POLAR4 Q1 school leavers meet the University's minimum entry requirements of AAA+ (4% in 2016-17)7. Of these, about 30% currently apply to Oxford. (Oxford p3)

Entrants in Q5 are over-represented at Cambridge when compared to the UK 18 year old population, whilst those in Q1, Q2 and Q3 are under-represented. This is also the case in the sector as a whole, but to a lesser extent. Two contributing factors to this are prior attainment (our research shows that 50.7% of the UK A-level taking population that attain A*AA or higher are from Q5, whilst only 4.6% are from Q1 and 9.0% from Q2) and the extent to which the University has drawn its intake from London, which contains very few Q1 areas. (Cambridge p2)

Our main threat to meeting these targets is that the pool of disadvantaged students who can meet or get close to the entry tariffs for our courses is limited and we are under fierce competition with other higher tariff universities for the same relatively small group of students. (Bath p11)

Demanding entry standards and a perception of high cost may discourage students who are already likely to become disaffected with formal education or lack confidence in their academic ability. (Durham p1)

We also recognise the OfS national key performance measure, and the role we will play in this in light of current performance. We will seek to address this through a supplementary access target specifically focussed on closing the gap in P4Q1 access, but our approach must be realistic given the evidence of a small national pool of suitably qualified applicants (even with grade drops). (Birmingham p3)

Whilst the University of Nottingham is supportive of the OfS's aim to reduce the gap and eliminate the gap completely by 2038-39, a recent Russell Group research paper highlighted that there are currently not enough quintile 1 students with the required prior attainment available to meet the target, even with contextual admissions policies in place. (Nottingham p10)

Seven providers with the highest Q5:Q1 ratios, and two others with lower ratios, reported that a substantial part of their outreach efforts would focus on encouraging applications from suitably qualified pupils from widening access backgrounds:

Oxford has been successful in attracting applications from students from under-represented groups who meet our entry requirements. About one third of the POLAR4 Quintile 1 AAA+ pool of school leavers already apply to Oxford. We will continue to encourage applications to Oxford from this pool of students. (Oxford pp18-19)

As well as working to increase the number of applications received from well-qualified students from target groups, we will work to ensure that our admissions processes take applicants circumstances fully into consideration. (Imperial p10)

By increasing access to high quality IAG, we hope to increase applications to UCL from the most underrepresented groups. We have been delivering targeted IAG programmes for more than 15 years and we know that around 40% of participants make an application to UCL each year. (UCL p16)

On a national level, Colleges engage in outreach across the UK through the area links programme, which provides every state maintained school in every local authority with a dedicated Cambridge contact and enables effective, coherent and strategic relationships to be developed on a national scale. Within this programme schools are prioritised according to (a) their number of high achieving students from target POLAR and IMD locations, and the proportion in receipt of FSM, and (b) an assessment of their need given historical rates of application and success in relation to Cambridge. (Cambridge p22)

Undoubtedly, we need to generate more quintile 1 applications. Doubling the number of LPN students would bring Durham close to the average LPN population for universities in the North East, but we will have to go further to close the ratio to 3:1. We have to grow the proportion of students across quintiles 1 to 4. (Durham p2)

We also recognise that regardless of our admissions policy, unless a sufficient volume of under-represented students choose us as a viable option then we will not achieve the levels of diversity we seek. (Exeter p14)

Supporting academic attainment in schools

Virtually all providers reported that they would be doing more to work with pupils and schools to help raise the attainment of students from under-represented groups who would be unlikely otherwise to meet the institutions academic entry requirements.

The proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the AAA+ pool did not grow in the period 2013-2017. The University's aim is both to increase the number of applications it receives from eligible candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds but also to help increase the size of the pool of eligible candidates. (Oxford p16)

In order to grow our POLAR Q1 intake to meet our target, we are conscious that we will need to work with schools to raise attainment or consider additional routes into UCL and our entry grade profile. (UCL p15)

…our strategy is to work closely with schools in areas with concentrations of students from target groups, in order to raise the attainment of their most talented students to a level which enables them to meet Imperial's minimum entrance requirements. (Imperial p7)

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of attainment-raising in helping young people access highly selective universities. Our K+ Raising Attainment project is a response to this and aims to increase the grade outcomes for K+ participants studying science A-levels. As the pilot had initial success, with an average increase in attainment of 8%, we will expand the initiative so more K+ participants can benefit. (King's p15)

To meet our access targets, the number of applications from underrepresented students needs to increase or our conversion statistics need to be higher. We will work in collaboration with schools and other providers to help raise the attainment of prospective underrepresented students to increase the number of applicants eligible for high-tariff

institutions like Nottingham, as currently there are not enough eligible students nationally. (Nottingham p13)

Our existing work on raising attainment and analysis of sector data has highlighted the importance of work in this area. From 2018/2019, additional models of raising attainment are being trialled and they include pre-HE work with the community to support attainment in maths amongst mature learners and projects with Tutor Trust, Brilliant Club and IntoUniversity. (Leeds p17)

We will develop a Maths Attainment Raising Strategy by AY2020-21 in partnership with organisations across Greater Manchester. The strategy will be focused in schools where maths attainment is below the national and regional average. (Manchester pp11-12)

From 2019/20, Leicester High Flyers will provide support for targeted underrepresented groups of potential students delivered by academic staff, on topics which support Key Stages 3 and 4, and the Gatsby Benchmarks. High Flyers will aim to increase attainment of attendees by providing expert support unavailable at the learners' schools and the opportunity to engage with student role models from similar backgrounds. (Leicester pp15-16)

Seven providers indicated that they were sponsoring one or more local schools serving pupils from disadvantaged groups as a means of helping to increase attainment:

School sponsorship: Alongside our work with individual target schools, UCL also supports schools at a strategic level. UCL is the sole sponsor of the UCL Academy in Camden, a cosponsor of Elutec in East London, and a Trustee of the University Schools Trust, which sponsors Royal Greenwich UTC and St Paul's Way Trust School in East London. UCL also has strategic partnerships with City and Islington College and Newham Collegiate Sixth Form. (UCL p15)

We wish to include a collaborative target to diversify our student body and contribute to the national agenda of increasing the number of students from Q1 entering higher education. The Venturers Trust is the Multi Academy Trust which the University co-sponsors and has a high proportion of its students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see section on school sponsorship form details). We will upscale the number of students recruited from the Trust to our University. (Bristol p10)

Just prior to the 2016/17 academic year the University initiated a significant partnership with King's College, Guildford, a non-selective academy situated a mile from our main campus. The Polar4 HE participation rate of the area is only 17.8%, and 92% of the pupils are from one or more under-represented group. The school is a member of a local multi-academy trust, the Guildford Educational Partnership [GEP], and the Vice-Provost Education now represents the University on the GEP Board. (Surrey p12)

…the University of Liverpool also sponsors two secondary schools within the Northern Schools Trust and has established mentor-based attainment raising programmes with a number of other local secondary schools to work with underrepresented groups. (Liverpool p19)

For seven universities, this attainment raising work has, will, or might involve running a secondary school focused on Maths attainment:

By September 2020 we will have…Decided in principle whether to launch a Maths Sixth Form College, targeting students from IMD Q1 and Black students, and also POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 (though its likely location in London reduces its impact on the latter). (Imperial p10)

King's College London Mathematics School aims to increase the number of young people with high levels of mathematical attainment studying STEM subjects at highly-selective universities. It also aims to improve access to high quality mathematical education at sixth-form level and targets individuals from schools where such provision is not easily available. KCLMS has been running for five years and has 140 students split across two year groups. Of these students, 37% are girls, 11% are on Free School Meals, 26% have no parental history of HE and 58% are BME. (King's p18)

We are keen to explore how we can harness the expertise of the Exeter Mathematics School and work collaboratively to support mathematics attainment at GCSE more widely to the benefit of a greater volume of students. (Exeter pp13-14)

The Department for Education have recently approved the pre-opening stage for a new Maths school led by the University and Cardinal Newman College in Preston. The School of Maths will deliver outstanding achievement and focus on widening participation, by building on existing successful work to target disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Lancaster will provide support to both staff and students within the School of Maths including bespoke residentials, study skills workshops, EPQ support, networking events with Lancaster academics, PhD students and alumni, business and industry partners, CPD for staff and input into curriculum development. (Lancaster p15)

Potential to succeed

While comparatively low levels of pre-entry attainment among under-represented groups was a concern for virtually all providers, around half of those with the largest Q5:Q1 ratios, and all but one provider with comparatively low ratios, signalled that they were looking also for potential to succeed at university:

While our selection criteria for undergraduate study are demanding, we are committed to making Oxford accessible and attractive to students with high academic potential from all backgrounds. (Oxford p2)

The principal aim of the admissions policy of the University is to admit, via processes that are transparent and fair, students of the highest academic calibre and potential to succeed in their chosen course, irrespective of financial or other non-academic considerations. (Cambridge p1)

…we will continue to reach out and recruit students with great potential, from diverse social and national backgrounds, and ensure, through academic and financial support, that they are all equally able to flourish. (King's p1)

Our ambition is that students with the potential to succeed at the University of Birmingham have the opportunity to gain access, achieve their academic potential and progress successfully to their chosen careers or further study. (Birmingham p12)

The University offers a flexible, transparent and fair admissions policy to ensure students with potential are given the opportunity to enrol. (Nottingham p12)

Nine providers went further to indicate that they understood that socioeconomic group differences in prior attainment were rooted in structural inequalities rather than individual deficits, such that the grades of prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not do justice to their potential:

For some of these candidates, the lack of opportunities at school to develop a depth and breadth of academic experience beyond the school curriculum can hinder them from making competitive applications to Oxford and reaching their full academic potential. (Oxford p1)

Once A level grades and location are taken into account, our entry rates are as expected under a fair system. However, we know that there is a correlation between public examination results and social background and that some groups of students are disadvantaged before they apply. (UCL p14)

We recognise the impact of multiple indicators of deprivation and are determined to overcome the effects of such intersectional variables at every stage of the student life cycle. (Bristol p12)

Many students from under-represented groups already have the aspiration to access HE, but do not always have support to develop the additional study skills required to achieve their full potential or make a successful application. (Reading p16)

6.3 The wider adoption of contextualised approaches to admissions

The use of contextual data to prioritise applicants for standard offers

Four of the providers with the largest POLAR Q5:Q1 ratios indicated that they use contextual data about the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants to their degree programmes in order to ensure that disadvantaged applicants were fully considered for admission, but that offers of admission would be based on standard rather than reduced entry requirements:

We already make extensive use of contextual information. We will further strengthen this to support decisions about admissions in general and offers under the bridging programme in particular. Admissions coordinators and tutors are provided with comprehensive contextualised data about applicants to assist in assessing academic potential in the context of the applicant's education experience, and in making decisions about shortlisting and offers. (Oxford p20)

As well as working to increase the number of applications received from well-qualified students from target groups, we will work to ensure that our admissions processes take applicants circumstances fully into consideration. For 2020 admissions, we will trial a number of new approaches to admissions, with the intention of increasing the number of applicants from target groups who receive offers from the College (but not – with the exception of Medicine, noted above – making lower offers). (Imperial p10)

We receive a large number of applications from students who go on to meet at least our minimum entrance requirements (often exceeding them by some distance). Therefore we do not use contextual data to make lower offers; instead we use it to consider the context within which academic achievements have occurred and identify individuals who may show greater potential than their current attainment or predictions might suggest. (Cambridge p23)

…[we] will continue with our bespoke service offering extra consideration for flagged WP applicants within our Admissions system. We will continue investigating course requirements and courses offered in order to encourage as many students from underrepresented groups as possible to apply to us. (Bath p19)

Three of these HEIS (Oxford, Imperial and Cambridge) indicated that they were unwilling to reduce academic entry requirements since prior attainment has been demonstrated empirically to be strongly correlated with success at degree level.

> *All our courses set standard entry grades of AAA or higher. Subjects that make higher standard offers than AAA, mostly in the mathematical and physical sciences, have introduced them in response to evidence that students, from all backgrounds, who achieve AAA grades can often struggle on those courses. While our standard offers are demanding, they are not, in many subjects, the highest in the sector. (Oxford p3)*

> *The degrees which Imperial offers are largely in areas where knowledge is cumulative, and a sound record of prior attainment in particular subjects is often crucial to a student's success at Imperial. We do not, therefore, propose in general to lower the A Level requirements for entry, either for the population as a whole or for particular subsets of students. (The exception is in Medicine, where attainment in the third A Level is less important for success on the course, and where we will continue to make slightly lower offers to students from target groups.) (Imperial p7)*

> *We use our process to identify those applicants who have the greatest ability and potential to succeed academically on our courses (which comprise lectures, seminars and practical sessions alongside small-group supervisions) and our evidence shows that there is a strong relationship between the number of A*s achieved and such success at Cambridge. (Cambridge pp1-2)*

Although three universities indicated that there would be some future research to investigate the scope for and likely impact of contextual offer-making:

> *To ensure that we have effective measures in place to increase the diversity of the applicant pool from which we select, we are taking the further step of conducting a comprehensive strategic review of admissions and outreach chaired by an external member of University Council. […] This review will include, but not be restricted to, an assessment of our use of admissions tests, interviews and contextual data, and will explore other possible admissions mechanisms such as contextual offers. (Cambridge p24)*

> *[We are u]ndertaking research into contextual offer-making at LSE and the likely impact on the diversity of the student body. [Starting 2019-20 for entry in 2021 and beyond.] (LSE p22)*

> *…[we] will assess scope to introduce more contextual offers by the end of the 2020/21 academic year. Work is underway to assess appropriate grade levels where a contextual grade offer would not then have a detrimental impact on student outcomes and progression. (Bath p10)*

Reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants

In contrast, the remaining five institutions with very high Q5:Q1 ratios indicated that they would reduce academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged learners, as did all five providers with medium-sized Q5:Q1 ratios, and nine of the eleven providers with comparatively low ratios. For one provider with a very high Q5:Q1 ratio, and five providers with relatively low ratios, contextual offers were restricted to those who had completed their in-house widening access schemes:

> *Access UCL launched in September 2018 for students from groups underrepresented at UCL. Eligible students who complete the Access UCL scheme will receive a reduced offer*

of up to two grades below the standard UCL offer. We expect that up to 100 additional students from underrepresented backgrounds will enter UCL through the scheme in 2019. (UCL p15)

Access to Leeds is our flagship contextual admissions scheme which gives students who meet several WP criteria the opportunity to receive a two grade reduction in their University offer. (Leeds p5)

In2Surrey is a contextualised admissions scheme which identifies and supports applicants from underrepresented groups who have the potential to succeed at University. Whilst the scheme does not guarantee a place at the University, it gives consideration to eligible students whose circumstances may make it difficult for them to achieve the standard offer for the programme of interest to them. Students who successfully enrol onto the In2Surrey Scheme can benefit from: an alternative offer equivalent to one grade lower (dependent on qualification and subject) (Surrey p12)

In 2018-19, Lancaster piloted the use of contextual admissions for those applying to study Medicine and Surgery. This includes an offer two grades lower than the published offer for students who met two or more WP characteristics. We know, that applied correctly, contextual admissions can provide fairer access and a mechanism to identify the potential in students that may not be evidenced through grades alone. Lancaster Access will identify and nurture this potential, and WP students who successfully complete the programme may be eligible for an adjusted admissions offer. (Lancaster p12)

Our flagship supported admissions project [Liverpool Scholars Project] offers Year 12 underrepresented students a sustained and progressive set of activities to support progression to HE, e.g. application guidance masterclasses, lectures and academic key skills workshops. These activities are delivered in partnership with academics, students and professional staff across UoL. For those students who complete the project (including an academic assignment), Scholars provides: A guaranteed conditional offer of a place at the University of Liverpool (this offer is reduced by up to 2 A-level grades or equivalent); A non-repayable financial bursary to support continuation (by alleviating any financial impediments to study). (Liverpool p27)

However most providers indicated that contextually disadvantaged applicants in general – i.e. not only those who had participated in the institution's widening participation initiative – were eligible for reductions in academic entry requirements. For seven providers, making all disadvantaged applicants eligible for contextual offers was already somewhat established practice:

We will continue to take a holistic and contextualised approach to admissions and outreach. All students from aspiring state schools and colleges, those living in Q1 and Q2 postcodes, intensive outreach participants and those in Care will be flagged within the University's admissions database and if an offer is made it will automatically be at the contextual level (typically two grades lower than the standard offer). (Bristol p14)

Durham can be bolder in its use of contextual information and data in judging applications and making differential offers, and our recent centralisation of admissions will provide the opportunity to implement more radical change using POLAR4 quintiles. (Durham p9)

Build on long-standing commitment to contextual offers we will seek opportunities to extend our contextualised offer policy to a broader range of students and circumstances; remove unnecessary barriers to admissions presented through the application process; ensure these policies are transparently and effectively communicated. (Exeter p20)

The University introduced a contextual admissions policy for the 2015-16 intake in order to recognise students' achievements and potential in the context of their background and experience. This scheme allows us to make adjusted offers to students with recognised characteristics. This practice effectively harmonises our institutional strategy to admit high quality students and the requirement to acknowledge educational disadvantage. Since we introduced a contextual admissions policy in 2015 we have been evaluating its impact and success annually, including monitoring its effectiveness in targeting the cohorts it is aimed at and the progression and success rates of the students admitted under the scheme. (Southampton p16)

For others, contextual admissions policies involving reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants in general (as distinct from those who have successfully participated in the institution's widening participation scheme) was a new initiative:

Students from PQ1&2 areas will become eligible for the variable offer, alongside care experienced and estranged students. (King's p19)

Having reviewed the evidence from the sector we have adopted a contextual offer-making approach. Applicants who meet the criteria (POLAR4 Q1 or Q2, IMD Q1 or Q2, declared disability or MEM flag from UCAS) will receive an offer that is 2 grades lower than the standard offer. Our intention is to make UoR a viable choice for applicants who may previously have felt they would not achieve our standard entry requirements. (Reading p19)

From the September 2019 admissions cycle (i.e. impacting on 2020 entry) the University will move towards full contextual offer making, giving lower offers to applicants from POLAR4 Q1 or Q2 (excluding students from independent schools), as well as Care Leavers. Guaranteed standard offers will also be given to all BAME students. (York pp14-15)

…for 2020 entry and beyond the University will implement contextualised admissions where applicants with a certain number of widening participation indicators will be considered for a reduced academic programme offer. (Liverpool p27)

These generalised contextual offer making policies were often borne out of longer-standing policies of contextual offer making to widening access scheme participants which continued to operate and typically offered larger reductions in academic entry requirements:

We have long recognised that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience educational disadvantage and we already offer targeted contextual offers. Students who progress from our access programmes (including A2B students) receive a two grade reduction on our standard offer, while students from Polar Q1 backgrounds outside of the region receive a one grade reduction. (Birmingham p3)

We appreciate that we now need to increase this to play our part in the national KPM and the introduction of our full contextual admissions policy for 2020/21 entry will support this. (Sheffield p1)

Eight providers referred to the evidence base used to develop their contextual offer making practices:

We also note the recent report published by Durham University Evidence Centre for Education that suggests contextual offers could be made at more than one grade below the standard offer without impacting on students' academic performance, and continue to review this scheme to maximise its effectiveness in supporting contextually disadvantaged students. (Royal Holloway p13)

Having reviewed the evidence from the sector we have adopted a contextual offer-making approach. Applicants who meet the criteria (POLAR4 Q1 or Q2, IMD Q1 or Q2, declared disability or MEM flag from UCAS) will receive an offer that is 2 grades lower than the standard offer. (Reading p19)

Access Manchester is one of the key strategic measures that will enable us to deliver on our ambition to reduce our POLAR4 Q5:Q1 ratio as outlined in the table in 2.1, in particularly through strengthening our use of contextual data to make differential offers using recommendations from recent reports. (Manchester p17)

Our approach to contextualised admissions has been successful in improving access for students from LPN Q1 and internal analysis indicates that students receiving contextualised offers achieve good grades and graduate outcomes. (Exeter p14)

The University will consider relevant research into contextualised admissions within the HE sector to ensure fairness and consistency in our own approach. (Liverpool p27)

Foundation Year programmes

Many providers with large or medium sized POLAR Q5:Q1 gaps in access saw value in using Foundation Year programmes to enable disadvantaged learners to enrol on year zero of a degree course with lower grades than the standard academic entry requirements. Some providers had been operating Foundation Year programmes for a while:

The Extended Medical Degree Programme uses a contextualised admissions process to set lower entry requirements for students from non-selective state schools who may not be predicted or have achieved the necessary GCSE, A-level or UKCAT scores to enter a conventional medical programme. The majority of EMDP students are the first in their family to attend university and 90% are from BME backgrounds – demographics which are underrepresented nationally within HE, and particularly in the medical field. The Enhanced Support Dentistry Programme is based on the standard five-year Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme, but students receive additional support and tutorials throughout their studies. We have incorporated Acorn and POLAR4 categories into the eligibility and targeting of the EMDP. (King's p19)

The English Language and Community Engagement (ELCE) degree and our Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities (FYAH) were both designed specifically to recruit and support students from under-represented groups, including mature students. The ELCE degree is taught one night per week plus occasional Saturdays over 6 years. The FYAH programme is full-time but is taught 2 days per week in family-friendly hours. From 2022 we will be expanding the FYAH programme into Social Sciences and Law. We are also exploring the implementation of a STEM foundation year to create a route into degrees in our Science, Life Sciences and Engineering Faculties. We recognise the need for truly flexible part time provision and are working with our School for Education on a new part time degree. (Bristol p15)

Warwick Business School (WBS) offers a BSc (with Foundation Year) in Accounting and Finance, and a BSc (with Foundation Year) in Management. The Foundation Year is common to both degrees and aims to equip students with the skills and knowledge they will need for successful progression to Year 1 of the existing 3-year BSc degrees in these subjects. The Foundation Year is targeted at students from underrepresented groups who have the potential to succeed on the WBS UG Programme, but who, for reasons beyond their control, have no realistic prospect of meeting the standard requirements for direct

entry. The first cohort will graduate in 2019 so we will have a good understanding of degree outcomes and progression outcomes after that point. (Warwick p16)

…our foundation year programmes provide opportunity for both young and mature students to demonstrate potential through more than grades alone. (Leeds p12)

For other providers, Foundation Year courses had been newly introduced or were still in the planning stage:

We are developing a foundation year programme for state school candidates from underrepresented backgrounds who, because of severe personal disadvantage or disrupted education, are not able to meet our standard offer but who would benefit from a one year intensive programme and support to bring their attainment to the level required to start an undergraduate degree at Oxford. Under this new scheme, Foundation Oxford, we aim to offer up to 50 places a year by 2022 for 2023 entry. (Oxford p2)

As part of our new UCL East campus in East London, we are developing foundation programmes which will offer students alternative routes into study. The vision for these new programmes is that at least half of the UK students will be from our target access backgrounds. (UCL p15)

In addition to this, a new transition year programme is under development. This will allow those from under-represented backgrounds who do not have the level of attainment or access to qualifications required for entry to a Cambridge course, but who are believed to have the potential to succeed, the opportunity for undergraduate study at Cambridge following the successful completion of the programme. It is anticipated that, subject to agreement, the first cohort will begin in the Transition Year in 2022. (Cambridge pp23-24)

The University has completed a feasibility study on the development of a Foundation Year programme working with a local FE provider, and also had discussions with an FE College serving a socio-economically disadvantaged area in Wales with low progression to HE. Discussions have not progressed since the publication of the Augar Review on Student Funding as there is concern that the recommendation to withdraw funding for foundation years will make the programmes unviable. We will review this during the 2019/20 academic year. (Bath p10)

From September 2019, the College is offering a number of integrated foundation degrees in order to increase access from underrepresented groups. These programmes have lower entry requirements than standard degree programmes, allowing students who have not achieved the required grades for direct entry to enrol for an additional year in order to prepare them for full undergraduate study, participation and academic success. (Royal Holloway p11)

6.4 The improvement of support for students to realise their potential

Socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities in rates of success at degree level

In its guidance to providers, the OfS asked providers to address in their APPs equality issues relating not only to access but also to rates of continuation on course at the end of the first year, and rates of attaining a first or upper second class degree. Most providers reported no statistically significant differences in continuation rates for students from different POLAR quintiles, but just under half reported moderate to large attainment gaps by POLAR category, typically of around 5-6 percentage points and as high as 12 percentage points. Similarly, few

providers had statistically significant continuation gaps between BAME as compared to White students; however, almost all had large attainment gaps by ethnicity, typically of around 10-12 percentage points and rising as high as 23 percentage points.

Almost all providers explicitly acknowledged that they had an important role to play in ensuring that students admitted onto their programmes succeeded on course. Around a third of providers acknowledged that they were at an early stage of understanding the causes of and most effective solutions to socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities in degree attainment:

> *We will continue to promote greater diversity in teaching, assessment and the curriculum. We have produced guidance on addressing differential attainment. We will develop new resources to support teaching staff in delivering an inclusive teaching and learning experience with a new online course available for individual tutors in 2020-21. We have encouraged local initiatives to diversify the curriculum, through academic workshops and seminars. We will also create a new Centre for Teaching and Learning in August 2019 which will bring together all education development and learning technology support staff into a single unit that will coordinate all learning and teaching enhancement activity across the institution. (Oxford p21)*

> *We will be taking a strategic approach to the delivery of equal opportunities and outcomes for our students. Our overarching aims will focus on gaining a better understanding of the experiences of our current students at every stage of the student journey, as well as understanding which interventions work well across the different stages, drawing on evidence from our own initiatives, as well as examples from other providers. We will continually apply the insights of this analysis to improve our interventions. (York pp12-13)*

> *Our inclusive T&L policy requires all teaching staff to comply with an explicit set of expectations which ensures a baseline level of accessibility for students with disabilities as standard. This has been recently introduced and its effectiveness will be assessed as part of the work of the above Task Force before 2020/1. (Reading p23)*

> *…the University is committed to better understanding the challenges, obstacles and barriers faced by different groups at the University and to foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. (Manchester p15)*

> *The development of the EDI Strategic Delivery Plan is underway with publication expected over the summer of 2019. This will set the vision for equality, diversity and inclusion for both staff and students at the University and identify priority areas of focus over the next three years. The strategic delivery plan will draw together and link to several areas of work already underway across the University, including the APP, the work on degree awarding gaps and the student experience, and the focus will be to champion and communicate this work. (Nottingham p13)*

Pre-sessional support

All providers mentioned several strategies they would be using to better support their students; in some cases these strategies had existed for some time and would be enhanced or rolled out, but in most cases these strategies were new initiatives. Six providers indicated that they would be introducing new pre-sessional bridging programmes:

> *…we are launching a new scheme, Opportunity Oxford, in which we will we provide additional places, within existing overall numbers, to candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds (measured in relation to POLAR4 and ACORN, and other indicators of disadvantage) who meet our standard offer but who may not otherwise be offered a place*

and need support to make a successful transition to undergraduate study at Oxford. These candidates, as a condition of their offer, will take part in a bridging programme, in the period between offer and arrival, which will provide tailored academic support to help prepare them for entry to Oxford. The full costs of course delivery, accommodation and living expenses will be met by the University, with no cost to students. The programme will be phased in over the next three years, with 60 places offered in 2019 for 2020 entry, rising to 200 places in 2021 for 2022 entry. (Oxford pp18-19)

…Campus Engagement run targeted activities to improve the pre-arrival experience and transition into life at Royal Holloway for these students. This includes peer-to-peer mentoring and proactive sign-posting to relevant College services via the telephone before students arrive and in person once they have started on their programme. In addition, the team invite the target groups to attend a pre-arrival event on campus in order to manage students' expectations about university life and ensure that they feel more prepared to start at Royal Holloway, both academically and socially. (Royal Holloway p15)

In two cases these pre-sessional programmes were targeted specifically at helping new entrants who had narrowly missed the required grades in A-level mathematics to improve their maths knowledge and skills prior to the start of the academic year:

…development of an intensive three-week pre-sessional course for students who narrowly miss their required grade in A-level Mathematics for degrees in engineering, science and social sciences). (Bath p11)

We will introduce some specific measures designed in particular support of our targets to increase recruitment of P4Q1 students. These include: […] Piloting a pre-sessional Maths course for P4Q1 applicants to Engineering and Physical Sciences programmes who have narrowly missed the terms of their offer to support progression to the UG or Foundation programme, depending on the assessment of their needs. (Birmingham p19)

Early warning systems

Ten providers indicated that they would be using real time attendance and attainment data as part of an 'early warning system' so that students needing support could be identified quickly and strategies put in place in a timely manner:

With access to further information on student backgrounds through the Student Dashboard, personal tutors will be able to encourage students from widening participation backgrounds to opt-in to taking advantage of the pastoral and academic support offered by trained Peer Guides. (Royal Holloway p17)

We will increase use of data and appoint student success officers to combine early identification of students at risk. This will ensure a person-centred approach to mitigate risk of non-continuation, introduce an effective pre-entry engagement activity/intervention with BTEC offer holders to aid transition to University courses, use learner analytics and monitoring in all Faculties and increased effective means of communicating support available to students. (Leeds p20)

Student Success Teams support the work of academic departments and bring together into one integrated team professional practitioners in data analysis/monitoring and evaluation, student wellbeing, and skills development. The teams are particularly focused upon support for underrepresented groups and work in business partnership with academic departments to develop a more supportive institutional culture and more integrated approaches to student retention, and students' personal and career development by facilitating the

planning, implementation and evaluation of evidence-informed, collaborative interventions within each department. (Leicester p17)

The dashboard, to be launched in 2019/20, will provide students and their academic tutors with an up-to-date visual presentation of assessment results from all of their modules in one place, along with a running average. It will provide facilities for goal setting and reflection that will provide a rich basis for Academic Tutors to discuss with students their performance to inform development action for upcoming work. (Reading p24)

At an operational level, the University is investing in a new student record system that, from 2020, will allow greater central oversight of student performance in year and at the component level. This will support the development of improved services to academic teams and help them to identify, at an earlier stage, points at which attainment deviates (positively or negatively) from point of entry and to inform interventions. (Sheffield p18)

Support for learning in year one

Thirteen providers were intending to run extended induction programmes, often covering the entire first year of undergraduate study, to support students in making the transition to university, often involving peer support programmes. Some of these extended induction schemes were focused on cultivating a sense of belonging at the university:

We know that the transition to university is a major event in all students' lives and for some this can be particularly challenging. Our Transitions team offer additional support to those groups who we know can find this transition particularly difficult. In particular, they support the transition of students who are first in family, students on the autistic spectrum, those with mental health issues and students with learning difficulties or problems communicating. Through a series of activities, such as preregistration residentials (Smart Start), peer mentoring and well-being walks and social activities, the team provide an environment in which students can explore barriers, concerns and fears and develop relationships with peers from similar backgrounds. (Lancaster p12)

Our interventions start with support for transition, developing belongingness, wellbeing support on course and the opportunity to develop academic skills that underpin successful study. (Birmingham p21)

Other initiatives involving more general support throughout the first year of study focused on helping students to bridge gaps in knowledge, improve their study skills and sustain their engagement with their course:

From 2020/2021, pre-HE engagement with schools and students will support prospective students holding BTEC and Access to HE qualifications to ease transition to University. This will be complemented by the findings from a research fellowship in the Leeds Institute of Teaching Excellence on induction and transition which will inform recommendations, relevant to all students but particularly those at risk. […] We know from research across the sector and the success of the Plus Programme that the early identification of students at risk of lower engagement in learning enables timely intervention to support and encourage in their daily interactions. We aim to replicate through enhanced use of data and will trial employment of dedicated student success officers with a mature model of delivery in place by 2021/2022. (Leeds p19)

Our own internal analysis shows a correlation between a student's performance in Year 1 and their final outcomes. […] We therefore view the first year as critical in optimising student outcomes, particularly for those groups of students where gaps are in evidence. We will focus on making sure that Year 1 is as effective as possible in enabling all students to

succeed. We anticipate our approach to Year 1 will concentrate on the following areas: 1) working with students to identify their learning needs and putting in place interventions to enable all students to meet minimum requirements of academic skill and IT literacy; 2) Reviewing and enhancing our Year 1 programme structures and modules to ensure they fully support students to build levels of competency to achieve successful outcomes in future years; 3) Focusing on how we can work with students to build resilience and better support wellbeing. (Exeter p23)

These initiatives often involved the use of peer support programmes

The University seeks to provide all first year students with a supported introduction to higher education by delivering a comprehensive Peer Support programme. […] Our Peer Support programme offers all new students the structure to seek guidance from students in a higher year of the same course. We deliver two distinct Peer Support schemes: Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) and Peer Mentoring. Both schemes are centrally coordinated, discipline owned and student led... (Manchester p17)

For instance, all targeted undergraduates are allocated a peer mentor prior to the start of the academic year and both the mentor and mentee are expected to report back on the success of this relationship. This allows the team to measure the effectiveness of the scheme and compare students who have accessed peer mentoring with those who have not. (Royal Holloway pp15-16)

Over the last two years the Academic Skills team have developed a programme of Peer Assisted Learning where second and third year students are trained to support first year students through identified 'threshold modules'. Initially piloted with three academic departments, positive feedback has meant that the programme is now running with a further 9 and there are plans to increase this further in line with demand over the course of this Plan. (York p17)

Support for learning over the whole degree programme

Fifteen providers reported that support for students would be made available over the entire course of the degree programme, often facilitated by recently created or newly augmented Academic Skills Centres:

Students can access academic advice from their departments and pastoral support from their colleges, but this does not appear to be sufficient for students in groups where there is an attainment gap. DCAD will offer student academic support programmes, with special attention to the writing, communication, numerical and analytic skills and abilities needed to thrive at Durham. (Durham p15)

Our Skills Centre has an embedded programme at present reaching all students as well as drop-in sessions for those needing individual support. Monitoring has shown that the support is disproportionately taken up by students from more disadvantaged groups which we believe is a sign that the offer is accessible to all and that there is no stigma associated with getting extra support. (Liverpool p21)

We will review and refine our approach to the delivery of academic skills, by focusing our approach on providing more support to those students where there are gaps in their attainment and continuation. This will include: The introduction of tailored support to students who are admitted through the contextual admissions process. (Southampton p16)

For some providers this focuses on the introduction or enhancement of support for mathematics:

Short-term evaluation work will focus on the effectiveness of maths support for 'BTEC-route' students. (Liverpool p19)

Maths Help Centre which supports hundreds of students annually. The 'Transitions Toolkit' delivered by the Leicester Learning Institute is supported by workshops and training which are embedded in the curriculum of many courses. (Leicester p17)

Several providers had already begun or were preparing to provide learning support via online learning portals:

A distinctive feature of our learning support is the strength of the service provision by our non-academic units. The University Library has developed My Learning Essentials (MLE), a collection of face-to-face workshops and online resources, specifically designed to support students' academic skills development. Through MLE, the Library supports our efforts to close the gaps in access and student success for students from our WP target groups who may be at risk of not achieving their potential. (Manchester p17)

A number of interventions are being established to support the skills development of students from widening participation backgrounds. All students will automatically be enrolled onto an online academic skills development package, and we are also investigating the design and production of a series of academic skills signposting and development resources for applicants preparing to study at Royal Holloway. (Royal Holloway p17)

More inclusive pedagogical practices

Almost all providers reported that they were keen to foster understanding and adoption of more inclusive pedagogical practices among their teaching staff:

One strand of LSE 2030 is the development of a five-year Inclusive Teaching and Learning Action Plan that will focus on institution-wide change across five major areas of activity. This inclusive teaching and learning approach aims to improve the student experience for all students […] The Inclusive Teaching and Learning Action Plan purposefully moves away from the deficit model, which attempts to 'fix' students to match the existing university culture. (LSE pp18-19)

Our academic and professional services staff will be supported to develop inclusive practice in the classroom. (King's pp22-23)

Lancaster's Education Strategy aims to transform lives and core to this aim is increasing the flexibility and range of provision, enabling greater diversity in student learning opportunities, including through different modes of study and variety in pedagogic approaches. […] We have also established an Inclusive Learning Network with representation from seven Professional Services and Academic Departments, as well as existing equality and diversity networks, to discuss and share good practice about curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. (Lancaster p11)

[We will d]evelop online and course support for academic staff around inclusive learning, teaching and assessment approaches; Innovative approaches to pedagogy and assessment, evaluating the potential and impact of new approaches; Use results to develop institution-wide inclusive learning interventions. (Newcastle p15)

A more inclusive curriculum

Almost all providers indicated that work was underway to develop a more inclusive curriculum:

We are undertaking a major programme review as part of the Bristol Futures programme. This is focused on four key themes of Inclusivity, Wellbeing, Effective Learning and Student Partnership. The review will address curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment, seeking to embed the core themes at every level. This will enable us to build in inclusivity at the design stage of programme development and embed approaches such as personalised education and anticipatory adjustments. (Bristol p15)

Our Institute for Curriculum Enhancement (ICE) has been established to act as a focus for curriculum and educational enhancement, and places the scholarship of learning and teaching at its heart, so harnessing the expertise and insights of colleagues within and beyond Lancaster to inform educational change and enhancement. ICE will also explore issues around intersectionality within our curriculum and the learning gain (both academic and cultural) experienced by staff and students from working and learning in a diverse environment. This will be a long term objective which will initially focus on developing an inclusive curriculum. (Lancaster pp9-10)

Between August 2019 and February 2020, the University will be participating in a national Advance HE project 'Embedding EDI in the Curriculum'. Participation in this project offers the University access to resources, support, frameworks and additional expertise to help it drive forward change in this area. During the project the University will consider how its pedagogies and practices might advance equality, enhance belonging and improve learning and teaching experiences for students. (Leicester p18)

Our Subject Librarians are now involved in Departments' consultations and planning for curriculum transformation, and provide advice and support to help in extending the breadth of recommended reading for initiatives to increase diversity in the curriculum. The curriculum transformation process additionally offers an opportunity to embed information skills teaching and learning at appropriate points within students' programmes, which should help support retention and outcomes, by ensuring equality of opportunity and skills acquisition, irrespective of a student's pre-University experience. (Liverpool p22)

For many providers a core focus was on 'decolonising the curriculum', involving the greater inclusion of intellectual contributions from scholars from outside of the global North:

A number of departments have undertaken considerable change projects already, with History focusing on decolonising the curriculum, Modern Languages revising their assessment to enable a diverse range of students including a range of social and cultural references included in their work, the Warwick Business School diversifying their module choices to engage with non-western business and management models. In the coming years the major curriculum and regulatory change processes affecting all departments enables learning from these departments. […] Our work is informed by educational research and consequent academic practice development activities. A prime example is the anti-racist pedagogy effort, with three groups of academics and professionals working on research, data and experience interrogation and guidance development for departments respectively. In the coming years a similar approach will be taken with regards to lower social economic groups and intersectional aspects as set out in this plan. (Warwick pp10-11)

Supporting this activity, UCL invests in Liberating the Curriculum to address the issue of an inclusive curriculum and support pedagogical transformation. BME champions in each faculty drive and support local change. (UCL p20)

Eleven providers mentioned steps being taken to develop more inclusive assessment practices, although only a few universities offered any details:

> *…a new model for personal academic tutoring will ensure that the system is less daunting for first generation students. We are also introducing three new assessment support weeks and an enrichment week as an additional opportunity to build a wide range of personal and employability skills. These initiatives are being co-designed with our students. (Birmingham p18)*

Virtually all providers recognised that the raft of new or enhanced student inclusion and support measures listed in their APPs constituted a fundamental shift in the university's approach to supporting students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to fulfil their potential at university.

6.5 Summary

Our analysis of the APPs for 2020/21 to 2024/25 submitted to the OfS by higher-tariff providers in England has shown that all providers have committed to much more ambitious widening access targets than ever before. Although some providers' ambitions fall short of the 3:1 ratio of POLAR quintile 5 to quintile 1 entrants by 2024/25, this was justified by universities with reference to legitimate concerns about the inadequacy of POLAR as a widening participation metric, especially in London, and particularly as a tool for identifying genuinely socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. Many providers identified the dearth of highly qualified individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds as a continuing obstacle to widening participation at their university. However, the APPs indicated that there had been a shift in thinking away from interpreting lower attainment in terms of individual deficit and towards a more structural understanding of social inequalities in school attainment. Most providers also indicated that they had a contribution to make in closing the school attainment gap through varied forms of outreach work. All providers now reported some form of contextualised admissions policy, with many universities having recently introduced a policy of reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants. Only four of the twenty-five higher-tariff universities – Oxford, Imperial, Cambridge and Bath – stated that they would continue to require that contextually disadvantaged applicants meet standard academic entry requirements. Finally, answering the OfS's call to examine the continuation and attainment of admitted students in addition to access issues, all providers acknowledged that they had a major role to play in ensuring the success of their students at degree level, especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds. Correspondingly, all providers had committed to a range of initiatives designed to significantly improve the social and academic inclusion of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups as a means of helping to ensure these students fulfil their potential at university.

7. Recommendations for fair admissions policy and practice

The findings of our interviews with admissions personnel conducted in 2017/18 indicate that universities offering courses with high entry requirements and a high demand for places were operating principally within the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm and in accordance with the rules of procedural fairness. These universities were seeking to admit "the best students" as evidenced by high levels of prior and predicted attainment which were understood to be the best available indicators of the likelihood of academic success at degree level. At the same time, many of the admissions personnel we spoke to were sympathetic to distributive fairness concerns and were operating some form of contextualised admissions policy in recognition of the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on prior academic achievement. These contextualised admissions policies tended to be quite modest in scope, however, involving a degree of prioritisation of socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants for admission subject to standard entry requirements, or a reduction in academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants of just one or two A-level grades. Some selectors indicated that a contextualised approach was also taken to the evaluation of other more informal selection criteria such as grades achieved at GCSE and at AS-level, applicants' personal statements, teachers' references, portfolios of work and performances at interview, although in many cases this was not formalised practice.

Although there was widespread recognition that contextually disadvantaged applicants' achievements to date may not do full justice to their true potential, the desire to achieve a greater degree of distributive fairness was held in tension with the expectations of the meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm that university places should be awarded only to those highly likely to succeed at degree level. It was recognised that socioeconomically disadvantaged students would need to be supported to bridge the gap between previously demonstrated merit and future potential for successful study at university. However, recognition of inadequacy of existing academic support structures and pedagogical practices, and of perceptions of resistance among some academic staff to their development, acted as a brake on the pursuit of more progressive admissions policies and practices.

This picture has begun to change since our interviews with admissions personnel in 2017/18 following the Office for Students' direct call on higher-tariff universities to develop five year Access and Participation Plans which set out how they intend to go about achieving ambitious new widening access targets as well as closing wide gaps in attainment at degree level for socioeconomically disadvantaged and ethnic minority students. The OfS's call on higher-tariff institutions to "rethink merit" in relation to admissions and to take on a greater level of responsibility for supporting students to succeed at degree level has resulted in a much wider uptake of contextualised approaches to admissions and the beginnings of a transformation of academic support services and pedagogical practices at these institutions. This chapter sets out several key recommendations for continued development and further change in pursuit of fairer admission to universities in England and the wider UK.

Recommendations for university policy and practice in relation to fair admissions

Focusing specifically on universities offering courses with high entry requirements and a high demand for places, our key recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1. Universities should aim to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data on the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants to inform admissions decisions. Universities that have pioneered contextual admissions practices have increased their ambition over time, progressing from the initial use of contextual data to give extra consideration to disadvantaged applicants subject to standard entry requirements, to the introduction of reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants. In some cases, these universities have subsequently increased the size of the reduction in academic entry requirements for such applicants, or rolled out contextual offer making previously limited to widening access programme participants to contextually disadvantaged applicants in general. However, many universities have only recently begun to dip their toes in the water. It is understandable and appropriate that universities should engage with contextualised admissions in a somewhat cautious manner given the current lack of resources and systems invested in ensuring that contextually disadvantaged students are supported appropriately to succeed on their degree programmes. But it is equally important that universities set an intention to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions over time in the pursuit of distributive fairness goals.

Recommendation 2. Universities should commit to the contextualised assessment of all selection criteria used formally or informally to reach admissions decisions including grades achieved at GCSE, scores on additional entrance tests, personal statements, references, portfolios of work and performances at interview. It is widely recognised that there is a need to contextualise such information, and some universities are already doing so, but often on a piecemeal and informal basis. Ensuring that applicants' achieved GCSE and AS-level grades are contextualised before this information is used to rank applicants is particularly important to ensure that high potential applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are shown to be competitive applicants within the wider pool. Formalising the requirement to contextualise all parts of the application is crucial for distributive fairness, but would also adhere to the procedural fairness principles of transparency and consistency in decision-making.

Recommendation 3. Universities should continue to develop currently nascent academic support systems and newly inclusive approaches to teaching and learning for the benefit of all students but especially those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Developing effective ways of supporting students to fulfil their potential at university is critical to ensure the wider and fairer access gains made at the point of admission are successfully translated into rates of completion of achievement at degree level for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups that are on a par with those of other student groups. This will require a cultural shift away from a deficit model of student under-achievement towards a model which recognises and celebrates the fundamental role universities have to play as teaching and learning institutions. Universities should carefully monitor the effectiveness of their developing support and inclusion initiatives in 'real time' and should seek to share effective practice and lessons learned with the wider sector.

Recommendation 4. Universities should proactively communicate to prospective students and the wider public their commitment to contextualised admissions policies and to inclusive teaching and learning practices. Universities have an important role to play in making the case for more equitable access to and achievement in higher education. By setting out a clear commitment to the values of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity and distributive fairness, universities have the opportunity to forge new reputations for excellence in promoting social mobility, and in supporting all students to achieve their full potential.

Recommendations for national policy makers in relation to fair admissions

As already outlined, the Office for Students' new approach to widening access has already begun to challenge universities to think differently about what constitutes 'merit' and to take on a greater degree of responsibility for the academic outcomes of their students. Building on these promising beginnings, our findings point to the following recommendations for national policy in relation to fair admissions:

Recommendation 5. National policy makers should facilitate the shift to a post-qualifications admissions (PQA) system in order to ensure that admissions decisions are made on the basis of achieved rather than predicted grades, and to make it more possible for institutions to select applicants with a mind to distributive fairness. Currently, the unreliability and frequent over-prediction of A-level grades results in some applicants receiving offers of places on the basis of predicted grades that they subsequently fail to achieve and being admitted anyway as 'near-miss' (or sometimes as 'far-miss') applicants. For offer holders who go on to achieve A-level grades that meet the academic entry requirements for their course, the over-prediction of their A-level grades may have placed them higher in the ranking of applicants than was really warranted. Although it is not entirely clear which social groups are favoured by the current system in which most applications are judged on the basis of predicted A-level grades, and although some universities seek to prioritise applicants from disadvantaged and under-represented groups when reviewing 'near-miss' cases, it is probable that the current system favours those from more advantaged backgrounds whose families and schools are more attuned to the value of generously estimating probable A-level achievement. In any case, the shift to a post-qualifications admissions system would enable institutions to make selection decisions for a single gathered field of applicants, based on accurate information about their attainment, making it easier to select applicants in accordance with distributive fairness goals.

Recommendation 6. National policy makers should replace the area-based widening access metric POLAR with individual-level measures of socioeconomic disadvantage and should make this information available to universities so that it can be used to inform individual admissions decisions. In their APPs, many providers point to empirical evidence which shows that most socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals do not live in POLAR quintile 1 areas, and that many individuals who do live in POLAR quintile 1 areas are not from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, the use of POLAR and other area-level measures to set and monitor progress towards widening access targets, and correspondingly to target widening access initiatives including contextualised admissions policies, may mean that any apparent progress on widening access is more illusory than real. National policy makers should revise the regulations governing Access and Participation Plans to ensure a focus on

socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals rather than on those who happen to reside in low HE participation areas, and should ensure that individual-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage such as information from the National Pupil Database on individual students' free school meal status is made available to universities via UCAS so that it can be factored into admissions decisions

Recommendation 7. National policy makers should require universities to record and report on the number of applications they receive from prospective students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and on the admissions decisions made in relation to these applications. Currently very little is known about the socioeconomic characteristics of individual university applicants (as distinct from the characteristics of the areas in which they live) and less still is known about how socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals fare in the admissions process, including whether or not they receive contextual offers involving a reduction in standard academic entry requirements. Requiring universities to record and share more detailed applications and admissions data using individual-level measures of socioeconomic background would enable universities and policy makers to more accurately monitor their progress on widening access.

Recommendation 8. National policy makers should continue to facilitate the development and dissemination of the growing evidence base supporting good practice in the use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions and in the use of academic support systems and inclusive teaching and learning practices to ensure that students from all backgrounds realise their potential once at university. The recently created organisation for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) should take a highly proactive role in publicising the existing evidence base, developing models of good practice, and supporting individual institutions to collect and share emerging evidence from their own experiences of developing contextualised admissions policies and more supportive and inclusive learning practices.

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https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/benchmarks