

Contextual Admissions:

A guide to fair and transparent practice

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Introduction

This appendix document to the UUK-GuildHE Fair Admissions Code of Practice is intended to guide higher education contextual admissions practices to ensure that they are fair, transparent, and delivered to best support widening participation in higher education.

This document has been developed by a project group led by Universities UK (UUK), UCAS, and the Sutton Trust. It sets out the principles for transparent, responsible and fair use of contextual admissions and the specific behaviours that demonstrate those principles in practice. This appendix document applies to all universities and colleges in England that have signed up to the Fair Admissions Code of Practice.¹ While the practices described are primarily designed for the admission of home undergraduate students in England, its principles can also be considered by other providers and for the admission of other student groups such as postgraduate students.

What are contextual admissions?

‘Contextual admissions’ is the overall term relating to the practice of universities considering a student’s individual circumstances and background to better understand their potential to succeed in higher education. This approach recognises the systemic barriers students may have faced on their educational journey beyond an individual’s control, such as growing up in the care system or attending schools with lower academic outcomes. These structural barriers can suppress measured attainment in ways that do not reflect a student’s true potential.

Universities and colleges in England use contextual admissions in different ways (if they do use them, which not all do) and for different groups of students. Applicants can be eligible for contextual admissions based on measures such as:

- Individual-level criteria (such as care-experienced status),
- School-level criteria (such as attendance at a school with low attainment or higher education progression),
- Area-level criteria (such as living in a region with low participation in higher education),

¹ Universities in other devolved administrations have different approaches to contextual admissions. For example, in Scotland university contextual admissions policies are closely tied to national widening access policies, meaning that universities already systematically use indicators like postcode, school background and care experience to adjust offers in a more standardised way. More information on the approach in Scotland can be found in the [Guarantee of Fairness](#).

- Or via engaging with particular outreach programmes.

Some ways that contextual admissions can operate include:

- A lower offer than standard course entry requirements (implemented at either offer or confirmation stage)
- An offer with mandatory completion of a pre-arrival course or offer on a course with a foundation year.
- A guaranteed or prioritised interview.
- Giving an application extra consideration during the decision-making process.

Why do universities use contextual admissions?

There is strong evidence that structural factors impact a pupil's attainment in school. For example, the attainment gap in pre-18 education between pupils at different school types remains stark. In 2025, 49% of A level results at independent schools were awarded at A and above, compared to 23% at academies and just 15% in FE colleges.²

We also see gaps in prior educational attainment by region, socioeconomic background, experience with the social care system, and more. Latest data from the 2024/25 academic year shows that only around a quarter (25.8%) of disadvantaged pupils achieved a grade 5 (good pass) in English and maths GCSEs, compared to over half (53.1%) of all other pupils.³

Alongside other interventions universities implement to widen access to higher education, contextual admissions practice allows universities to take structural factors into account when making admissions decisions, placing achievement in the wider context of someone's background. This means universities can admit students based on their potential to succeed and benefit from higher education, rather than judging them based on barriers beyond their control. In England, universities are then measured and regulated against the outcomes of these students. With the right support, these applicants are able to both access and succeed in university.

² Ofqual (2025), A level outcomes by centre type.

³ Department for Education (2026), Key stage 4 performance for academic year 2024/25.

Principles for responsible use of contextual admissions

Overall, universities and colleges should have regard to the overarching guiding principle of the Fair Admissions Code of Practice to protect and prioritise the interests of applicants, not the provider. Contextual admissions exist as a widening participation intervention to take account of structural inequality, not to drive recruitment. Contextual offers must never be used to secure acceptances or influence applicant decision-making.

Applicants who apply to a university or college that follows this Code can expect:

1. Contextual admissions interventions delivered fairly and impactfully in the admissions cycle

- 1.1) Contextual admissions is an overall term for a range of different interventions across the applicant journey. Universities and colleges should use interventions which evidence and evaluation suggests are the most impactful in supporting widening participation and student success, prioritising early and upfront communication of contextual practices to applicants. These interventions might include:
 - a) Guaranteed or prioritised interviews
 - b) Contextual flags for additional application consideration
 - c) Reduced entry requirements at offer stage
 - d) Reduced entry requirements at confirmation stage
- 1.2) Universities and colleges should be mindful of the communication and nature of contextual admissions (for example, at what stage in the cycle a reduced offer is communicated to the offer-holder) in order to support the ongoing attainment of applicants.
 - a) Early communication of a contextual offer and any associated support is helpful to support informed applicant decision-making.

- 1.3) University and colleges should avoid utilising contextual admissions to in any way place undue pressure on applicants. It would be inappropriate to link a contextual offer to a timebound decision.
- 1.4) It is typical and reasonable for admissions assessments to differ between the main scheme of applications compared to Clearing. This is due to the nature of Clearing with applicants applying post-results at the same time as remaining places are being filled on recruiting courses. However, universities and colleges should continue to apply contextual consideration of applications during Clearing where possible.
 - a) This should be made possible by ensuring that all those making admissions decisions, including during Clearing, receive appropriate staff training that includes how to apply contextual admissions.
 - b) Contextual consideration should not be multiplied across numerous points in the admissions cycle (for example, if an applicant has already received a contextual offer, that offer should not then be further reduced during confirmation).

2. An evidence-based approach to determining eligibility of applicants for contextual admission

- 2.1) Universities and colleges should ensure that their approach to contextual admissions is implemented as a widening access initiative, admitting students based on their potential to succeed and benefit from higher education. This should be clearly distinguished from wider recruitment activity. As such, an institution's approach to contextual admissions should be embedded in their access and participation plan.
- 2.2) There are a wide number of possible metrics for universities and colleges to use to better understand an applicant's background and inform contextual admissions decisions. When utilising these measures, institutions should be aware of the limitations of these metrics to determine disadvantage as no one single measure can fully capture an individual's circumstances, and there can be a cumulative impact of intersectional disadvantage. Universities and colleges should therefore consider using a basket of measures to determine eligibility of an applicant for contextual consideration, using verified national datasets where possible and reducing individualised requests for further information.
- 2.3) The table below sets out the four broad categories of indicators commonly used in contextual admissions, an overview of what each metric measures (and its limitations) based on the latest evidence, as well as how universities and colleges can best access this information when making admissions decisions:
 - a) Individual indicators (e.g., FSM, care experience)
 - b) School data
 - c) Area-based indicators (e.g., POLAR4 quintile, IMD quintile)
 - d) Engagement in outreach activity

Indicator	Overview	How providers access this information?
Individual indicators (high reliability)		
Eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)	<p>FSM is a validated indicator of household income. Its use should be explicitly linked to socioeconomic disadvantage.</p> <p>It is not a direct measure of academic potential or family background more broadly and represents a specific measure of disadvantage. However, it does not capture those who were eligible by family income but did not take up FSM due to choice or attendance at an independent school.</p>	<p>Applicants who have been eligible for FSM can self-declare this on their UCAS application. This can be verified by the school/college, or with a letter from the local authority.</p> <p>For 18 and 19-year-old applicants in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, UCAS provides (via MCDS):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School/college linked FSM status for state school applicants • School/college linked bursary indicator for independent school applicants
Care-experienced / Care leaver status	<p>Care-experienced and care-leaver (see glossary for range of definition) applicants face profound structural barriers. Institutions should explicitly recognise these students as priority applicants and ensure minimum entitlements such as guaranteed contextual consideration, access to enhanced support, and clear signposting of entitlements within offer communications.</p>	<p>Applicants can share their self-declared care experienced status on their UCAS application and have the option to upload supporting documents.</p>

Personal circumstances flags:

- Refugees and asylum-seekers
- Estranged
- Carers
- Service children

These circumstances should be treated as high-significance indicators of structural disruption and instability. Best practice recognises these statuses as requiring bespoke support, contextualised interpretation of qualifications, and automatic contextual consideration at minimum.

Applicants can share self-declared information about their personal circumstances on their UCAS application.

School data (moderate reliability but not to be used in isolation)

School or college performance and progression measures

Flagging applicants from schools with low average achievement at KS4-5 or historically low rates of progression to higher education or to selective institutions. This helps contextualise attainment and support understanding of opportunity gaps.

Best practice uses progression data in combination with school attainment metrics. Typically must consider limitations such as cohort effects and institutional performance volatility. Institutions should avoid assumptions about individual learners based solely on school averages.

The UCAS contextual data service supplies historic data (going back to 2008) about an applicant's school or college.

Area-based indicators (Contextually useful but not to be used in isolation)		
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)	<p>IMD is an area-based indicator, reflecting neighbourhood-level deprivation across measures such as income, employment, education and health. Universities and colleges often flag applicants from IMD deciles 1–2.</p> <p>Best practice in England treats IMD as contextualising information, not a high-stakes individual determinant.</p>	The UCAS modernised contextual data service (MCDS) provides in-cycle applicant data including IMD quintile.
POLAR4 and TUNDRA	<p>POLAR4 measures the participation rate in higher education by local areas; TUNDRA builds on POLAR using individualised school-linked data. These measures should be treated as contextualising information, not high-stakes individual classification tools (as specifically stated by the OfS).</p> <p>POLAR does not reliably capture disadvantage for mature students or high-performing schools in low-participation areas. Area-based indicators identify place-based inequalities and are best used alongside individual-level data.</p>	The UCAS contextual data service supplies historic data (going back to 2008) about an applicant’s school or college, including local area data in the form of POLAR2, POLAR3, POLAR4.

Engagement in outreach activity		
Outreach programme participation	<p>Participation in a recognised widening participation programme can show that an applicant has already been assessed as coming from underrepresented background and has already completed structured preparation activity for undergraduate study.</p> <p>Best practice ensures that outreach participation is verified, and of significant size (e.g. sustained over multiple interventions or in the form of a residential).</p>	<p>Institutions should consider recognising participation in outreach programmes run by alternative or national providers, rather than requiring participation at a specific institutional programme which can be a barrier for applicants.</p> <p>Applicants can self-declare 2 'extra activities' they have participated in within their UCAS application.</p>

- 2.4) When considering different metrics that can be used to determine the eligibility of applicants for contextual admissions, universities and colleges should be mindful to only consider factors of structural disadvantage (see table above) as opposed to personal extenuating circumstances.
- 2.5) Care should also be taken to understand how factors have already been mitigated for in an applicant's prior qualifications, mindful that awarding organisation decisions could be minimal and applied late in the assessment period, though also careful to avoid 'double-counting' of factors that have already been adjusted for. For example, a pupil who has already had reasonable adjustments applied in their level 3 examinations should not also receive a reduced offer for the same reason.
- 2.6) Universities and colleges should be explicit in their published policies on which indicators they use, how they are weighted, and why they are valid measures of structural disadvantage.
- 2.7) When reducing entry requirements compared to standard acceptance, a higher degree of deviation from standard entry requirements necessitates greater institutional responsibility to ensure positive student outcomes with enhanced transition and academic support.
- 2.8) Reduced entry requirements should be informed by evaluation of student outcomes and engagement with teaching staff to consider what threshold of attainment is required for success on course, avoiding a reduction that could pose a tangible risk to positive student outcomes. Where appropriate professional bodies should also be consulted. Currently, common practice across the sector is for reduced entry requirements to be in the region of one or two grades below standard entry requirements.
- 2.9) Universities and colleges should consistently review their contextual admissions policies to ensure that they are informed by the latest research and evidence, as well as their own evaluation.
- 2.10) This might include contributing to and using wider sector monitoring and evaluation efforts on contextual admissions, supporting best practice across the sector.
- 2.11) This might also include flexible approaches appropriate to different courses and disciplines.
- 2.12) Universities and colleges should make use of verified and/or centralised data, reducing reliance on requests for additional applicant information or manual checks as much as possible, while maintaining appropriate routes for applicants to communicate circumstances that are not captured in datasets.

3. Contextual admissions interventions that best support future student success

- 3.1) Universities and colleges should ensure that their contextual admissions interventions not only support access to higher education, but also support those students admitted via contextual routes to succeed on course. Any application of contextual admissions practice brings with it the responsibility of student support, which will increase with increased adjustment at the admission stage. To ensure a cross-institutional approach to this, contextual admissions interventions should be embedded in the access and participation strategy of an institution as set out in their APP.
 - a) Universities and colleges should ensure they have the resource and capacity to adequately support students when making admissions decisions.
- 3.2) Universities and colleges might consider additional wraparound transition support for students admitted via contextual routes, especially where evaluation reveals a disparity in outcomes compared to the rest of the student population. This could include:
 - a) structured pre-arrival programmes or modules,
 - b) summer school,
 - c) additional study skills support during the first year of study,
 - d) a dedicated mentor.
- 3.3) Universities and colleges should develop a theory of change to establish what their contextual interventions are intended to achieve and undertake regular evaluation of the impact of their contextual admissions policies, as part of wider evaluation of the impact of their institutional access and participation plan. This should include both effectiveness at widening access as well as the outcomes (continuation, completion, and degree outcomes) for students admitted via contextual routes compared to the rest of the student population.
 - a) This might include utilising student record systems to track the outcomes of students admitted via contextual routes, linking student data from application to graduation.
 - b) This might also include discussion with students to further understand the qualitative impact of contextual admissions policies on applicant decision-making, and sense of belonging on course.

- 3.4) Universities and colleges have a responsibility for ensuring their contextual admissions practices continue to support high quality education and standards in higher education.
- a) This should take into account responsibilities for regulated courses through close engagement with relevant PSRBs. For some courses, reduced accepted grades in key subjects (such as maths) might not be possible.
 - b) For subjects with performance-based or portfolio-based admissions (e.g. art, drama, music, design, engineering with project-based evidence), best practice requires institutions to articulate clearly how contextualisation applies to non-exam-based assessment. Illustrative examples should be provided so applicants understand what contextualised judgment looks like in their subject. This may include:
 - i. Recognising limited access to specialist equipment or coaching
 - ii. Evaluating potential rather than polish in portfolios
 - iii. Adjusting expectations for prior technical exposure
 - c) It is therefore appropriate for different approaches to be adopted for different subject areas, but where this is the case it should be clearly justified and explained for applicants. Approaches should always be informed by evaluation of student outcomes, ensuring that all admitted students are set up for success.
- 3.5) Universities and colleges should approach contextual entry requirements ambitiously, using evaluation of student outcomes and engagement with teaching staff to consider what minimum threshold of attainment is required for success on course.
- a) Published policies should also indicate how contextual considerations are applied to admissions tests results, where applicable.
- 3.6) Universities and colleges should set entry requirements to include UCAS tariff points where possible in order to indicate broad acceptance of a range of qualification types, regularly updated to reflect developing qualifications.
- a) Where possible, entry requirements could also consider professional experience and other non-traditional routes to higher education, designed to enable progression to higher education for mature learners.

Case study: Falmouth University

"As a specialist creative institution, Falmouth University recognises that talent and potential can't be measured by grades alone. Across our portfolio, we offer applicants the opportunity to interview and share their work, either through a portfolio or audition. This facilitates a contextualised approach to admissions, allowing us to explore each applicant's creative journey, including any barriers to their academic growth, alongside their motivation and readiness to succeed.

Offers are tailored to reflect individual potential and preparedness, ensuring they are realistic and achievable. This supports a fair admissions process that acknowledges different educational experiences and fosters applicant confidence and wellbeing.

Rather than using tariff-based offers as a mechanism to support access, we have developed alternative entry routes that enable students to successfully transition into higher education. These include Integrated Foundation Years and a short, online 'bridger' course, which provides scaffolded preparation for Level 4 study.

Access is embedded in our recruitment and admissions practices, including our Enhanced Applicant Support programme which offers guidance sessions and one-to-one interview and portfolio support sessions, as well as the Preparing for Falmouth programme which provides place holders with online and on demand advice and guidance events to support their transition to university.

Falmouth's student demographics alongside core Access and Participation Plan metrics evidence the importance of this approach. For example, this year we saw application growth from IMD Q1 neighbourhoods of +22.6%, substantially ahead of the sector. 50% of Falmouth's students declare a disability, learning difference or mental health condition, with an attainment gap of only 1.3%.

This highlights the value of contextual admissions in recognising potential, widening participation and closing attainment gaps in specialist contexts."

4. Clear accessible communication of the institutional contextual admissions policy

- 4.1) UCAS' applicant-facing information regarding contextual admissions can be found here. This contains a range of content that universities and colleges can use to articulate contextual admissions to applicants.
- 4.2) Universities and colleges should outline in a central repository (for example, the UCAS website) their contextual admissions policy, using clear language (drawing on the Glossary of shared language in this document) with an applicant audience in mind.
 - a) The UCAS website provides space for universities and colleges to briefly outline their approach to contextual admissions and provide a link to more detail on their own webpages. This is visible to applicants at course level in the UCAS Search tool. All universities and colleges are encouraged to utilise this field to provide as comprehensive information to applicants as possible.
 - b) To ensure that this text is accessible for applicants, testing could be done with applicants and students.
 - c) Tools should be used to allow applicants to easily understand whether they might be eligible for contextual admission or other support, such as the Sutton Trust tool and an eligibility checker on institutional websites.
 - d) The design of contextual admissions policies should balance the need to clearly communicate with applicants and the level of complexity of the processes involved in making admissions decisions.
- 4.3) Universities and colleges should utilise applicant-facing engagement opportunities to publicise and explain contextual admissions to prospective applicants, as well as available support.
 - a) This might extend to wider outreach work with schools, engaging with teachers and advisers to ensure they can best support their pupils through the application process including with understanding of contextual admissions.
- 4.4) Universities and colleges should carefully consider how to communicate contextual offers to offer-holders, ensuring that the conditions of their offer are clearly understood.
 - a) Offer communications should directly explain why an applicant has been determined as eligible for a contextual offer and indicate any additional support the applicant might be entitled to as a result.

- b) Providers should consider carefully how to communicate to applicants the basis for eligibility, balancing transparency, applicant understanding, privacy, and the need to avoid deficit framing.

Glossary of shared language

Access and participation plans (APP)	Plans monitored by the Office for Students (OfS) that set out how universities and colleges in England will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education.
Admissions	The term used to describe the process by which individuals (applicants) make applications to universities and colleges to study on higher education courses, are assessed, are made offers, make their final choices, and have their choices confirmed.
Adviser	Individuals who give information, advice and support to applicants. They are most commonly teachers or tutors.
Applicant	Individuals applying for courses at universities or colleges.
Care-experienced and care leaver	<p>Individuals who are care-experienced have spent time living with foster carers under local authority care, in residential care (such as a children's home), looked after at home under a supervision order, or in kinship care with relatives or friends, either officially or unofficially.</p> <p>Care leaver is a more limited legal definition, referring to individuals who have been in the care of a Local Authority for a period of 13 weeks or more spanning their 16th birthday.</p>
Conditional offer	An offer made to an applicant dependent on them meeting certain requirements. Most commonly, these

	offers are dependent on achieving grades in a qualification or subject.
Contextual admissions	Overall term relating to the practice of universities considering a student’s individual circumstances and background to better understand their potential to succeed in higher education.
Contextual offer	Universities and colleges using information and data about an applicant’s individual circumstances to assess their potential and adjust an offer accordingly. Criteria to inform eligibility might include an applicant’s socioeconomic status or their educational background.
Entry requirements/criteria	What a university or college recommends applicants need to be accepted onto a course. This might include qualifications, specific grades, or passing admissions tests. Applicants who meet these requirements are not guaranteed an offer.
Estranged	Young people studying without the support and approval of a family network due to a permanent breakdown in their relationship.
Firm choice	An applicant’s first choice of course and university or college in UCAS, where they are guaranteed a place if they meet the requirements.
Free school meals (FSM)	Indicator of whether a student received free school meals at any point in the six years leading up to key stage four (KS4) used in England. This indicator can be used to inform contextual admissions, where data is available when an individual makes their application.

Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) data	Data sets that draw on multiple measures (including employment rates, income and education) to determine the relative deprivation of areas within the UK. Each nation of the UK derives their IMD measure differently.
Insurance choice	An applicant’s second choice of course and university or college in UCAS, that they can use in the event that they do not meet the requirements of their firm choice (dependent on them also meeting the conditions of their insurance choice).
POLAR4	A measure of participation in higher education of local areas. It classifies local areas into five groups by quintile based on the proportion of young people in that area who enter higher education aged 18 or 19.
Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs)	Diverse group of professional and employer bodies, regulators and those with statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals. Some bodies have a prescribed statutory or regulatory responsibility to accredit higher education courses, determine standards and set professional competencies.
TUNDRA	An enhanced area-based measure which uses individualised data and tracks individuals from key stage 4 to higher education, identifying areas of low HE participation.
Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)	The central organisation that processes applications for most full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges

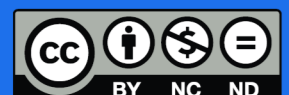
<p>UCAS Hub</p>	<p>A source of tools and information to help applicants explore courses, universities and colleges.</p>
<p>Unconditional offer</p>	<p>An offer of a place with no conditions (ie specific entry requirements). Usually used where applicants already hold the required grades or have been assessed in another way (ie through interviews or auditions).</p>
<p>Universities UK/GuildHE <u>Fair Admissions Code of Practice</u></p>	<p>Code of practice co-owned by Universities UK and <u>GuildHE</u> and covers universities and colleges that have signed up to the code in relation to the admission of home and international undergraduate students. It consists of revised principles for fair admissions developed during UUK’s <u>Fair admissions review</u>, and underlying behaviours that demonstrate these principles.</p>

Universities UK (UUK) is the collective voice of the UK's universities, bringing them together to pursue a common cause: thriving universities, serving society.



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