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Abstract

This paper explores how highly selective universities in England have responded to the Office for Students' call to make faster progress on widening access by "rethinking how merit is judged in admissions" (OfS 2019: 8). Our analysis of the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) for 2020/21 to 2024/25 submitted to the Office for Students shows that England's most academically selective universities have committed to much more ambitious widening access targets than ever before. We also find that these universities have begun to articulate more structural explanations of socioeconomic inequalities in prior attainment; are making greater use of contextualised approaches to admissions; and are beginning to acknowledge the role they must play in supporting disadvantaged students to succeed at university. We argue that this represents the fragile beginnings of an important shift away from the traditional meritocratic model of admissions, in which university places go to the most highly qualified applicants irrespective of socioeconomic background, towards a more progressive model of admissions that seeks a greater degree of distributive fairness.

Introduction

The higher education regulator for England, the Office for Students (OfS), has recently set challenging new widening access targets that call on England's most academically selective 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 (OfS 2018). This reinvigoration of national widening access policy follows a long period of slow progress on widening access, especially to England's most academically selective institutions (Boliver 2015, Harrison 2017). In order to achieve these unprecedentedly stretching new targets, the OfS has encouraged the most academically selective universities to engage in a process of "rethinking how merit is judged in admissions" (OfS 2019: 8). This process of "rethinking merit" entails a move away from the traditional meritocratic model of university admissions, which holds that university places should go to the most highly qualified applicants irrespective of socioeconomic background.

The high bar set for entry by the most academically selective universities is informed by the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model of university admissions that, ostensibly for reasons of both efficiency and social justice, holds that university places should go to the most highly qualified candidates irrespective of their social background. Rooted in theories of meritocracy popularised by functionalist sociologists in the 1970s (Parsons 1970; Treiman 1970; Bell 1973), this model conceptualises a fair admissions process is one in which all prospective students are judged impartially against the same appropriately demanding academic criteria. This emphasis on equal treatment, also known as procedural fairness, rests on the presumption 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 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 (Bourdieu 1974; Littler 2018). Young people with the most economic, cultural and social capital will inevitably find it easier to meet high academic entry requirements than their less well-resourced but no less able and hardworking peers. Consequently, 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. For example, young people in receipt of free school meals¹ perform much less well at GCSE than non-FSM pupils, are only around half as likely to continue in upper secondary education, and are just one-third as likely to have achieved key stage five qualifications equivalent to three A-levels at grades ABB or better by age 19 (Gorard, Siddiqui and Boliver 2017).

In light of this, critics of the traditional meritocratic model have argued that fair admissions requires that prospective students' qualifications be judged with regard to the socioeconomic circumstances in which they were obtained (Mountford-Zimdars and Moore 2020; Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui 2021). This emphasis on equitable opportunity, rather than merely formal equality opportunity, does not do away with the notion of merit, but stresses that attempts to measure merit must be contextualised (Clayton 2012; Jacobs 2013). The concern is not with ensuring procedural fairness but with achieving distributive fairness (Rawls 2001); that is to say, a more even and hence more socially just allocation of resources. In response to traditional meritocrats' concerns about setting less well qualified students up to fail, proponents of the meritocratic *equity of opportunity* model argue that universities have an important role to play in developing as-yet-unrealised potential (Boliver, Powell and Moreira 2018).

The Office for Students' call to "rethink merit" in this manner represents a "new approach to regulating access and participation" (OfS 2018), and contrasts sharply with the approach of its predecessor, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Created in 2004 in response to concerns that the tuition fee increase in 2006 might deter those from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to university, 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, mainly by means of outreach activities intended to 'raise aspirations'. Universities were required to report on their widening participation activities and outcomes through Access Agreements submitted annually to OFFA. While these Access Agreements could in theory be judged inadequate, resulting in the institution being denied permission to set tuition fees at the higher rate, this sanction was never applied, even to universities making the most negligible progress on widening access (Pickering 2019).

¹ Free school meals is a social welfare entitlement targeted at children from low-income households. For a detailed theoretical and empirical account of the value of using receipt of free school meals as a widening participation metric, see Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui (2022).

Unsurprisingly then, previous studies that analysed the Access Agreements submitted by universities to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access, found that universities in England and the wider UK framed fairness overwhelmingly in traditional meritocratic terms. An analysis of the Access Agreements produced by a sample of 20 English HEIs in 2006/7 and 2008/9 found that Old universities framed themselves as conforming to the traditional meritocratic model in that they were willing to admit students from all backgrounds, provided they met the institution's high academic entry standards (McCaig and Adnett 2009). Their widening access initiatives tended to be targeted at high-achieving disadvantaged young people only; 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 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" (ibid p.34).

This finding is corroborated by an analysis of the language used in the prospectuses and websites of 3 Old and 3 New English HEIs in 2007 which 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" (Graham 2013). 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" (McCaig 2015). 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.

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 Group² 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' (Bowl and Hughes 2013). 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

² The Russell Group comprises the following 24 "research intensive" universities: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen Mary University of London, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, University of Warwick and University of York.

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.

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 (Pickering 2019). This finding chimes with a 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 restricted eligibility 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 (Rainford 2017: 46). 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.

A study involving interviews with widening participation professionals at 7 UK universities in 2010 corroborates this insensitivity to structural inequalities, finding that lower-attaining students from widening participation backgrounds were regarded as being of low ‘quality’, reflecting a misrecognition of structural disadvantage as individual deficit (Burke 2013). Similarly, an interview study with widening participation strategy leads at two UK universities in 2011 identified an active commitment to widening participation framed by a discourse which characterised disadvantaged students as lacking in aspiration and intrinsically low-achieving, rather than appreciation of the need for student-centred initiatives to better support their learning (Butcher, Corfield and Rose-Adams 2012). Interviews in 2015 with 75 admissions personnel at eighteen Scottish universities found that most academically selective institutions saw their mission as being to admit only the ‘best’ applicants, defined as those with high grades, who could be expected to succeed at degree level without need for more than the “traditional” amount of support (Boliver, Powell and Moreira 2018). Interviews with 68 admissions personnel at seventeen universities in England revealed a similar reluctance on the part of higher-tariff institutions to admit socioeconomically disadvantaged students with lower levels of prior attainment for fear of inevitably setting students up to fail (Boliver and Powell 2021 & 2022). Tellingly, many of those interviewed indicated that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate to the task of ensuring that such students would be appropriately supported to fulfil their potential at the institution.

What these prior studies make clear is that the admissions policies and practices of England’s most selective universities have historically been guided by the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model. In this paper we explore how highly selective universities in England have responded to the Office for Students’ call to make faster progress on widening access by “rethinking how merit is judged in admissions” (OfS 2019: 8). Drawing on a thematic analysis of the most recent Access and Participation Plans (APPs) produced by England’s most academically selective universities, we explore the extent to which these institutions have begun to rethink merit as evidenced by the development of a more structural, as opposed to individual deficit, understanding of socioeconomic inequalities

in prior attainment. We also explore the extent to which these institutions are willing to take practical steps to achieve genuinely equitable opportunity, as opposed to merely formal equality of opportunity, with a particular focus on the development of a more contextualised approach to admissions and proposed improvements in the support provided to students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to help realise their potential at degree level.

Methodology

This paper analyses textual data from the Access and Participation Plans covering the period 2019/20 to 2024/24 submitted to the Office for Students in 2019 by England's 25 most academically selective universities. We define higher tariff universities as those identified by the Sutton Trust to be the 30 most academically selective universities in the UK, 25 of which are located in England (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). APPs are publicly available documents which can be found on the website of the Office for Students. Table 1 describes some of the key characteristics of the institutions whose Access and Participation Plans are included in our analysis, listed in descending order according to the ratio of new entrants from POLAR quintiles 5 and 1 in 2018-19.

Table 1. 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*
Kings	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 relate to 2018-19 and are taken from Table T1 of HESA (2020). Figures for the average UCAS tariff score of new students entering the university relate to 2018-19 and are taken from the Complete University Guide 2021 edition. 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.

As Table 1 shows, 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 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 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.

The sampled Access and Participation Plans were subject to a systematic thematic analysis by the lead author using NVivo, with a particular focus on how England's most academically selective universities have responded to the OfS's challenge to "rethink merit" as a means of bringing about a step-change in widening access. 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. The findings of our analyses are presented under four main headings: the development of more ambitious widening access targets; the shift towards a more structural understanding of prior attainment; the development of a bolder contextualised admissions practices; and the improvement of support for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to realise their potential at degree level.

Findings

The development of more ambitious widening access targets

Continuing in the tone of the Access Agreements submitted to the OfS's predecessor the Office for Fair Access, almost all of the 25 higher-tariff institutions in our sample were keen to highlight in their Access and Participation Plans some of the more positive aspects of their current status and recent trajectory on widening 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 benchmark set for the institution by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which adjusts for location, subject mix and entry requirements:

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)

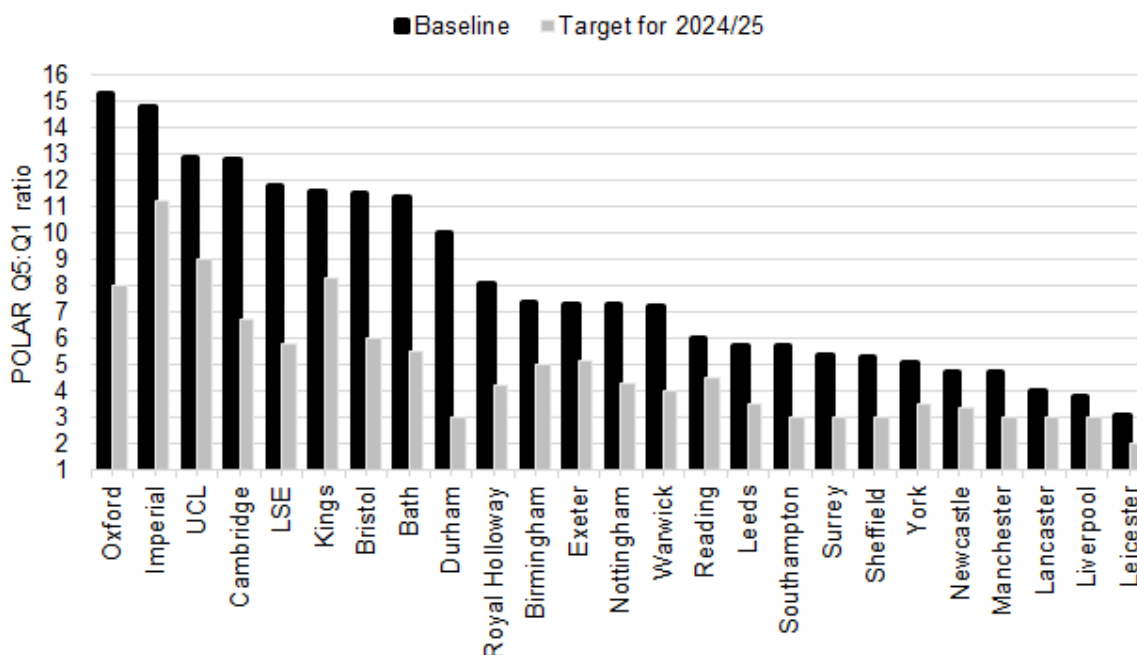
Another six institutions highlighted that they were outperforming other high-tariff or Russell Group comparator institutions:

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)

Nevertheless, virtually all providers acknowledged that they had “a long way to go” (UCL p12) to achieve the OfS’s target of fully equitable access by 2038-39, that they had an “important part” to play (Cambridge p2), and that their new targets represented “a significant shift in ambition” (Kings p9).

Correspondingly, in their APPs, all 25 high-tariff institutions 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. This contrasts sharply with the markedly unambitious targets set previously by these institutions in their Access Agreements for OFFA (Pickering 2019). 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 institutions had baseline ratios less than 10:1 but higher than 7:1. The remaining eleven institutions 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 institution 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 Kings) which had set targets that are more modest but still expressed a commitment to working towards the OfS’s longer-term goal of achieving perfectly equitable access to higher tariff universities.

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



Note: Baseline figures are for 2018/19 for Oxford, LSE and Durham, 2017/18 for all other institutions. Targets figures for Imperial, Kings and Exeter are averages of upper and lower bound estimates, and for LSE, Bath, Royal Holloway and Leicester are point estimates.

All three of the providers that had set more modest targets for 2024/25 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:

...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)

These three institutions and four others – all London-based or recruiting heavily from the London area – identified the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) as a more suitable additional widening access metric, making explicit its superiority over POLAR in that IMD is a measure of socioeconomic disadvantage whereas POLAR is not:

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 enrolls 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)

Similarly, five institutions identified ACORN as additional widening access metric they would be using because of its superiority over POLAR as a measure of 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 ... who may live in urban areas where individual disadvantage can be masked by area-based high levels of participation in Higher Education. (Oxford p3)

Eleven institutions 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, but also other individual-level markers of disadvantage – and lamented the current unavailability of this data during the admissions cycle.

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”. [...] 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... (Cambridge p16)

The shift to a more structural understanding of prior attainment

Again following the precedent of the Access Agreements submitted to the OfS's predecessor, the Office for Fair Access, 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:

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 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)

Fifteen providers attributed their poor record on widening access to date in part to the dearth of POLAR Q1 students who meet the institution'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)*

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)

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)

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 institution's academic entry requirements. 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. For seven institutions, this attainment raising work has, will, or might involve running a secondary school focused on Maths attainment.

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:

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)

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:

...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)

The development of a bolder contextualised admissions practices

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 continue to be based on standard rather than reduced entry requirements:

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)

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. (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)*

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)

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)

For the other nine institutions, contextual admissions policies involving reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants in general was a new initiative:

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)

Many providers with large or medium sized POLAR Q5:Q1 gaps in access also 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; for other providers, Foundation Year courses had been newly introduced or were still in the planning stage:

Acknowledging the need to support students to realise their potential

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 to their programmes succeeded on course, although few indicated that contextually admitted students in particular would be targeted for support. Around of 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 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)

...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)

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. 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. Ten providers indicated that they would be using real time attendance and attainment data as part of an 'early warning system' so that struggling students could be identified quickly and support put in place in a timely manner.

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. 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, often involving 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)

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)

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)

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)

In addition, almost all providers indicated that work was underway to develop a more inclusive curriculum:

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)

Conclusion

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 institutions with reference to legitimate concerns about the inadequacy of POLAR as a tool for identifying socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui 2021 & 2022), especially in London.

As they had done previously in their Access Agreements, 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 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 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 institutions 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 and would not be making reduced offers.

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.

These responses to the OfS's call to "rethink merit" represent the fragile beginnings of an important shift away from the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model of admissions towards a meritocratic *equity* of opportunity model that seeks a greater degree of distributive fairness with respect to both access and achievement.

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