

Evidence review on university contextual admissions

Introduction

Contextual admissions refers to universities considering a student's individual circumstances and background to understand their potential for higher education. It acknowledges systemic barriers, such as time in care or attending under-resourced schools, that may depress attainment without reflecting true potential. Contextual admissions is one tool among a range of approaches taken across the sector, including by high, medium and low tariff institutions, to widen access.

Contextual information can come from a range of sources including information provided through the UCAS application, evidence supplied directly by an applicant and third-party or administrative data linked to a student's school, college or area. This can cover individual circumstances, school or college context and area-based measures. This data can then be used by institutions for application flagging, scoring, interview selection, offer-making, routing to foundation years and/or planning support.

The argument for contextual admissions, as framed by the higher education regulator Office for Students, is that identifying 'potential to succeed' can require more than the 'highest-ranked exam results' and that public confidence depends on fairness and transparency.^[1] Universities UK's recent contextual admissions commentary similarly frames contextual admissions as considering structural barriers so that admissions decisions can be based on potential rather than barriers outside applicants' control.^[2]

This high-level overview of literature considers approaches, prevalence, current debates and evaluations surrounding contextual admissions in the UK. This adds to emerging evidence outside of the UK on contextual admissions practices (also called holistic admissions) in other countries, including Australia, France, the US, Chile and South Korea.^[3]

This report is presented as supporting evidence contributing to the contextual admissions project jointly led by Universities UK, UCAS, and The Sutton Trust.

Executive Summary

- Emerging evidence indicates that contextual admissions policies are increasingly used across the sector and there are several examples of evidence that they can widen access without undermining academic standards.

- Studies of universities find that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to enrol when contextual offers are available and that their absolute academic performance is high, though some attainment gaps remain. This underscores the importance of seeing contextual admissions as part of a wider strategy of support and inclusion.
- The evidence base remains limited by the absence of standardised data on contextual admissions across the student lifecycle. This limits the scope for robust national evaluation of access, continuation, attainment and progression outcomes for contextually admitted students. While some studies report marginally lower year one outcomes for contextual offer holders, others highlight high absolute success rates and point to the importance of additional student support.
- Evidence from Scotland illustrates the benefits of a sector wide approach: all universities use contextual information and have adopted minimum entry requirements linked to clearly defined indicators, contributing to steady progress towards widening participation targets.^[4]

Approaches

A range of contextual indicators are used across universities in the UK. As highlighted in work led by Vikki Boliver for the Sutton Trust, institutions often combine several indicators into a basket of measures that capture the circumstances of the individual applicant (e.g. care experienced, free school meals recipient), the school they attended (e.g. low school-average KS4/5 attainment level, low school rate of HE progression), and their area of residence (e.g. an area of low HE participation as captured by POLAR/TUNDRA Q1/2, an area of high deprivation as captured by IMD Q1/2, and so on).^[5]

Evidence suggests that disadvantage is multidimensional and institutions therefore combine indicators reflecting individual circumstances (such as care experience, free school meals eligibility, estrangement and carer status), school context (such as low average attainment or university progression rates) and area measures (such as low HE participation or high deprivation). Evidence shows that there is greater risk of false positives and false negatives when using area and school-based indicators,^[6] whereas measures like free school meal (FSM) eligibility have far less risk. A summary comparison of measures can be found on page three of the Sutton Trust's *Measuring Disadvantage* report.^[7]

Despite FSM eligibility being one of the most robust measures available, there is still a risk of missing those who would be eligible but their parents/guardians do not apply. To avoid this, using parental income can be more appropriate, but higher education institutions usually do not have access to such data.^[8] However, the government

appears to be moving in this direction for school funding, using a household income-based measure. This potentially presents opportunities for future use in university admissions.⁹¹ Evidence from the Sutton Trust Contextual Offers Tool, drawing on a wide range of 55 universities with publicly available policies, reinforces this picture. It suggests that institutions are generally working from a shared conceptual model of disadvantage but vary significantly in how they operationalise it. The most common measures used are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of institutions using contextual measures according to the Sutton Trust Contextual Offers Tool

Measure	Number of institutions using measure
Care experience	49
POLAR	35
Free School Meal (FSM) Eligibility	35
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)	31
Refugee status	26
Young carer	24
Estrangement	23
School-level measures	19
ACORN	7
TUNDRA	7
Service child status	7
Ethnicity	2

Note: 40 institutions have outreach participation as a criterion for a contextual offer.

The tool also shows that contextual admissions are typically multi-indicator models: universities use a median of seven indicators, most commonly between five and eight. However, policy design is not consistent. 16 institutions require applicants to meet multiple criteria, which can substantially narrow eligibility, and the frequent use of outreach participation as a requirement means some applicants' eligibility depends on access to institution-specific programmes, which adds a barrier to many applicants. There is also evidence of more constrained use in highly selective courses. The implication is not that there is too little activity but that applicants face an uneven and

often difficult-to-navigate landscape with similar backgrounds potentially treated differently depending on provider, course and eligibility route.

The OfS describes contextual data being used in multiple ways: targeting outreach, deciding who to interview and informing decisions on specific offers.^[10] A general category of contextual admissions includes a variety of approaches, of which contextual offers is just one. Contextual offers can form part of an integrated approach that encompasses pre-application support and outreach; support during studies; and assistance with further study and employment.^[11]

In practice, these broad models cover most UK approaches:

1. **Automatic grade reductions:**

Applicants are flagged as eligible and receive a reduced offer (often one or two grades lower) with subject prerequisites usually unchanged. For example, this is explicitly described in the **University of Nottingham's** policy, which involves standard contextual offers typically one grade lower. Nottingham also has enhanced contextual offers, which are usually two grades lower. Both approaches have specific subject grade requirements that are generally maintained, but the two models have different eligibility criteria. Standard contextual offers are based on area level measures whilst enhanced offers are linked to FSM eligibility. Both also have specific outreach programme participation criteria.^[12] Strengths include operational simplicity, predictability for applicants, and potential to reduce risk-aversion by making higher-tariff offers feel achievable.^[13] Weaknesses include proxy error (wrong people flagged), "cliff edges" and the risk of treating admissions as the intervention while underinvesting in transition support.^[14] This is the most common model featured in published evaluations, as outlined below.

2. **Contextual scoring used for selection stages:**

A numerical score adjusts decisions about interview and selection as well as (sometimes) grade reductions. A broad range of approaches fit under this heading. For example, **The University of Cardiff** combines eligibility flags with other indicators to construct a weighted score.^[15] Elsewhere, **the University of Cambridge** (who have a collegiate system) uses contextual data to decide on candidates for interviews and again in the final selection process, with potential for reconsideration if results differ from predicted grades.^[16] Contextual flags also form part of eligibility for an August Reconsideration Pool at **Cambridge**, whereby those who achieved the required grades can be offered a place that remains after Level 3 results day.^[17] One advantage of this approach is that a weighted system can reduce dependence on a single proxy and can reflect cumulative disadvantages. One weakness is a lack of transparency, as scoring can feel opaque for applicants unless criteria and weights are communicated clearly. It can also be difficult for students to

compare offers that are available across institutions if they are not communicated in a consistent way.

3. **Alternative routes, pre-entry programmes and foundation years:**

Contextual admissions is operationalised through structured programmes that build preparedness and provide a route to an adjusted offer. For instance, **The University of Glasgow** operates adjusted entry requirements for widening participation applicants in Scotland and explicitly links adjusted offers to credit-rated pre-entry programmes.^[18] Specialist institutions are now introducing such programmes; **The Royal Academy of Music** is the first conservatoire to offer a fully funded foundation year.^[19] Strengths of all approaches here include academic preparedness and belonging. For pre-entry programmes, further improvements to retention and transition can also be achieved when combined with an adjusted offer.^[20] Weaknesses of pre-entry programmes include capacity and equity of access - programmes require places, time and travel. Considering foundation years specifically, it may be difficult to scale nationally and also involve an additional year of study as well as debt for students already likely to be disadvantaged. This financial barrier may shut out some students unless alternatives exist.

4. Other approaches may not explicitly use criteria to determine whether an application needs to be contextualised, but instead consider such factors when assessing applicants' predicted grades. For example, **Northumbria University** encourages applications from those that have predicted grades that are lower than entry requirements as they feel they may not accurately reflect potential.^[21] Known as 'aspirational offers', applicants are still given an offer based on standard requirements – typically, these go to applicants with predicted grades up to three or four grades below the standard. They can also make 'dual' offers whereby an applicant also receives an offer for a foundation year, where entry requirements are lower. These less common approaches have not yet featured in published evaluations.

Prevalence and use

The use of contextual admissions as part of wider access and participation targets, particularly (but not restricted to) higher-tariff institutions, has featured in key guidance documents from the Office for Students (OfS) in recent years.^[22] In a 2023 review, Boliver and Powell looked at Access and Participation Plans for 2020-2024 submitted to the OfS by England's 25 higher-tariff universities. They found that all had made commitments to using contextual information in admissions, with 19 reducing academic entry criteria for disadvantaged applicants.^[23] The authors contrasted this with findings from the Sutton Trust a few years earlier, which indicated contextual admissions use among the 'Sutton Trust 30' higher-tariff institutions typically involved

additional consideration rather than a reduced offer for an applicant.^[24] Despite considerable widening participation activity among medium and lower tariff institutions, the published literature on contextual admissions in this part of the sector remains sparser. This highlights the need for further evaluation across the full range of provider types.

Evidence from Scotland illustrates the benefits of a sector-wide approach to contextual admissions. All universities use contextual information and have adopted minimum entry requirements linked to clearly defined indicators, which their government has said has contributed to steady progress towards widening participation targets. The proportion of students from the most deprived fifth of areas increased from 13.7% in 2013/14 before the Commission on Widening Access was established, to 16.7% in 2023/24, though progress has slowed since the pandemic.^[25]

Current debates and challenges

With a notable proportion of institutions, particularly high-tariff universities, using contextual admissions, debate has turned to how they should be designed and evaluated. Indeed, a qualitative study from Mountford-Zimdars, Moore and Higham (2019), which involved interviews with 15 stakeholders in contextual admissions, noted challenges in accessing high quality data, achieving consistency across institutions and monitoring the long-term outcomes of contextually admitted students. These discussions focused on refining contextual models, ensuring transparency and fairness, and investing in student support rather than questioning the principle of contextual admissions. The research identified key concerns in the sector relating to availability of data, a lack of consistency across institutions, and how contextual data is used beyond admissions.^[26] While this paper is several years old, many of these challenges and debates endure.

Key policy debates and challenges on contextual admissions include:

Assessing potential: A key tension in contextual admissions is between traditional grade-based selection and assessing applicants' potential through contextual measures. Under the 'minimum preparedness' approach, all applicants must meet a baseline academic threshold to ensure they are capable of succeeding on the course. Once this threshold is satisfied, universities can exercise discretion to prioritise applicants from underrepresented backgrounds. This framing is evident in Scottish practice, where minimum entry requirements are applied to specific equity groups. Sector guidance such as UUK's Fair Admissions Review, proposes a core set of indicators (IMD, FSM, care experience) to guide equitable consideration and use of minimum entry requirements.^[27]

Contextual offers and student choice: Elsewhere, other research has considered how contextual offers and the visibility of contextual information might affect the choices of applicants. Emerging evidence from the London School of Economics has found that awareness of contextual offers encouraged prospective students to apply to higher-tariff universities, with such students more likely to select the institution if they had received a contextual offer.^[28] Another study observed this relationship at a medium tariff institution but only with insurance choices rather than firms.^[29] Prospective students may be steered towards institutions with more easily accessible information.

Qualitative research from Bagnall, James and Skipper (2025) shows that while contextually admitted students are increasingly aware of being admitted on such an offer, there remains a lack of understanding about what being a contextually admitted student actually *means* – including exact eligibility criteria and whether any other benefits, such as financial support, are available. Some contextually admitted students feel concerned about how their prior academic performance compares to that of their peers and fear stigmatisation from peers.^[30] Issues have also been raised that university-level contextual admissions information is not always easily identifiable for students. This is something this wider project and others, such as Sutton Trust's Contextual Offers tool, aim to improve.

Evaluation

Institutional evaluations provide evidence that contextual admissions can widen the pool of entrants and that contextually admitted students often achieve good outcomes. The evidence is strongest where providers can link admissions decisions to enrolment and student outcome data though there remains scope to strengthen the evidence base across a wider range of provider types and contextual models. It should be noted that evaluations of contextual admissions approaches are typically conducted at the institution level. Contextual offer status is not currently recorded in datasets from UCAS, HESA and others. Improved data availability is vital for facilitating national-level research. One project looking to strengthen the evidence base is currently being run by TASO.^[31]

Notable evaluations from institutions include the following pieces:

On admissions into university:

Durham University:^[32] A large evaluation of undergraduates entering 2018-2020 (N=11,392) reports that contextual offers were typically 1-2 grades lower and that eligibility required meeting at least two of six criteria (POLAR Q1-2, ACORN 4-5, UK state school, FSM, care experience, estrangement). The share of entrants receiving contextual offers increased from 17.2% (2018) to 26.6% (2020) alongside growth in entrants from POLAR Q1-2 (15.4% to 22.3%) and a reduction in the POLAR Q5:Q1 ratio from 7.4:1 to 5.4:1.

University of Glasgow Top-Up evaluation:^[33] An evaluation of Top-Up entrants (2004-2013) compares three groups and reports first-year continuation of 87.3% (Top-Up completers), 85.5% (Top-Up schools, non-completers) and 88.1% (control schools). The report notes the Top-Up cohort contained a higher share of students from the most disadvantaged postcode group (MD40) than comparator groups (54% vs 44% vs 33%), supporting the interpretation that programme participation can aid transition for more disadvantaged students.

Highly selective institution evaluation (London School of Economics and Political Science):^[34] A mixed-methods contribution analysis at a highly selective institution finds contextual offer holders were more likely to firmly accept offers (68.5% vs 63.9%) and, in regression, 1.454 times more likely to firm their offer than standard-offer holders. The study finds evidence of marginally lower year-one outcomes for those admitted with contextual offers and calls for further research on long-term outcomes and student experience, reinforcing the 'offer + support' design logic.

On achievement at university:

Durham University:^[35] In the same study cited above, on outcomes, contextual offer entrants had slightly lower pass rates and average marks than standard-offer entrants but still achieved highly (e.g. Year 1 pass rates around 93% for general contextual offer entrants versus 96.4% for standard offer entrants; lower first-class rates but substantial 2:1+ attainment). The study stresses that contextual admissions are not the end of the story: support, belonging and financial stability shape whether potential is realised.

University of Strathclyde:^[36] Overall findings from this study reflected those seen in the Durham study. An evaluation of year-on-year pass rates and overall completion rates for contextually admitted students at Strathclyde found that while students performed well in absolute terms, they performed less well relative to peers who were admitted on a typical offer. Contextual offer students had an 82.7% chance of progression and a 62.2% chance of completion, while standard offer students had a 90.6% chance of progression and a 77.4% chance of completion. The study also saw variation across faculties and subjects.

University of Birmingham:^[37] This study examined students studying accountancy and finance at the University of Birmingham who had been given a contextual offer after taking part in the university's widening participation scheme. Students who passed the widening participation scheme (and were therefore given a contextual offer) had higher performance across every year of the degree programme examined, with disparities in performance the largest in years 1 and 2, compared to those with equivalent entry level qualifications who did not take part in the scheme.

University of Bristol monitoring evidence:^[38] The University of Bristol reports that since 2018, 90.9% of contextual offer holders achieved a "good degree" (1st/2:1) compared with 91.1% of standard offer holders and continuation rates were 94.7%

versus 95.4%. Bristol's published criteria include school context, IMD quintiles 1-2, outreach participation, care experience and FSM (with verification via National Pupil Database or equivalent).

Concluding remarks

While further evaluations are needed to both widen and strengthen the evidence base, the growing number of findings highlighted in this review demonstrate that contextual admissions can widen access without lowering academic standards. Students admitted on contextual offers generally achieve high absolute outcomes, although relative attainment gaps remain in some evidence. This underscores the importance of seeing contextual admissions as part of a wider strategy of support and inclusion.

There is currently little evidence to indicate what works to support contextually admitted students when at university. In the 2020-2024 Access and Participation plans from many higher-tariff institutions, there were commitments to improve support given, such as extended induction programmes and peer support networks.^[39] Evidence from these and future interventions would be beneficial to policymakers as well as institutions looking either to introduce contextual admissions or develop their approach. Evaluations should consider how different contextual models affect admissions, on-course experiences, and academic outcomes.

With continued commitment and refinement of practice across the sector, contextual admissions can help ensure fairer access and realise the potential of talented students from all backgrounds.

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