Mapping and evaluating the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions in Scotland

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Report 2

Institutional orientations to contextualised admissions

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Overview

This report explores institutional orientations to contextualised admissions at the levels of policy and practice. The report draws on 75 in-depth interviews with admissions policy-makers, selectors, and data analysts across 18 higher education institutions conducted during the 2015/16 academic year. Interview data was supplemented by a reading of publicly available institutionally-authored policy documents, including admissions policies and strategic plans. The purpose of the interviews was not to confirm or correct the information collected from publically available sources summarised in Report 1. Instead, the interviews explored the philosophies underpinning contextualised admissions policies and the practicalities involved in their implementation. Our analysis of the interview data identifies four broad types of institutional orientation to contextual admissions. We unpack these broad types of orientation, identifying key components of institutional thinking with regard to the selection of students, and examining how different kinds of thinking are linked to different approaches to the practical implementation of contextualised admissions policies.

Section one of the report outlines the case study methodology used to gather the data presented in this report. We describe our sample, the methods of data collection, and the ethical guidelines we have followed. We also discuss our approach to the analysis of the data collected and the steps we have taken to ensure that our interpretation of the data constitutes a fair reflection of institutional thinking and practices.

Section two provides an overview of our analysis of the case study data. Here we sketch out the distinctive orientations to contextual admissions policy and practice we observed across the 18 institutions examined. We describe four broad types of institutional orientation to contextual admissions, which we label (1) selection of the brightest and best, (2) selection for supported progression, (3) selection to widen participation, and (4) selection on talent.

Sections three begins to unpack these broad types of institutional orientation to contextual admissions. We focus first on the different conceptions they entail regarding the institution's relationship to the wider educational system, and to society at large.

Section four then examines how institutional orientations to contextual admissions differ with respect to understandings of the purpose of admissions policies in general and of contextualised admissions policies in particular. We explore different conceptualisations of

the 'ideal student' and its relationship to the framing of contextualised admissions and the operationalisation of contextual disadvantage.

Section five considers how different institutional orientations to contextualised admissions are reflected in practice, in the nature of and rationale for the use of specific systems and tools to aid the selection of students. We explore differences in the significance and meaning attached to formal academic achievement and how this relates to understandings of what it means to identify 'potential'. We also examine how admissions practices are influenced by the perceived need to be accountable to external stakeholders and by concerns about the quality of the underpinning data and evidence.

Section six highlights key findings and discusses their implications. In particular, we note a number of unresolved issues which may impede the development of contextualised admissions strategies if left unaddressed. These issues relate to (1) the tension between recognising socioeconomic differences in school achievement as having structural causes and the primary focus of undergraduate selection on grades achieved by the individual; (2) uncertainty about what constitutes and indicates potential and whether disparities between potential and formal academic achievement can and should be addressed at degree level; and (3) concerns about the robustness of the data and evidence underpinning contextualised admissions policies. Addressing these issues is likely to be critical not only to the further development of contextualised admissions strategies, but also to the willingness of institutions across the sector to publicly champion a contextualised approach to admissions.

1. Research methodology

The higher education sector in Scotland is a diverse ecology, comprising a range of higher education institutions with different histories, present-day values, and future orientations. This diversity of organisational identities, of institutional conceptions of "who we are as an organisation" and of "what our ambitions are for the future",[12] means that different higher education institutions are likely to respond differently to the challenge of widening access and of using contextualised admissions to foster widening access processes and outcomes. In order to fully reflect the diversity of institutional orientations to contextualised admissions,

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[1] Puusa, A., Kuittinen, M. and Kuusela, P. (2013) Paradoxical Change and Construction of Identity in an Educational Organisation. *Education Management, Administration & Leadership*, 41(2): 165-178.

[2] Stensaker, B. (2015) Organisational identity as a concept for understanding university dynamics. *Higher Education*, 69: 103-115.

this study explores policies and practices at eighteen higher education institutions in Scotland. These institutions encompass all but one of the members of *Universities Scotland*.[3]

Box 1. Higher education institutions included in the study (in alphabetical order)

University of Aberdeen
Abertay University
University of Dundee
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh Napier University
University of Glasgow
Glasgow Caledonian University
Glasgow School of Art
Heriot-Watt University
University of the Highlands and Islands
Queen Margaret University Edinburgh
Robert Gordon University
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Scotland's Rural College
University of St Andrews
University of Stirling
University of Strathclyde
University of the West of Scotland

1.1 A case study approach

Policies and practices in each institution were explored using a case study methodology, involving a detailed and in-depth engagement with each institution as a unique case. Case studies are normally associated with a study of a single case, the representativeness, uniqueness or particular features of which can be used to illuminate the dimensions of the wider social phenomenon of interest.[4] Single case-studies however, particularly in exploratory studies, may suffer from selection bias since some of the characteristics of the wider population of cases are unlikely to be adequately represented. This study, in contrast, includes multiple cases from almost the entire population of Scottish higher education institutions.[5]

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[3] The Open University in Scotland, which has a unique open-access admissions policy, is not included in this study.

[4] Yin, R.K. (2009) Case Study Research: Design and Methods (Applied Social Research Methods). London: Sage.

[5] Ragin, C. (2014) The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies. California: University of California Press.

Although we approached the study of each institution as a specific and unique case, our aim in this report is not to present an analysis of each individual case. Instead we present a synthesis of the findings from individual cases, achieved by means of a systematic comparison across cases. Our aim is to identify dimensions, mechanisms and relationships relevant to the whole population of cases under analysis, and to identify key points of difference within the population. This analysis strategy is discussed in more detail in section 1.3, below.

1.2 Data collection methods

For each case, we collected public-facing documentary materials, including policies and procedures on admissions, widening access and contextualised admissions, and we interviewed members of staff responsible for the development and implementation of admissions policies and procedures inside the organisation. In this report, we focus on the interview data, although the documentary data served as background for our case-based analysis.

We approached case study institutions with a request to participate in the study in September 2015. Contact was made initially with senior admissions personnel in each institution to request permission to carry out the research, to interview them, and to approach other staff involved in the undergraduate admissions process. Thanks to the overwhelmingly positive response from those we contacted, initial scoping interviews at each institution took place during the first part of the 2015/16 academic year, and a series of follow-up interviews took place in the second half of 2015/16.

A total of 75 interviews were carried out, involving 97 members of staff from across the 18 case study institutions. Those interviewed included admissions policy-makers, admissions selectors (including academics and professional services staff), admissions data managers, outreach staff, student support staff, and staff with other responsibilities.

The primary purpose of the interviews was to gain an insight into institutional orientations to admissions, selection, widening access and contextualised admissions policies and practices from the perspective of university personnel engaged in a range of admissions-related roles. The interviews were intended to be dialogic rather than a question and answer session, in order to facilitate a deeper exploration of the topics being considered and a

shared understanding of institutional perspectives. The intention was not to hold individuals to account for institutional policies and practices, but to explore the everyday challenges of making situated admissions decisions. This dialogical approach encouraged interviewees to engage in reflective and reflexive discussions about institutional policies and practices, and we are grateful to interviewees for the thoughtfulness with which they engaged in the conversation.

Table 1. Number of interviews with admissions personnel by topic and role in the institution

Anonymous institutional ID number	Scoping interviews	Admissions policy-makers	Admissions selectors	Admissions data managers	Outreach staff	Student support staff	Research staff	Other	Total
1	1*		3	1					5
2	1*	1	3						5
3	1*		2						3
4	1*	1							2
5	1		2	1	1	1*			6
6	1								1
7	1*	2	1	1					5
8	1		3		1		1		6
9	2*								2
10	1	3		1	1			1	7
11	1	1	1	1	1				5
12	1*	1	3	2	1				8
13	1	2	2						5
14	1	1	1		1*			1	5
15	1								1
16	1*	1	2	1	1				6
17	1	1*							2
18	1								1
Total	19	14	23	8	7	1	1	2	75

Denotes a group interview with between 2 and 7 interviewees.

In line with this approach, all interviews with admissions personnel were semi-structured, with the conversation being guided by broad topics for discussion rather than by direct questions, and topics covered in an order resulting from the flow of conversation between the interviewee and interviewer rather than according to a predetermined sequence. As a

result, the interview conversations were relatively free-form but covered a range of themes pertinent to university admissions and contextualised admissions policies and practices. Each interview lasted between one and three hours long, with most taking about 90 minutes.

The research was guided by the principles of voluntary participation, non-malfeasance, anonymity and confidentiality, clarity, and independent, accurate reporting of findings. Approval for proposed safeguards relating to the general and specific ethical issues raised by this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University

When recruiting those to be interviewed for the study, participant information sheets were provided containing information on the funding, background and aims of the study; its methodology and its recruitment procedures; and how the data provided would be managed in adherence to Durham University policies on data management. Informed consent was obtained from each individual participant in the research using a consent form attached to the information sheet. Participants were assured they were under no obligation to participate in the study, and that if they did agree to take part they were free to withdraw at any time. Signed consent forms were scanned and stored in a secure location.

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, sent to participants for accuracy checking, and anonymised prior to systematic analysis. The anonymity of individuals and specific institutions is protected first and foremost by the use of unique identifying numbers in place of real names in the anonymised interview transcripts and in all analysis of the interview data including that intended for publication. Our anonymization protocol for the interview transcripts also included redacting any mention of the names of specific individuals, and replacing all potentially identifying information (for example, mention of an institution-specific summer school) with generic markers. The principle of this anonymization protocol was to retain sufficiently meaningful detail for the purposes of analysis whilst minimising the risk of indirectly disclosing the identities of individuals or institutions.

1.3 Data analysis approach

The anonymised transcripts of interviews conducted with admissions staff across the 18 universities included in this study form the primary source of data presented in this report. This interview data was analysed in the software package NVivo, using standard procedures of qualitative data analysis. This involved general thematic coding to identify specific categories or themes within the interview data, and constant comparative coding to distinguish differences between cases with regard to the perspectives expressed and to identify links between themes.

These techniques were used iteratively in our analysis of the set of scoping interviews with institutions, to establish an initial coding frame. The initial coding frame was then developed by the research team in data clinics, where team members analysed and categorised the data collaboratively. Once the initial coding frame was agreed, focused, systematic coding of the interviews was then conducted, with samples of the data coded independently by a second analyst at this stage to test the reliability of the coding frame.

Three overarching themes were identified inductively from the data, each comprising a series of sub-themes. These overarching themes relate to:

> ➢ Institutional orientations to the wider education system and to wider society (discussed in detail in section 3)
> ➢ Institutional orientations to admissions policy-making in general and to contextualised admissions in particular (discussed in detail in section 4)
> ➢ Institutional orientations to admissions practices in general and to contextual admissions practices in particular (discussed in detail in section 5)

These overarching themes enabled us to identify four broad types of institutional orientation. The four broad types of institutional orientation identified are not intended to be representative of any particular case or set of cases; instead they represent a logical synthesis of the key points of difference observed across cases. These broad types are essentially a hermeneutic device, an aid to understanding the general pattern of relationships between antecedents and outcomes (e.g. the tendency for particular orientations to the wider educational system to be linked to specific ways of thinking about contextualised admissions). They also aid the interpretation of cases which do not conform to the general pattern.

2. Broad types of institutional orientation

Four broad types of institutional orientation to contextual admissions were identified from the key themes which emerged from our systematic analysis of the interview data. The broad types of orientation distinguish between focuses on:

- ➢ Selection of the brightest and best (Orientation A)
- ➢ Selection for supported progression (Orientation B)
- ➢ Selection to widen participation (Orientation C)
- ➢ Selection on talent (Orientation D)

These broad types of orientation are summarised below, and unpacked in sections three, four and five of this report.

2.1 Orientation A: Selection of the 'brightest and best'

Orientation A represents a competitive approach to selection where existing experiences, expertise and practices are situated in the context of selecting using maximum (highest) grades on the school qualification scale (Higher, Advanced Higher, A Level) achieved in the shortest time. In this type of approach widening participation programmes are used to select applicants anticipated to be the highest performing candidates from the largest pool of disadvantaged school leavers identified using regional or national targeted widening access programmes. Information offered by candidates and schools may be used as additional indicators of potential but its use in this way is not necessarily guaranteed. This type of approach is underpinned by in-house research using samples drawn from existing student cohorts to identify disadvantaged applicants whose degree outcomes are predicted to be the same as that for traditional applicants. This type of approach equates 'same' with 'equal'. Typically, the admissions process is highly bureaucratised in this type of approach and selects using grades as the primary indicator of a match between individual and organisation. Flags are used to call attention to applicants who may warrant a contextual offer in the event of a contest between applicants with the highest grades. Additional, institutionally-verified information may also be used for this purpose. Institutions taking this approach will offer some less competitive courses and select for these using different measures. The purpose of contextualised admissions is to select the best and brightest disadvantaged applicants from known neighbourhoods and schools who will be a good fit for the institution and are predicted to achieve a high degree classification, and to make

immediate offers. This type of approach is unclear about how learning progression is conceptualised and does not acknowledge the attainment gap as a consequence:

> "something else that university admissions have to be very careful about is that we do not take students in who might perform slightly less well in our institution because of our methods who could have performed exceptionally well in another university"

2.2 Orientation B: Selection for supported progression

This second type of institutional orientation represents a hybrid approach where existing experiences, expertise and practices are situated in the context of recruiting using widening participation indicators but where increasing competition for places is creating entry requirement inflation. Widening access has been a core organisational function and applicants have typically been college leavers from known colleges identified using articulation agreements, and professional practitioners located in higher status professions. Professional progression has been the main driver. Applicants also include school leavers with mid-range grades, some of whom have been identified using regional, national or in-house targeted widening access programmes. This type of approach is underpinned by in-house research using samples drawn from existing experience to push existing widening access practices forward. The approach requires a high degree of organisational reflexivity and acknowledges institutional and programme reputations may function as a barrier to disadvantaged potential applicants. This type of institution will offer some competitive courses and will select for these using the highest grades the market will bear. Typically, the admissions process is bureaucratised and will include a formalised evaluation of additional information to differentiate between applicants. Flags are used to call attention to applicants who may warrant a contextual offer. The purpose of contextualised admissions is to offer a supported chance to catch-up over time, that is to say both before and beyond the point of admission either for disadvantaged school leavers with high potential or college leavers who will be a good fit for high status programmes and can secure a specified level of attainment in graded assessments in order to be admitted directly into second or third year of the degree programme. This type of approach recognises learning progression as a step-up and seeks to make a significant contribution to bridging the attainment gap:

> "I expect that demand [for places] will to continue to grow, and therefore that pressure, and places will continue to be there. But that's precisely why things like contextual admissions for us is important to have as a way of managing that, balancing that demand … curriculum changes and the attainment gap amongst the most deprived students will be a big challenge for us, you know."

2.3 Orientation C: Selection to widen participation

This third type represents an approach where existing experiences, expertise and practices have been situated in the context of recruiting using widening participation indicators into medium status professional programmes. Functioning along the lines of a 'comprehensive university', grades have not functioned as the primary indicator of potential and additional information has been used to make judgments about applicants who may not meet grade requirements. Typically, the admissions process is centralised and all applications are contextualised by default. Institutions will also offer a small number of competitive and high status courses by association that attract insurance applicants. Courses in the latter category do trade in the hard currency of high grades. This type of approach is not well-supported by research evidence however, nor is it well-supported before or beyond the point of admission. It seeks to continue to offer a second chance to applicants but recognises that increasing competition among universities for disadvantaged applicants will challenge their capacity to bridge the attainment gap in the future:

> "… [other organisational targeted HE programme] is very much a profile that you can see the amount of work that that individual has been through would be equivalent to one grade in a Higher … you'll have colleagues in here saying right, we're going to do a summer school and that's equivalent to one grade higher. Oh no it isn't. Two weeks doing this, this and this, sorry will not bring that grade up, so it's the depth and the substance you have to look at and it's sectorial advice and experience that comes in to it there, but as you say, it is difficult to measure that additional measurement of potential, but some areas are much easier to measure than others"

2.4 Orientation D: Selection on talent

This fourth type of orientation represents a niche approach where existing experiences, expertise and practices have relied upon embedding progression into highly specialised programmes. The type of organisation that uses this approach will offer a range of qualifications, including school and college credentials, and has the capacity to fully support students from 16+. This approach recognises the need to provide access to the qualifications needed to step up to the next level and its focus is on bridging the gap between individual potential and the capacity of the education system to develop that potential. Applicants have typically been school leavers, but, for this type of organisation, grades are not necessarily reliable indicators of an individual's talent because it offers a supported and bespoke opportunity for applicants to demonstrate and develop individual talent. For this type of organisation, thinking about contextualised admissions has yet to develop:

"they all come with a bit of cultural capital attached. So when it comes to contextualised admissions, it's trying to assess the students' cultural capital, particularly when they've come from an environment that is not as fecund in that environment as a middle class environment, and I think that is really a hard one because you almost have to make judgments that are discriminatory because you're trying to make a judgment about what resources that student had behind them to begin to think that way"

In sections three, four and five, we unpack the components of these four broad types of institutional orientation, beginning with institutional orientations to the wider educational and social systems

3. Institutional orientations to the wider educational and social systems

3.1 Orientations to the wider educational system

Of fundamental importance to understanding contextualised policies and practices is the way in which universities see their role in relation to the wider education system. Do they see themselves in symmetrical or asymmetrical relations with that system? Which education system and which part of that system do they have most familiarity with?   Is their existing expertise and experience informed by a greater familiarity with for example, Highers, A Levels, the International Baccalaureate, Higher National Diplomas, or none of these?

"things like the new UCAS tariff and qualifications in England, that was on the agenda. Contextualised admissions wasn't on the agenda much" [Orientation B]

We explored whether the statutory sector was seen as an equal partner and recognised as a significant stakeholder on equal terms with other stakeholders, and whether the institutional relationship with the statutory sector was regarded as a relationship managed by third parties such as SQA, UCAS, regional and national targeted HE programmes, or as a relationship mediated by its internal widening participation and outreach functions:

"they're the people [widening participation] who really make the links with low progression schools and they also run our … [organisational targeted HE programme] as the condition of offer if people haven't made the grade" [Orientation A]

If the latter, we were interested in where the widening participation or outreach function was situated, whether it had a central role in the organisation that was inward as well as outward facing, and/or a formal role in the admissions process beyond the point of identifying potential disadvantaged applicants:

> "So my role functions around two strands of support, and we have support for students from widening access backgrounds, so that is set around looking in to developing enrichment activities for them and recognising the different barriers and struggles that we might face and trying to identify relevant pre-existing university support services that they can be redirected to or to identify if we need to develop anything more specific just for them. And the other half is support for staff, which at the moment is centred mainly around contextual admissions here at the university and what the different contextual data points actually mean, and what barriers that applicants or students who possess one of our contextual indicators, what sort of barriers they may have faced and the run up to the higher education commencement and also the sort of barriers that might continue to follow them whilst they're students here" [Orientation B]

Institutions with orientations A and B were understood as the destination of first choice, of "natural" choice even, for the highest attaining contextualised school leavers. Typical of Orientation C institutions, the highest attaining contextualised school leavers were framed as the "property" of type A and B institutions despite the strong historical association of Orientation C institution with widening participation:

> "And there's engagement from S2 upwards basically … we try and tap into the existing mechanisms in order not to step on the toes of the … [regional targeted higher education programme] and the schools, because it's obviously the schools are bombarded by every university wanting to access, particularly in the last couple of years there's been increased activity by … [institutions] for these schools … great from a market point of view that people have got more choice … but at the same time it can sometimes be a little bit frustrating when you see the big queue for … [institution] … and a small queue at the other ones who have been doing it for a while and then realistically you know that they're not actually getting in" [Orientation C]

This orientation to the education system might be described as being in reciprocal relation with the statutory sector, working in direct partnership with schools at much earlier curriculum stages. Such a partnership enabled schools to seek support from the university at other curriculum stages and for purposes other than the identification of potentially high achieving disadvantaged applicants:

> "So you start to find schools that want more input at the early years, for example, and other schools that say oh we've got a real problem with our S3s and they drop in motivation and they tend to then, there's a risk of dropping, not dropping out but leaving at the end of S4 so would like to target support there. And others it's focusing

on that support for a senior phase. So it's a variety of approaches that have developed." [Orientation C]

Whether universities scaffolded contextual admissions beyond supporting disadvantaged applicants over the admissions and graduation thresholds and on to employment with high status graduate employers was also a significant point of difference in educational values:

"[we have] strong links with industry so that there's you know, it's from school to college through university and then into employment … our career service as well spent a lot of time with us talking to graduate employers because we were aware across the sector that if graduate employers are still going by UCAS points then we can use our contextual policy, we can get someone in and they can get a first and wouldn't be entitled to have a go at those graduate jobs … some of the major ones that said they won't be looking at A Level of Higher results …" [Orientation B]

In many cases, orientation to the education system also offered insights into core beliefs about learning and how progression is understood:

"you're probably more interested in unfinished work and work that shows a process … it's not about having people who are fully formed …" [Orientation D]

More importantly perhaps, how organisations orient themselves to education systems is an important indicator of how they see the problem of the attainment gap and in consequence, their capacity to address it. Associated with this is the question of the extent to which organisations support students and whether that support is specifically targeted at disadvantaged students either side of the admissions threshold:

"what's the point of making an adjustment [to the offer] if you're not going to help the person to become a successful student, because they're going to come in and they're going to struggle. So you've got a far better chance of somebody being a good student if you work with them beforehand and work with them when they come in and there's all kinds of ways you can do it" [Orientation B]

The link between structural disadvantage and the attainment gap is clearly articulated here. By contrast, the view expressed below was shared by interviewees in institutions with Orientation C characteristics, and indicative of a discomfort about targeting particular social groups for support. This 'disadvantage blindness' conflates equality with sameness and suggests a misrecognition of the attainment gap:

"we are a supportive university. It's a supportive environment and therefore it's part of the norm. It's not an overlay or you need to identify so that we know to support you, we support all of our students. So and I think, actually, it's for some people, obviously not for all, there are always individuals who want to identify themselves as needing

the support, but oftentimes they're looking at it as an opportunity to be a normal part of the environment without having a label stuck on … But we wouldn't sell it from the perspective of "Oh, we've noticed that you're a contextual offer and therefore …" [Orientation C]

A clear desire to take affirmative action to make a positive intervention in the trajectory of the attainment gap and its impact over time was explicitly articulated by Orientation C institutions:

> "So the attainment gap is still a big barrier for us, and that's one we'd really like to work on … recent research suggests that by the time that other students from some of the most deprived areas in the country go to primary school they're operating behind in terms of their literacy and their numeracy and this just increases" [Orientation C]

Historic experience of recruiting for programmes mainly from college providers however, also gave rise to concerns about where the responsibility for the gap lies:

> "Yeah, because I suppose one of the discussions that they- it's been a couple of years since I've been involved in the subject level meetings, but they quite often for example would have a discussion about the Maths content within HNs and how- and I suppose it goes back to that question, whose responsibility is it to make up this gap" [Orientation C]

3.2 Orientations to the wider social system

The education system and the social system to which it orientates itself are inextricably linked. The way in which education, the institution and its organising structures, such as schools, colleges and universities, relate to other elements of the social system, such as individuals, networks and other institutions, signifies core beliefs and values underpinning how education frames its purpose and justifies its role and function in that social system.

Education policies and discourses, at an institutional level, can be in symmetric or asymmetric relation with other social policies, but can also be in symmetric or asymmetric relation with policies and discourses circulating at the level of its organising structures. As such, university policies can function as indicators of dominant underpinning organisational beliefs about the relationship between individuals, networks, the organisation and the wider social system.

The role the institution plays in either facilitating or constraining social change can be strongly influenced by those beliefs. How institutions make judgments about individual worth

therefore is interlinked with how organisations see their role in the education system and how they see themselves and their role in the social system. In addition to progressing individual learning on an everyday basis therefore, education organisations have a wider social function.

Whilst the organisation's wider role was not the main focus of our research, it featured in most of our conversations. Interview participants talked about the history of the organisation and its strategies for the future. In some cases, the relationship between the organisation and the social system formed a substantial part of the conversation. In these cases, participants talked about merit in relation to fairness, equality and equity and shared concerns about whether organisational processes and practices were in fact fair or equal or equitable. To help them resolve these questions, some participants referred to the more familiar equal opportunities legislation, particularly in relation to policies on gender or ethnicity or disability. Underpinning most contextualised admissions policies is the question of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment to existing admissions policies and practices.

The nomenclature contained in these policies, processes and practices was varied and included the use of a number of terms, some of which indicated a considerable degree of sensitivity. Some participants used the phrase "adjusted offer", others referred to a contextualised offer as a "supported offer". Few used the term "discounted offer", fewer still used the term "reduced" in these conversations, and "differential" was clearly perceived as a provocation requiring a robust defence.

Most participants were struggling with the idea of how to think about the fairness of what they are doing. They talked about transparency and consistency but this was very difficult for them to evidence conceptually other than in the substantive context of admissions and contextualised admissions systems and protocols. At the root of this struggle however, is how the organisation relates to the wider social system. Whilst protected characteristics provide organisations with an accountability shelter, social class background as an explicit category was rarely spoken of directly.   The following quotes capture a dilemma that emerged in some form or other in the majority of our dialogues with research participants and is perhaps best characterised as the "uncomfortable truth" of contextualised admissions that most are struggling to deal with:

> "There was an article in one of the student's newspaper a couple of years ago written by a current student journalist who had picked up on what we were doing and contextualised admissions and was railing against it saying this is social engineering, it's just [45.19 unclear] and those students should be admitted on the basis of their

academic merit [45.23 unclear] because exams an exam and all that kind of stuff, and I thought […] she had been flagged. Her circumstances had been taken into account when an offer was made and it may have been – it will have been – a factor of her getting an offer, but she didn't know. And that's fine … Fine but she may not have been here to write that article if she hadn't been a contextualised admission." [Orientation A]

The correspondence of contextual disadvantage with deficit contrasted sharply with the more affirmative actions targeted on social groups with protected characteristics and enabled by equal opportunities legislation. This was captured in the following:

"[we] brought in a very different group of students through that route, so there is lower entry criteria and they also work with Scottish wider access programmes that they're bringing in adult returners. So it's already looking like a different kind of cohort … there's more women, there's older people … so it's set up so they're a cohort together … They all come in together and, I suppose the idea is they feel like a cohort progressing together" [Orientation B]

During a conversation about whether an organisation's admissions and contextualised admissions policy was fair and/or equal, one participant commented:

"you're going to have new winners you're also going to have new losers. And those losers are going to have louder voices than the winners. So you're going to spend quite a lot of time having to explain ... the challenge for us is to apply them to every single person in exactly the same way, because if someone challenges a rejection there's two things they can say; the one is to say they've not been treated fairly by us, in other words somebody else was treated differently. The second thing is to say well our process isn't fair in the first place. Everyone's being treated unfairly" [Orientation B]

This issue of establishing an equivalence between 'fair' and 'equal' is problematic for some organisations because it requires them confronting its relational others with the consequences of their classed behaviours in the education market.[6] The logical conclusion to the argument that the same grade can have a higher or lower value (depending on background *and* individual factors) is that assigning a lower value adjusts/deflates or inflates individual attainment according to background and confronts the issue of individuals 'bartering' (using a number of 'currencies') for unfair advantage. The question is whether this social adjustment to a market consequence is the responsibility of autonomous organisations or elected governments. For some universities, autonomy and value is invested in the "best and the brightest" individuals, their knowledges and judgment practices have not therefore been built to acknowledge the relationship between social background

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[6] Ball, S.J. (2002) Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage. Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.

and attainment. Other institutions however, have invested in knowledges and judgment practices that routinely associate backgrounds with individual attainment. Others still, have acquired niche knowledges and practices. If therefore, the true value of grades cannot be established without a formal acknowledgment that background and attainment are relational, institutions may be uncertain about using grades alone as a measure of 'readiness'. In this scenario, how "potential" is measured may be as contested or defended an element of admissions and contextualised admissions as grades and may function as a site of considerable struggle:

> "It's not about what they've done before, it's about whether or not by coming to this university they will be able to achieve their full potential" [Orientation A]

4. Institutional orientations to admissions policy

4.1 Approaches to admissions

This section of the report is informed by our questions about university admissions systems and how universities conceptualise the overarching purpose of admissions. All approaches to admissions were strongly characterised by their capacity to make the best match between individual, organisation and programme. Where places for universities and programmes were in especially high demand, the overriding purpose of admissions was to select the "best and the brightest" irrespective of background and make an immediate offer:

> "I'm not here to be fair to an individual, and I think that's the understanding that people get, is this fairness to an individual. If the other guys come at me and say you're not being access friendly we can say well actually, we know we require these grades to do well" [Orientation A]

Where places for universities and programmes were in less demand, the overriding purpose of admissions was to admit as many "high calibre" applicants as possible without incurring penalties for over-recruitment or high rates of attrition.

The key dimensions at work here are selecting versus recruiting processes and practices. Participants described the admissions process as highly pressured by time: "[admissions] people talk about stop the clock" [Orientation C]. The capacity of the admissions system to process applications in the shortest possible time was, for most, paramount. Associated with converting offers into acceptances in the higher education market in general and in the

market for disadvantaged applicants in particular, admissions systems were designed to be front-loaded, that is to say to input most resource at the beginning of the cycle:

> "We know that they're obviously under pressure to meet their targets for the SIMD so we do ask them to prioritise those groups and sometimes they come back and say oh we can't easily, as I tried to explain, we can't easily extract who they are, but I think they find that sometimes the pressure for those SIMD students is quite tricky. And we have been in clearing for the past couple of years for Scottish applicants just to pick up those SIMD students." [Orientation B]

Most expressed a desire to meet their targets at stages during the cycle using various sifting mechanisms such as 'rounds' rather than to backfill through clearing:

> "student's overall profile determines which round they sit in … so broadly, if it's [minimum entry grades] and their overall profile is [minimum entry grades] they're in round three … if they've got [one grade in one subject above minimum] they'll be in round two, and if they've got [two grades in two subjects] above the minimum entry criteria they'll be in round one … so round one will be processed first, then round two, then round three. Round four they won't be rejected but they'll sit in round four and we look at that and they may be, if there are places available, they may receive offers for round four" [Orientation C]

4.2 Constructions of the 'ideal student'

Institutional orientations to contextual admissions are embedded in the broader discourses of admissions. In turn, admissions policies and practices are embedded in organisational identity: past, present and future. The language of self-promotion evident in organisational marketing and reputation management discourses promotes universities in a way that might discourage atypical potential applicants from opting in. In the extract below, the participant makes reference to this potential discouragement, and to how this might be countered using contextualised offers:

> "I think in the more competitive admissions environment now universities are interested in the marketing function of offer conditions and does a high entry requirement or offer suggest it's a better programme. And I'm sure that at some point I've read a study that suggests that for students from under-represented groups and non-traditional backgrounds, I can't remember what the categorisation was, the cluster, but lower conditions and offer requirements act as an incentive for them and they're more likely to think actually yeah, they really want me whereas a student from a more traditional background won't necessarily have that" [Orientation A]

In other words, the discursive construction of organisational identity in universities' public-facing documents may be in conflict with universities' ambition to widen access in general

and to promote contextualised admissions in particular. There is no doubting the desire and commitment of admissions staff to make a significant difference but our conversations were frequently tempered by the deferral to overarching organisational strategies in conflict with contextualised admissions (though not in conflict with widening access in the sense of outreach activities).

Whilst this conflict is evident in policy documents, it was also very much in evidence during our conversations with university personnel across the range of roles and functions included in our sample. Most evidently, the "uncomfortable truth" is the link between disadvantage and attainment: the attainment gap. This sits awkwardly with representations of the ideal student constructed by policy discourse, commonly scaled and labelled as the "brightest and best" or "high calibre" or "talented" to those who will "benefit" the discipline, industry or community. All of which is predicated on the organisation's definition of what counts as "success". In the comparison across cases, what stands out is the way in which these ideal students are hierarchised and the correspondence between the labels used and the perceived value of both organisation and programme. "Success" was defined variously as "[institution] graduates will be work-ready" [Orientation C] and "highly valued by employers and well prepared for successful careers" [Orientation C] but it was also defined as transformative both at the level of the individual and at the level of community in that participation in higher education "enables them to make a positive impact within their communities, transforming their lives and the lives of others" [Orientation C]. Being in "graduate-level occupations" [Orientation D] or "professional-level career employment" [Orientation B] also counted as evidence of "success". If classification systems classify the classifier, that is to say if the tools of selection are designed to self-select, "success" is a pre-determined future projection of how the institution sees itself, "when you're the institution that we are" [Orientation A], and its future ambitions. In this formulation of success, the ideal student is inextricably linked with institutional strategy:

> "No, no I think it's a fair point because the university, particularly certain parts of the ... [department], we weren't a selecting university we were a recruiting university and that's changed because we no longer go into clearing. So it changes and what we've done is we've upped our criteria for entries and… so there has been changes about then the perception of getting in and when we're at open days we say 'It's not a guarantee that you will get a space' but that then has an impact on your other transitions in. So the areas that will be less advantaged coming in. It's a difficulty because you push towards the academic excellence, which the university wants to have, but how do you manage that with the transitions?" [Orientation C]

The participant is aware of the impact of these changing values and the impact on historic applicants and it may be useful to think about how 'traditional' is framed by the first participant quoted at the beginning of this section.

A more explicit account of the relationship between institutional ambition and selection practices and the role of the ideal student can be seen in the following extract:

> "Whereas we are probably getting towards a … [indirect identification] … in terms of ranking in Scotland, so bridging gaps where we can, I think, in terms of our own place within the sector. So there isn't…I think there's a particular two courses had a very, very unreasonably high outcome per place ratio, and it was felt that it could still more than comfortably fill the places and would be more appropriate because ultimately those students who were presenting much lower, they were wasting a choice. They were never going to be at the top end of the sift, if you like, so it was seen as more realistic to cut down those number of applications" [Orientation C]

How "success" is imagined at an individual level has a correspondence with how universities substantively evidence success at an institutional level:

> "evidence shows that the intellectual and personal maturity and flexibility that we value in graduates from this system are also highly prized by employers" [Orientation A]

Where institutions see themselves as extraordinary their selection systems and tools are designed to interpellate and select extraordinary applicants. The ideal contextualised student, therefore, is framed heroically thus:

> "My goodness, they've got all of that and they came from that school. Goodness, that's a really strong potential" [Orientation B].

These narratives were not uncommon and functioned as an ideal type of contextualised applicant:

> "this applicant had managed to achieve 4As in their fifth year despite having a really debilitating disease" [Orientation A]

> "those who have come through the adversity of some core kind and still perform to the level that we want" [Orientation A]

> "and they are living in a residential unit at the moment which is not anywhere that's going to be conducive to you getting good grades in sixth year. They'd done well in fifth year as well. Not well enough to get this S6 tariff but again we made a decision to make that conditional offer to this person because it will encourage them to get

through the fact they're living in a residential until with people that they're basically taking drugs and drunk all the time, uninterested in studying" [Orientation A]

"I always remember the story, I think it was … the girl that self-studied through Advanced Higher … [arts and humanities]. She did it all herself … she came out with an A* … she had no support in school … there's not many people I know … I wouldn't have done that at 16, 17" [Orientation C]

In contrast, tales of more everyday learning progression at an individual level, where the learning trajectory of an individual whose attainment has been impacted by structured disadvantage suggests extraordinary progress of the less spectacular kind, were rarely given voice during our conversations. There was some recognition of the educational role of universities however, and the suggestion that "success" might be conceptualised and measured differently:

"this is about individual growth within education and that's not the most popular thing for the bigger universities to be saying" [Orientation D]

"that perhaps certain students who maybe haven't got the right subjects, haven't got the right grades, may view ... [science] as not something for them and it's to try to close that gap" [Orientation B]

The idea of "potential university learners" also implies applicants who are not yet fully formed but who have the potential to learn at university and locates responsibility for supporting these learners with the institution:

"what we really needed to do was to be much more active about working with these potential university learners … my philosophy is if we can widen out the activity we do with the schools and with the area then that is where you're going to get the advantage" [Orientation C]

The following point made by a different participant in the same interview encounter elaborates on the assumed link between high entry requirements and the ideal student:

"Just thinking about that I know that this does come across occasionally in meetings when staff say 'We should be upping our entry criteria' and it's really difficult to get across that actually just because somebody you know got a C instead of a B it doesn't mean that they are not capable students. And I think part of that is probably where most staff here, where they come from is probably universities who maybe did have those sorts of entry criteria. So there is this perception that unless you need three As, or five As in Scotland, to get into a university your university is somehow devalued which I think is what you're saying, something about the students. I think what we do really well is take those students who perhaps are not straight A students but they absolutely can come out with fantastic degrees and they do" [Orientation C]

In other cases, however, the ideal student is one who is educationally homogenous, that is to say has had experience of the same type of education as that which the institution offers, but one who may offer greater social heterogeneity to the diversity of the student cohort as a whole:

> "and the difference of teaching style … very traditional, very much about essays … you need a type of student that will do that" [Orientation A]

For others, there is recognition of the potential of teaching style to function as a barrier at policy level:

> "some academics get to a point in their career and suddenly an education agenda will make more sense to them than their specialisation has and they suddenly become … they kind of get it" [Orientation D]

Here, the ideal student is recognised as one who is 'becoming':

> "you're probably more interested in unfinished work and work that shows a process … it's not about having people who are fully formed …" [Orientation D]

In other cases, the ideal student was also framed as the one who chooses that particular institution and/or that particular programme; applicants who conveyed the idea that institutions were ranked as a positive first choice also persuaded selectors of their appeal:

> "it's actually not in the university's interest to admit students who don't want to be here or have been somehow led to believe that it's the right decision to come here when actually it's not" [Orientation B]

> "Everyone's catching up with us and then all of a sudden these widening access students have lots more choice and we want them to choose us for the right reasons, because they want to come to … [institution]" [Orientation C]

> "Because I know from what the sector, it's now edging to reasons for rejection rather than reasons of acceptance because of the competitive nature. Some of the big clangers are they're applied to five choices at further institutions but they mention I can't wait to go to … [institution]. Well others aren't. That's a reject. Someone will reject basically over that" [Orientation C]

4.3 The framing of contextualised admissions

Where organisations are bringing their widening access function closer to the centre, it has enabled them to make more effective all-through provision for individuals whose attainment

has been impacted by socioeconomic disadvantage, from pre-admission to post-graduation. It should be noted here, however, that all types formulate and implement their contextualised admissions policies by norm-referencing against the standard. In most cases, contextual admissions is understood in relation to existing practices and norm-referenced against existing populations.

The salient point made by the participant quoted below however, is that location of responsibility for lower-than-expected attainment is at an institutional and not at an individual level. This more social model of provision, where disadvantage is conceptualised as a public rather than a private issue, re-locates deficit at the level of the institution and argues compellingly that responsibility for change must be located there:

> "So now we started to bring in people on our contextual data and admissions policy we can look at what their attainment is going to be over first year, second year, third year and that will give us an indication of what to do next. I mean if they are performing just as well as their peers who've come with higher offers then we know that we're on the right track. If they're not, it doesn't mean that we've binned the contextual data policy, it means that we have to go and re-evaluate what's our student support that we offer" [Orientation B]

The above contribution acknowledges institutional uncertainty when changing entry requirement boundaries in admissions policy, but also offers a vision of more targeted support post-admission. The contribution below comes from an institution that also norm-references against the standard but offers a more assured view of adjusting entry boundaries:

> "what our research shows though is that the pupils in schools who particularly benefited from these programmes are the ones that are in MD40 postcode areas and that suggest too because we know that if somebody comes from a widening access background and they come to the university and we admit them on an adjusted tariff which now is as many as six or seven grades below the standard we will admit some of them. If we do that we know that they will perform as well as a person who's been admitted on the standard" [Orientation A]

The idea of contextualised admissions being required to exist in some sort of fair relation to other social groups emerged when a consequence of contextualised admissions policy was the displacement of standard populations:

> "we ran into problems in some subject areas where, and it wasn't across the board by any means, but where we'd have flagged applicants representing maybe sort of 15-20% of applications and representing 90% of offers. And that is probably just taking it a bit far, because there's kind of no room to make EU offers or offers to other Scottish domiciled students and that is tricky. And I think that it is hard to know then

well what's the right point to draw this line? But it's probably less than that, I think it's too extreme and so, yeah, so we remodelled. We looked at slightly different ways of shifting things. Well, I was determined, though, that we ended up with something that was consistent across the university. And we didn't end up saying for this subject we'll do this, and for that we'll do the other …" [Orientation A]

A range of views about contextualised admissions were expressed during our conversations, many of which drew explicitly on sporting metaphors, "levelling the playing field" being the most common. Those participants who drew on the idea of a "level playing field" were principally committed to the idea of giving individuals affected by socioeconomic disadvantage a chance to catch-up, an opportunity to compete with their more advantaged peers. This could be seen in the interview extracts above, both of which make reference to situated norms, situated that is in the context of specific organisations, and encapsulated by the phrases "If we do that we know that they will perform as well as a person who's been admitted on the standard" [Orientation A] and "if they are performing just as well as their peers who've come with higher offers then we know that we're on the right track" [Orientation B].

Other participants explained the present dominance of a narrower range of social groups and the persistence of social inequalities in relation to the increasing centralisation and systemisation of admissions:

> "there was a whole huge group of us that were contextualised. We wouldn't get in now. Even with contextualised admissions we wouldn't get in now … because the academic has been taken out of the process. It's become mechanistic. It's become process-driven" [Orientation D]

This view has some traction if the criteria used for norm-referencing are derived from standard populations. Increasing the diversity of the student cohort will be problematic if the data relied upon relates to past or present student populations. The same challenge emerges for research derived from either individual institutions or from institutions of a similar type. Our participants would refer to institutionally-generated research to verify existing practices unproblematically at times. At other times, participants explicitly acknowledged the role of self-institutional interest and argued that contextual admissions policies included the contextualisation of the institution as well as the individual:

> "I think contextual information people should understand that it is not just for the selective universities. I think more institutions should understand it is a good practice to contextualise your institution and the young people applying to it, and whether that's a good fit, whether we've got all the information possible" [Orientation A]

The question of where power lies in this formulation is an important one to consider and contrasts sharply with the view expressed about institutions taking greater responsibility for adjusting for individual educational attainment impacted by structural disadvantage. Arguments predicated on institutionally-biased evidence could be used to reify and then codify existing practices. The rights of historic and present student cohorts were accorded priority using the same evidence at times:

> "Where access comes in I would say if it's got…we do not make lower offers than what we think the minimum is. We stand by what we think the minimum you require to do well here which is in Scotland that [20.42 unclear] plus. What we might do for an access, well we will do, if it's someone who is absolutely SIMD, low progression, [20.52 unclear] they will be made an offer on the minimum. Thus displacing someone who is not access who has got 5 As, so they've done…and so there is a displacement issue here." [Orientation A]

Compare this view with that expressed below:

> "A lot of the time when you encounter people who are resistant to widening access it doesn't mean that they're an ogre. A lot of the time they are just thinking well hang on a minute, if we have a finite amount of places and people work hard to get here, the kids work really hard to get their grades, so why should we penalise people who are getting the better grades. So I think it is really important to say right, well that's a valid concern, but what we're seeing is that a B at Higher Maths and a B at Higher Maths do not always mean the same amount of effort" [Orientation B]

Whilst the reification and subsequent codification of admissions and contextualised admissions protocols may be problematic for A and B orientations, for orientations C and D there is also a problem about evidence. For organisations with C and D orientations, familiar and everyday routine admissions practices now require to be evidenced for reporting purposes. For these types of organisation however, there is less capacity for research and considerable need for an evidence base:

> "it would be lovely in that role that I'm in to have more time to look at the research because I think we really could learn an awful lot actually and it's one of the things that we have less time for it" [Orientation C]

The need for more research was expressed similarly by the following participant:

> "I think the hope was that over time we might be able to develop our knowledge to understand what were the better indicators. Quite whether that ever actually happens not completely sure, because you do get anomalies in the same way as you get…so with an SIMD you could just as easily get somebody who's flagged up as SIMD but they might live in the only house in the street that is yes, it may be in that postcode, but … actually a lot of disadvantages actually, it's more down to individual

circumstances. It's quite nuanced. […] And equally the thing around no parental background of HE, you can have parents who are self-employed, maybe have their own businesses, and somebody could be going to an independent school or two-way school where actually they're not disadvantaged. So I still think that you would have to be really, really clever with your data in order to identify. So I think the thing for us was to try and…to get a bit more nuanced about it but in relation to the factors that are maybe a bit more not specific to us, but that meet with our objectives, rather than trying to…because yeah, you can do it on data but often times it is the individual experiences and those things are not necessarily linked with data and it's difficult because how do you get a handle on those?" [Orientation C]

For organisations with an orientation D approach, the challenges posed by contextual admissions include an even more limited evidence base than that available to the other types, and there is also a need for more developed thinking about the attainment gap when there is such limited provision in the statutory sector. For organisations with this type of orientation therefore, thinking about contextualised admissions has a much longer way to go in the sense that disadvantage itself requires conceptualisation.

All roles and functions attested to the significance of widening participation (i.e. outreach work) as a mechanism for widening access (i.e. of increasing participation rates for disadvantaged groups). However, there was a frequent conflation of these terms and it is important to tease out what we consider the differences between them to be. Widening participation constitutes the broader commitment of the institution to the locale and took the form of various targeted outreach activities pre-admission and in some cases targeted children at primary school and adult returners. It also functions as a pre-application selection mechanism however and in this regard it is important to understand the various ways in which its formal and informal selection tools are deployed. Whilst this was outside the scope of this research, it was implicated in all our research conversations about contextualised admissions in the same way as admissions and organisational identity were implicated in contextualised admissions.

Much of the widening participation activity of institutions is specific to geographically bounded areas and is long-established. Where there has been a long-standing pre-admission engagement with various underrepresented social groups, organisations with the capacity for longitudinal monitoring have been in a position to track changes in these targeted populations, especially at school and/or college level. The implications of these changes to familiar populations are informing future targeting strategies:

"for those with the most difficult or the most chaotic backgrounds … you're not going to be ready [for university] at school so it's important that that later route [college] is open, but we are seeing a change in our college applicants. They're not … they're

getting younger and they're not the widening access students that they were 10 years ago, I don't think. So when I first came here it was a real priority that we did something to make the contextual offers perhaps apply to a broader group, and now I keep seeing the change in the college ones and it's not quite a priority any more for me personally" [Orientation B]

An unintended consequence of extensions and/or changes to these long-established widening participation activities however may be the withdrawal of support at too early a stage and progression rates in those populations dropping back.

There is also a risk here that institutions are pushing further afield to identify even higher achieving disadvantaged applicants elsewhere, across Scotland, the UK, Europe or internationally:

"we have to be fair to across the piece. So in terms of our use of contextual data is probably why it is broader then maybe some people would think too, because we're serving everybody" [Orientation A]

A consequence of pushing beyond the locale, typical of orientations A and B, may be to make it even more difficult for disadvantaged local applicants to access higher value institutions and programmes. The impact of this may be the creation of a competitive market for disadvantage and the maintenance of existing institutional hierarchies that in turn may increase social inequalities in higher education. There is already some evidence of a re-distributive function of widening participation initiatives typically taking place in orientation A and B institutions.

4.4 Operationalisation of contextualised admissions

This research has identified four broad types of orientation to contextualised admissions, the first of which might be characterised as a 'business as usual' approach. Selection tools and processes for contextualised admissions are geared to looking for the "brightest and best":

"So this one over here looks like it's going to be an offer. If I open that up you will see that's all the qualification they get, but across here is the bit we want to see. He's come from a low progression school and he's done something specific with [institution], and outreach programme with [institution] … summer school, something like that. If he was [cross-institution outreach scheme] we'd have a different code for it. So that's how we do it and there's more detail you can go into at length that gives the personal statement and that's just a show. So that person is definitely who I know has got 3 As, has definitely come from a diverse background which is the […] low progression school, and has definitely got some form of pre-engagement. So we're talking about somebody there that we would really want to be interested in. So that's how it works. And then we make decisions on that" [Orientation A]

In this type of approach applicants, indicators and predicted grades are matched systematically and offers made as quickly as possible to secure conversion:

> "Obviously you're managing lots of different expectations. You're managing the expectations of schools, of applicants, of parents. You're managing the expectations of senior management and everybody has a different view and it's not acceptable in today's society and technology and digitalisation to say well thank you for your application, we've received it on the 1st of October, but we have until the 31st of March to make up our mind, thank you very much. And universities are under lots of different pressures, financial pressures, and … we all want to get the best students" [Orientation A]

Contextualised indicators are flagged in these approaches and combine neighbourhood, school and individual level data but individual statutorily-verified data is indicator of first choice. The flags are used to indicate eligibility for a contextualised admission if a good match is evidenced. In this approach, preference was expressed for contextually indicated applicants who meet or exceed standard entry requirements. It was not always clear whether these admissions were counted as contextually admitted or as standard. These applicants were highly valued and placed in the first sift or round of processing for early offers:

> "I think you can always get someone living in an SIMD area, being first in their family, going to a low progression school, their father puts through the accounts as such that they get EMA, but really generally when we come down to it, are they really access? We can all find those, but my opinion is we won't worry about those … I'll take them … if I don't take them they'll go somewhere else" [Orientation A]

Compare the view about what should count as a contextualised admission with the view expressed below:

> "there are some offers which they would have been impossible to reduce, so say someone has, they're a 5A candidate anyway and they're applying for a standard 3As 2Bs course, it would have been physically impossible to reduce an offer, so it's unfair to flag that as I know the offer was not reduced" [Orientation B]

Our research found some evidence that indicators did not share equal value in some cases and were ranked and weighted accordingly. Most commonly, where this could be institutionally-verified applicants with care experience was regarded as sufficient evidence of eligibility and accepted as a single measure of disadvantage:

> "The only ones that we don't use in combination are care leaver because frankly they're up against enough" [Orientation A]

Numbers of applicants with care experience were small however, and when used as a single measure of disadvantage may impact the reporting of contextualised admissions disproportionately:

> "But because we think care leavers are a particular case and because the majority of our applicants who are from a care background and coming through college we're relaxing the grades a lot of the time there even though it's not policy." [Orientation B]

> "I don't think there would be much appetite for having a policy where we reduced it for all three of those markers [SIMD, low progression school & care]." [Orientation B]

Other indicators such as area-level data, could be used in combination to make offers either at the minimum or at a discount from the standard offer. Area-level data was regarded as the least trustworthy or reliable indicator of disadvantage unless it helped institutions meet their targets:

> "when one university is saying these are the contextualisations that we've got. It's for a very good reason because that fits them" [Orientation A].

> "if we lived in an area that was rife with low deprived postcodes we could tick lots of WP boxes without ever reading a personal statement and taking any of it into account" [Orientation A]

Justification for taking different institutional approaches was commonly acknowledged on the grounds of utility, 'because it works here':

> "we're aware of its [SIMD's] weaknesses and that's why it's not our only indicator … it's a proxy for disadvantage and it's probably the biggest one for us that we haven't seen that many examples of it [applicants with SIMD postcodes not coming from disadvantaged backgrounds] but certainly there can be a wariness amongst selector that people might be applying from a postcode deliberately because they're aware that would entitle them to a reduction in offer. As I say, I haven't seen a huge amount of evidence of that happening but I know it's a conversation that we have with selectors and it sort of makes them lose a bit of faith in the entire system that that could happen" [Orientation B]

What was not clear for these contextually indicated applicants was the point at which offers would be made. There was some evidence to suggest these contextually flagged applicants were considered ineligible for early offers and referenced against the standard population at this point.

The type of offer made to contextually indicated applicants was different to the standard population in another dimension: its conditionality. In orientation A and B institutions, the

conditions included the terms of the grade offer and additional requirements in the same way as offers made to standard populations, but it could also include additional admissions tests in the form of summer schools, participation in higher level qualification tests (to sit Advanced Highers for example, access to which was facilitated by the institution) or other types of access courses. The purpose of these additional tools was to provide an alternative measure of potential to make up the standard entry deficit but the purpose was sometimes expressed as a measure of applicant commitment or motivation. More significantly perhaps was the idea of an applicant's heroic journey. This idea had significant traction for some policy-makers but the logic of this argument was frequently flawed by the conditions attached to the offer, i.e. recognition that the applicant had already successfully negotiated considerable barriers over time (the attainment gap) but consideration that this, of itself, was not sufficient evidence of motivation or commitment. If, however, the applicant negotiated their way across this further barrier, entry would be granted.

This approach to contextualised admissions is characterised by the use of an offer with additional requirements attached:

> "the tariffs have increased about the last three years ago, I think, the tariffs went up, which led to a decrease in MD40 applicants, so we need more applicants from MD40 backgrounds because you've got a limited pool and what we're not doing is just making offers to people just because they're from a postcode … we're going to ask them to come and do a programme as well" [Orientation A]

> "if they've convinced four academic colleagues independently over an intensive period [when additional requirements have been put in place to make up for the deficit] … if four independent academics say they're ready for me who am I to say, or who is anyone to say they're not ready. So we've set up, if you like an alternative way of making sure that they're ready" [Orientation B].

It should also be noted however, that where standard entry requirements have reached the highest point on the scale, minimum entry requirements are not immune from inflationary pressures:

> "where we have looked at raising the minimum … where they've gone from 4Bs to an A and 3Bs. We had looked at what – assuming that there is a tail end – that there will be applications that will shift into that unqualified pool. What are the characteristics of those applicants, and are they disproportionately WP? Whether that's through contextual flags, or the other sorts of criteria and we found that they are not. So in lots of cases, we are attracting applicants who - it is not kind of fair to them because they haven't got a chance of getting an offer, because they are not contextually flagged. And they are not competitive. So, it's kind of not in their interest, that they could use that choice elsewhere, but it's also clogging up processes and creating

work unnecessarily. So, that's where things have shifted. I think it is important that we do have that range" [Orientation A]

The impact of these inflationary pressures could be seen in the third approach to contextualised admissions. This was characterised by an upward trend in entry requirements at the level of the institution and typical of institutions that until relatively recently had not formalised a contextual admissions policy but where historic and individualised approaches to admissions informed admissions decision-making. Increasingly, an early offer of a place was made conditional on the attainment of minimum norm-referenced entry requirements, but if those requirements were not met a second chance was offered at the end of the admissions cycle if places allowed. This second chance involved a discounted no-strings attached offer:

> "we've not changed our basket of measures, we're just introducing the lowering of the grade for the same basket of measures at offer stage rather than further down the line … just by one grade" [Orientation C]

This discount was norm-referenced using the practices of comparable institutions:

> "we felt that the tolerance level there was enough … for both the institution in terms of conversion of managing numbers where we don't have that data, where we didn't have the modelling done beforehand to be able to model the impact or the potential impact on that. We did some work. We looked at the previous year, how many applicants this would have affected, and I think we felt that also just looking at other [similar] institutions across Scotland, that was the average was that it be reduced by one grade" [Orientation C]

Greater discounts were offered in less competitive courses:

> "so we reduced the grade at least by one grade and then that also potentially if they accept their offer at one grade down, they still don't meet it at the time we get their results through then we may reduce it again … so it will very much depend on the overall profile of the person and the situation at the time … the profile is really just looking at their personal statement, their reference, if there were any extenuating circumstances that came out during the process. It might be even more baseline we need the student because we're not meeting our numbers … and we speak to them individually … the applicants … it's a luxury I suppose that all institutions should have" [Orientation C]

In some cases, however, discounts were not made available for direct entry to competitive degree courses:

> "We get a lot of applications for our … [science] course which is based here, and some of the sciences courses tend to be the applicants who are potentially also

applying for [other institutions] … I'm not entirely sure that we would potentially be their first choice" [Orientation D]

Establishing a minimum entry requirement is less familiar territory in this type of approach but our conversations did provide some evidence of anxiety in relation to where the threshold should be drawn. Referring to the practice of supported offers for highly selective courses, one participant was sceptical about reducing grade thresholds:

> "you can see the amount of work that that individual has been through [in approaches where additional tools are put in place to counter a standard grade deficit] would be equivalent to one grade in a Higher … you'll have colleagues in here saying right, we're going to do a summer school and that's equivalent to one grade higher. Oh no it isn't. Two weeks doing this, this and this, sorry will not bring that grade up, so it's the depth and the substance you have to look at and it's sectorial advice and experience that comes in to it there, but as you say, it is difficult to measure potential, but some areas are much easier to measure than others" [Orientation C]

Where competition for places requires a system for managing numbers, this third approach uses contextualised indicators to flag its core market:

> "but that has gone up over the last few years and this year we've put up … [social sciences] to an A and 3Bs, but in doing that I feel that we've introduced contextual so for me that's a kind of a … because I think once of the reasons I've been disinclined to put grades up is my concern that you're then missing people who really should be getting an offer from us … we've got to be careful here because you're getting a lot of great students who are coming in at 4Bs and we don't want to lose those … but remember we've got contextual and that will pick them up. So from an institution perspective I'm saying we're very supportive … I think we'll probably need two years before we made any decision, but we might well at that point give a reduced offer, particularly for the two subject areas, I think, that are now an A and 3Bs" [Orientation C]

It is not clear how offer-making works for contextually indicated applicants in this type of approach:

> "if it's a very competitive programme and we go through gathered field we hold everything back and it's processed as a batch and it's priority 1, priority 2, priority 3 in terms of the competitive nature … if someone has got maybe 4Bs and some's got 3Bs, some's got 2Bs we're looking at them in terms, the most competitive ones, in terms of having the highest qualifications per entry" [Orientation C]

This third approach showed evidence of being less confident about which contextual indicators to use. As a consequence, in some cases, exhaustive lists of possible indicators of disadvantage were shared that suggested a confusion of policy purposes, particularly in relation to the differences between social groups protected by law and social groups without

that protection. Confusion about the possible impact of grade inflation on contextualised applicants was also evident in these cases and the tension between institutional and individual good sometimes emerged:

> "courses that historically have a very very high applicant base ratio and so it's seen, I think, by and large as a positive step if where, as an institution, we can raise entry requirements we will if we can still maintain a good number of applications and interest per place" [Orientation C]

4.5 Socioeconomic disadvantage and protected characteristics

Some ambiguity about the place of contextualised admissions in widening participation was apparent. Whilst widening participation includes the full range of under-represented social groups, the distinction between protected characteristics and socioeconomic background was frequently blurred. For some, including socioeconomic background in widening participation created a blurring of policies designed for different groups and this was evidenced in a number of slippages between contextualised admissions and disability. For some, there was no acknowledgement of the difference between those with protected characteristics defined by law who are not permitted to be treated more or less favourably than others in admissions, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds who are without equalities law protections but where special provisions may be made in admissions policies. In some cases this implied a conflation or possibly a confusion of approaches:

> "As part of my initial whiz through the forms I pick out disability issues and postcode and low progression schools. Pretty much the only things that are easily retrievable from the front page of the form. What I don't have much information about, as a rule, at least on the front of the form, is things like care leavers… things like… I mean we've had occasionally people who have been homeless and that kind of thing, which obviously we'd want to take into account but… so that tends to wait until we look at the back of the form" [Orientation A]

This blurring was also evidenced post-admission and in relation to the monitoring of student progress:

> "We track them through the system and make sure our progress committee and at exam board that they are doing the way we would expect them to do, they're progressing the same way as everybody else. The same is true of care leavers, a student with a disability or anyone from SIMD. So actually we're looking at protected characteristics as well as care leavers and SIMDs and we're following their progression against the norm" [Orientation D]

5. Institutional orientations to admissions practices

5.1 Admissions systems and tools

Three main approaches to processing applications were identified: centralised, distributed or individualised. Centralised approaches included systems that used algorithms to match applicants with entry requirements prescribed by academics and protocols were developed to enable admissions officers to process applications through to the offer-making stage. Academics were included at a later stage in the process only in the event of a contest between two equal applications. More distributed systems were characterised by an initial processing stage involving admissions officers in checking the completeness of applications before distributing them to faculties and departments for sorting and selecting for offers. These distributed systems sometimes included another layer of admissions staff situated within faculties and departments who followed agreed protocols and made the offers. In other cases, distributed systems involved academics in a highly individualised manual sorting and selecting activity. The third approach to processing applications might best be described as individualised whereby admissions staff maintained a personal contact with applicants at all stages of the process, and negotiated entry with applicants in some cases after exam results had been published.

The tools admissions systems employed to expedite these matching/selection activities – whether matching for immediate offers, matching for additional entry requirements such as written essays, interviews or auditions, or matching for hierarchised rounds – included qualification grades and additional information such as personal statements and references. Using tools fashioned on traditional, that is to say previous ideally matched, students for contextualised admissions purposes can be problematic however, and neatly summed up by one participant in the following way:

> "This is not about achieving a first class or a 2:1 whatever at the time of application. This is about a journey and enabling them to reach that potential. So if we are going to take students with a lower tariff they may need more support, particularly in first year to help stick with it and get through first year" [Orientation A]

Similarly:

> "our retention is incredibly high, that is down to the culture as much as the rigorous selection process and we need to have a bit more confidence in changing that

selection process because our culture can cope with having a more diverse range of students who maybe are not all coming at the 2:1 equivalent and are slightly less well formed than historically they have been" [Orientation D]

These views can be sharply contrasted with the view expressed below:

"So what we did with that data was actually talked to our admissions colleagues and those with high entrance exam, typical entry were things such as 4 As, they then reduced that to 4 As and a B, but it is in order to gather that group of young people who would perform just as well […] it's not about who's better, who's worse, who's indifferent or whatever, it's about difference. And the difference of teaching style at … [institution], which is very traditional, very much about essays, three essays before Christmas, modular exams, and all of those things, it produces, you need a type of student that will do that, and the type of student we felt that were benefitting from that were the ones who were attaining well in their Highers." [Orientation A]

Some participants were very aware of the bluntness of their tools but expressed a pessimistic view about the prospects for change in the context of increasingly competitive systems. Justification for taking an undifferentiated approach to contextual admissions was predicated in the equating of equal with same in the context of a system without capacity for fairness. Others were more optimistic about the prospects of sharpening up older selection tools for use across the board in the pursuit of making even finer grained judgments about matching applicants. In conversation about one particular contextualised applicant, the extract below was located in a broader discussion about entry requirements:

"we had a particular issue with Maths … we were initially looking for a Higher Maths. Our requirements have now changed and we're just looking for a National 5. Her Maths is not her strong point and had she had to do the Higher Maths she probably wouldn't actually have got in … what I was saying to her was if you apply in this route [contextually indicated] you will get an offer. It will allow you to build up to the equivalence of having that Higher Maths if that is going to be necessary" [Orientation A]

Others recognised the bluntness of the tools and demonstrated a concern about how to make them fitter for the purpose of contextualised admissions in the context of increasing competition for places overall. In this approach, entry grades were subject to inflation and participants recognised the risk posed to disadvantaged applicants in the process of increasing reputational capital:

"but that has gone up over the last few years and this year we've put up … but in doing that I feel that we've introduced contextual so for me that's a kind of a … because I think one of the reasons I've been disinclined to put grades up is my concern that you're missing people who really should be getting an offer from us …

> we've got to be careful here because you're getting a lot of great students who are coming in at [minimum entry grades] and we don't want to lose those" [Orientation C]

One participant made a similar point about the potential for conflict between past and future organisational aspirations and those of disadvantaged applicants:

> "so we want to keep the balance of being open and being inclusive and being fair and transparent across the board. But it is an inclusive university and we would hope to continue with that. We'll see … the big discussion probably is the fact that do we offer this [standard entry requirements], it raises everyone else, or do we actually lower our offer, and that's going to be up for debate within the university" [Orientation B]

The contradiction here is apparent: on the one hand there is an awareness that individuals and their learning are situated in social systems and inextricably linked, that one type of social system confers advantage whilst the other confers disadvantage. On the other hand the discourse suggests a belief that separating that individual from their social system and re-locating them will increase the social mobility of the individual whereas adjusting for that disadvantage will decrease the social mobility of the institution.

5.2 Grades and their relationship to the identification of 'potential'

In most approaches to admissions and contextualised admissions, grades in traditional qualifications represent the hard currency of exchange. As an indicator of first choice, most admissions systems see grades as stable and reliable indicators of *individual* ability, and of potential by association:

> "we're very specific in terms of saying if you get these grades you're in. But as a university that's how admission systems basically work" [Orientation A]

Highly selective practices in the highest status institutions look for the highest grades in the highest value school qualifications (Highers and A Levels) for all subjects achieved in the shortest possible time to match individuals with institutions or to redirect contextualised applicants to other institutions:

> "what university admissions have to be very careful about is that we do not take students in who might perform slightly less well in our institution because of our methods who could have performed exceptionally well in another university" [Orientation A]

For institutions with high and medium status programmes, high grades in high value school and college qualifications in essential subjects achieved over time are used to match

individuals with institution and programme or to redirect contextualised applicants to other programmes:

> "sometimes you find that if we have spare places in let's say … [programme] there may be students who are not – who had near misses for our … [programme] and we could say 'well, actually we can't take you, but we can refer you to … students who want to study at … [institution] and can't get into one department, if we have spare capacity in another department, we'll say to them 'look, you can't get in here, but if you would like to consider going somewhere else then you can, but it's up to you, and if you want us to release you so you can go and take up an insurance offer somewhere else then that's fine" [Orientation B]

In some cases with a range of medium and emerging high status programmes, grades are absolute and final:

> "it's a tough confirmation because it means that if a student's just missed their conditions even by one grade they're not going to get in … for these subject areas we would be of a mind that if they don't meet the grades exactly, so if they're on the 4Bs offer and they've got A, 2Bs and C that doesn't equate. So they would be out on that" [Orientation C]

For other cases with a range of medium and emerging high status programmes, grades are not the only indicators of ability and potential:

> "the only way you get an offer [for a medium status professional programme] is if you do a Maths and Literacy test … because it's a B and 2Cs it's not a walk in the door" [Orientation C]

In some organisations however, there was more than a tacit recognition that grades were not flawless indicators of individual potential, whether predicted or already attained. What follows is an extract from a wider discussion about the reliability of attained grades as primary measures:

> "The universities have to work from the viewpoint that if you get a set of grades or predictions they're accurate. Now we know that 60 to 70 percent of predicted grades are wrong … if you think about it the whole admissions process relies on … that the SQA have developed an assessment in school which provides the correct amount of preparation for somebody in university … to some extent, the dilemma [is] between whose world is this. Is it the schools putting out their SQA students saying universities need to change or is it the universities saying the SQA are putting out the wrong students and they need to change" [Orientation B]

In contrast, the following extract goes further than recognising the unreliability of this single indicator and chooses an alternative mechanism for offer-making:

"teachers will put in what they think they're going to achieve. We don't base what we are going to offer them on what the teacher says … we can't rely on that … if we don't look at the predicted grades we will look to make sure they're doing the right subjects that we need them to" [Orientation C]

For some organisations, grades are less a measure of potential and more a mechanism by which the organisation can enhance its reputation and manage the increase in applications as a consequence:

"it's seen, I think, by and large as a positive step if where, as an institution, we can raise entry requirements we will if we can still maintain a good number of applications and interest per place … it's not an institutional objective to raise them where we can. There isn't really any high level strategy forcing that. It's more that where there are hundreds of applications ... out of step slightly with what other institutions are asking" [Orientation C]

Potential functions as a powerful indicator of the ideal student in university admissions processes but what this actually looks like was, for most, difficult to articulate:

"Get a really good idea of where your new potential, you know, real excellence is. And of course it's a really complicated because we're trying to of course increase accessibility across the piece at the widest possible sense. But then of course we have to recruit excellence as well, so it is really complicated because it's a balance of disciplines, it's a balance of finding mixes, and then it's of course a balance of ability. We cannot recruit someone that we know is going to fail. Of course we can't. But then equally we have to be mindful of well actually what pre-HE training have they had? … there's a massive, massive attainment gap there" [Orientation D]

Here we can see two exchange mechanisms at work that use different currencies, one of which is the preferred hard currency of grades. However, other symbols can function as capital and these can also be exchanged for a university place, for example:

"When we go out and give presentations we're saying to people, whether they're at school or at college, "Yeah, you've got the qualifications, but if you Duke of Edinburgh – especially for schools, you know, if you're doing Duke of Edinburgh, whatever, we want to know about that" [Orientation C]

but it may or may not be exchanged for a contextualised place:

"what we don't do is say we'll measure potential because you did x number of Duke of Edinburgh things so you get more points … it's for the context. Any kind of negative context we'll then [say] that's impressive that they've done that well academically even if they haven't quite reached our high tariff standard of number of As" [Orientation A]

"It's about the context, so if you see, for example, somebody who has done a Duke of Edinburgh award then you know they've done well but they've probably been in a very supportive environment. If you've seen somebody who's held down a paper round for three years you see, again, somebody who's got good determination and stamina, so you're looking for track record" [Orientation B]

"… how do we recognise and how can we accredit wider achievement. We do have the Duke of Edinburgh" [Orientation C]

"Levelling the playing field" is one of a number of sporting analogies used by participants to justify contextualised admissions policy actions. What is frequently described however is effectively adding levels to the playing field in the form of additional assessments of potential. In other words, if the organisation is unable to verify additional information using their preferred sources, the burden of proof falls on the individual. If achieving entry qualifications from a position of adversity has greater value than from a non-adverse context, logic might suggest the conclusion to be drawn is either a socially adjusted offer to disadvantaged applicants or the use of a handicap for traditional applicants:

"they all come with a bit of cultural capital attached. So when it comes to contextualised admissions, it's trying to assess the students' cultural capital, particularly when they've come from an environment that is not as fecund in that environment as a middle class environment, and I think that is really a hard one because you almost have to make judgments that are discriminatory because you're trying to make a judgment about what resources that student had behind them to begin to think that way" [Orientation D]

There is clearly more to be done to define how 'potential' is conceptualised and made more visible in admissions and contextualised admissions policies.

5.3 The use of additional applicant information

Admissions decision-making involves using other tools in combination with grades to measure individual potential. These tools include additional admissions tests such as written essays, interviews, auditions and so on. The extent to which these particular additional admissions requirements may present barriers for atypical applicants was difficult to access in most cases. Differences in how personal statements and references were used in practice were apparent, however, and ranged from non-recognition of personal statements and references and a reliance on grades only to personal statements and references being considered more reliable indicators of potential than grades. Additional information used for decision-making also included contextualised indicators, which were used formally in all organisations with the exception of admissions systems reliant on taking a highly

individualised approach. For this type of approach to admissions, more significant challenges such as conceptualising structural disadvantage and identifying what the attainment gap might look like will require considerable investment in research.

With the exception of highly selective practices in highly bureaucratised admissions systems typical of organisations where all degree programmes are conferred high status by association with the organisation:

> "What we're really looking for instead of just a list of I do this, this and this, it's trying to explain why, how they've managed to perform well academically and do something else" [Orientation A]

There is significant variation in how universities measure personal statements and references as well as how they use them in the decision-making process. Emerging from our conversations about data and evidence was the question of trust and mistrust. In most cases, participants expressed a preference for publically available and statutory data. Whilst statutory individualised certification was trusted – grades and medical or social records for example – despite the misgivings expressed above, aggregate data at neighbourhood and school level was regarded as less trustworthy unless that data enabled them to meet their targets:

> "you could say it's a blunt factor but it's got to be 38 different factors that go up to make it. That's why it's multiple deprivation, it's not just one thing, you know … so that's why we make a strong argument that it's important because we know it is" [Orientation A]

5.4 Contextual indicators and the challenge of evidence

Selection practices are highly varied where additional information besides grades is concerned, and the extent to which institutions can claim consistency and transparency in this regard was difficult to evaluate. Some institutions did not make clear how additional information was used although it was clear that a range of formal and informal approaches were taken. These included the marking of personal statements to generate interval or ordinal data as well as a more informal scrutiny of additional information that entailed looking for more nominal indicators of worth such as having achieved a Duke of Edinburgh award or having had a paper round. Selectors also described searching additional information for extenuating circumstances to account for a perceived deficit, where an applicant's lower-than-expected attainment involved them in making difficult judgments about, for example, different types of illness or bereavement:

> "How do you decide if somebody who has had a close family bereavement four years ago, how does that with against somebody who has been off with glandular fever and missed their exams?" [Orientation A]

Highly selective institutional orientations [A & B] prefer data provided and verified by public bodies such as government-produced and publically available datasets as well as that provided by medical and social services. There is also a preference for data provided by other institutions such as national qualification bodies, colleges, schools and charitable sources such as the Sutton Trust. Additional information is also provided and verified by third parties such as pre-engagement national and regional targeted Access programmes. Some institutions offer pre-application summer schools of their own and additional information is collected during these activities. Some institutions don't see themselves as having the capacity to support atypical students post-admission and, in those cases, justification for using these sources of data was expressed mainly in terms of accountability:

> "I would say the main ones we use, the ones that we … so we don't use first in the family necessarily for our admissions, but we do use first in the family for things like the [cross-institution outreach programme], our summer schools, our outreach and so on. So they're the main ones we feel that we can quantify in some way through either the schools or the postcode" [Orientation A]

Some institutions expressed concern however, about the extent to which they could rely on information given legitimation by official others:

> "There is a bit of a dilemma here in that there are people [selectors in the university] who believe that some personal statements and some school references are, if can use the phrase 'not genuine', in the sense that they are cut and paste or manufactured, or in some cases purchased. So there is a reluctance to go down that road too far because with nobody validating the information, I know we say if any of this is wrong your application is invalid, if you're making it up, but we have no way of policing that." [Orientation B]

For institutions trying to making a contribution to bridging the attainment gap, direct support for disadvantaged applicants pre-admission included support for teachers and potential applicants in writing references and personal statements:

> "So this is some events I do, I do things like how to write a UCAS personal statement … I do how to write effective UCAS references for teachers, that kind of thing" [Orientation B]

For institutions whose experience has involved looking beyond grade attainment as indicators of individual potential, additional information is used in three main ways: the first is to differentiate between applicants meeting standard or minimum grade requirements for offer-making [orientations A and B], the second is to identify potential applicants who have not met entry requirements for offer-making [orientations B and C], and the third is to identify applicants for invitation to interview, to submit additional evidence of potential, or to audition [orientation D].

Individual selectors expressed considerable reservations in terms of the reliability of references as a selection tool, however. For one, references are less about mitigating circumstances and more about showing determination:

> "because I would rather have someone who's in it for the long run, who's determined, won't give up, than someone who has more ability but maybe doesn't have to work so hard" [Orientation C]

For another selector in the same institution, references are not particularly helpful indicators of potential:

> "you might be the best [occupation] in the world with 15 references behind you, I can't have it on my conscience or on the university if you end up doing something and all I see plastered across the headlines is this university took this person on to be a … [professional practitioner] … it's not all about academic potential, it's – it's much more complex. And the academic potential tends to be the more straightforward one" [Orientation C]

For others still, references are taken into account at the initial application processing stage where the eligibility of applications is checked before forwarding on to the next stage of selection:

> "So that's a tick that they have some evidence of so there's life skill balance, extracurricular activities of some description that evidence that they would be able to balance their own workload and that they would be well suited for university life. That's a tick. And then the reference, again positive. That's a tick. We again tend to be quite flexible if there's somebody has…it's very unusual to see a poor reference. It's very, very unusual to see a badly written or poor reference. We would tend to be quite flexible because we know that some schools don't have the resources or the time in order to specialise references as much as others, so if somebody had a not such a glowing reference we would probably be quite flexible on that score. So that would be a tick" [Orientation A]

If the use of additional information legitimated by official others is regarded warily by some selectors, additional information legitimated by applicants themselves is even more

problematic. Highly selective approaches to contextualised admissions for high value organisations and/or high value programmes generally see personal statements as unreliable indicators of potential, although some participants did say they looked for erudition even though others explicitly acknowledged reliability was problematic:

> "And I think we're aware of the fact that we don't want to use too much self-declared information because it becomes a game playing exercise by some and, to be honest, some just forget to declare it" [Orientation A]

At the same time, however, this type of additional information was used to differentiate between applications who have met minimum and/or standard entry requirements at the eligibility stage:

> "[the]majority of personal statements we read are excellent because these are mostly applicants applying from school with some support from their school, from the guidance counsellor or from their parents. So it's very easy to spot a poorly written personal statement and so the majority are very good. What we look for, but we're quite flexible because we understand they only have one personal statement, they're applying to find different places and not all universities are as flexible in what they're looking for within that personal statement, but we're looking for motivation, and I think that's quite standard across universities that we want them to mention why they're interested in the subject that they want to study. And that can take various forms and it can be quite brief. It doesn't have to be the whole personal statement based on that. So we're looking for evidence of motivation. Quite often you can tell they've applied for different programs at different universities, and that's absolutely fine. They just need to have either tried to link them together in some way, which is usually fairly easy if they have genuine interest in different subjects" [Orientation A]

Personal statements and references also constitute an important piece of information and play a significant role at the final selection stage:

> "… if they are clearly not particularly engaged with this … [programme] then I'll either hold them back or indeed reject them at that point … when I've got a lot more people applying than I've got places to offer then it doesn't make sense for me to offer a place to someone who has not got the commitment and enthusiasm for it" [Orientation B]

Evidence of engagement with and commitment to the institution is also a key indicator of worth for highly selective and selective types:

> ""They'll also maybe look to see which people came to an open day. Which people showed commitment by mentioning a named academic in their personal statement" [Orientation B]

Additional information was judged in the same way for selecting programmes in orientation C institutions:

> "It depends hugely on the advice that they're given. Now some people do… the clever ones contact us, they'll come along to an open day and they'll come and speak to us and they'll ask for some advice and if they're asking for some advice I will tell them this. I will say 'These are the kind of things personally I'm interested in, tell me a bit about your character not just what you've achieved, what kind of person are you and how did you come to be that person'. Now the UCAS statements are quite short but people can actually convey a lot of information, the more articulate ones can manage to do that" [Orientation C]

For some institutions, widening access involves the identification of potentially high achieving applicants who are technically disadvantaged, that is to say, meet the criteria for a contextualised offer, but who may not in fact be disadvantaged at an individual level. Typical in highly selective institutions with strong entry boundaries, more evident in institutions with orientation types A and B for example, than in orientation C institutions where more flexible entry boundaries enable disadvantage to be identified at an individual level, addressing the attainment gap is more challenging. For these institutions, the bluntness of the tools used to measure disadvantage at neighbourhood and school level creates sufficient uncertainty about the capacity of contextual admissions to identify "true access students" at an individual level:

> "So I'm not saying all of those SIMD students are access students, but if you're going to ask me for markers I don't think anybody could give you a true figure of all of their true access students because they are so complex. And some kids won't even see themselves as access. They come from a local school, their dad's got a plumbing business, why would they see themselves as access?" [Orientation A]

The complexity of individual disadvantage was also offered as justification for being wary of changing entry boundaries in the extract below:

> "it's now become a complex picture about who's actually disadvantaged from Higher Education … that statistics and the metrics just show you what we need to be focusing on that group now, you need to focus on that group. Whereas actually, institutions should have a bit more of a moral stance about what they're doing and we definitely don't want to just keep recruiting [the dominant social group]" [Orientation D]

Whilst most institutions provide information on their websites about contextualised indicators on their websites, clear information about how these indicators are actually used in the decision-making process is much more difficult to find:

> "we don't actually set out anywhere that says it's ABB but if you come from this postcode it will be … you know … because it's very difficult and the tension is there about what you would actually say and what's reasonable to say … and what you can commit to" [Orientation A]

And making a similar point about the availability of information about contextualised admissions in the public sphere:

> "prevented us being so public about our adjusted offer … what we've always done with adjusted offers is these have always been given to our local authority partners … to our secondary school partners … tutors going out to schools who will explain them to pupils etc." [Orientation A]

By attempting to downplay social class differences and avoid the charge of "social engineering", admissions practices may be unwittingly perpetuating social class inequalities in higher education:

> "so somebody said to me once all you're interested in is social engineering, which I get a lot. And I go no, social engineering is when you take £30,000 and you pay a school to ensure that that young person will go to one of the top universities in this country. To me that's social engineering right from day one" [Orientation A]

The invisibility of both contextual admissions and a student population not representative of society contrasts strongly with wider society where the visibility of social inequalities is manifest:

> "you could walk around [areas of multiple deprivation] in a couple of hours. So we have some very concentrated areas where there are huge socio-economic issues. Lots of single parent families, large numbers of migrants, large numbers of all the groups who the system hasn't really supported to the extent that's required. But we also we've got loads of brilliant kids … within 10 minutes of driving, we've a tenfold difference on your chances to get to university … reality is that your life chances are massively dependent on where you're born in the city" [Orientation B]

> "there's a lot of deprivation in the surrounding area and I think that it's difficult to ignore. It bats you in the face when you walk around certain areas" [Orientation B]

A paradox is evident in the downplaying of social class in some organisations in the sense that whilst they are attempting to eliminate bias in admissions processes aiming to select the "brightest and best" by keeping social class markers hidden, they are erasing context:

> "we're already trying to be scrupulously fair because anything that gives you bias is by definition giving you bias. So if you know nothing about the candidate, if you just treat them as they are and then look at the context that they've come from afterwards

the score is a clean score and then you can look at the [contextualised offer]"
[Orientation B]

Some selective and highly selective organisations do make information about the detail of contextualised admissions visible in their public-facing documentation:

> "published a website and we're just now promoting that to schools that lists what the contextual offers will be but also gives eligibility criteria […] and what we're saying is if you're going to get an offer, it doesn't mean you will get one, but if you're going to get an offer based on all other parts of your application then this is the offer that you will be receiving" [Orientation B]

Whilst this is a more positive approach to social class using proxies for individual disadvantage it still contrasts sharply with the guarantee of an offer if standard entry requirements are met:

> "That's the standard tariff so what we mean by that is it's guaranteed if you achieve those grades then you would have your unconditional offer. You'll be offered a place" [Orientation A]

Responsibility for lower attainment should be located more explicitly with the socially unequal structure than at the level of the individual. Whilst this may require interventions at the macro-level, institutions are currently struggling with what appears to be a contradiction between meso-level policies celebrating institutional and individual attainment and engagement with applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. These concerns are felt by admissions policy-makers particularly with regard to how they account for differences between minimum and standard rates of entry in offer-making for example but apparent much more widely in provision for pre and post-admission engagement and support:

> "how best do we express this [the difference between different rates of entry], is it a range, is it that [there is a] standard [and a] minimum … to try to be transparent and attract the students we particularly want to attract who were academically able from whatever backgrounds and those from WP backgrounds particularly but how we deter those who just aren't going to be in with a shout because it's not fair on them and it's a huge burden for us potentially" [Orientation A]

Where support for disadvantaged students post-admission was concerned, practices were again characterised by an uncertainty about which approach to take. A frequently expressed reluctance to take a more affirmative approach was explained in terms of the potential for stigmatisation. Post-admission therefore, some institutions continued to misjudge the relationship between structural disadvantage and attainment in their attempts to downplay its traces:

"we are a supportive university. It's a supportive environment and therefore it's part of the norm. It's not an overlay or you need to identify so that we know to support you, we support all of our students … and I think, actually, it's for some people, obviously not for all, there are always individuals who want to identify themselves as needing the support, but oftentimes they're looking at it as an opportunity to be a normal part of the environment without having a label stuck on. So it is. We do have things like the university preparation programme and it is the sort of programme, because it's a preparation, it's two weeks before the start of term, somebody who's from a disadvantaged background would probably find that really quite useful in terms of getting to grips with the surroundings and it gives them a bit of a head start. But we wouldn't sell it from the perspective of "Oh, we've noticed that you're a contextual offer and therefore …" [Orientation C]

This can be contrasted with an emerging reflexivity on the part of other institutions that questions whether post-admission support needs to be more targeted:

"I think a gap that we wouldn't acknowledge and need to look further at in the coming years is what happens next. Are we doing enough [Unclear 00:27:01] on our campus? Is it right that there would be some specific activity for them once they've matriculated because we don't currently treat them any differently?" [Orientation B]

There is clearly a need therefore, to situate responsibility for lower attainment with wider structural inequalities, but institutional policies need to navigate this re-location more explicitly, more positively and more urgently. Institutions are struggling with how to frame their admissions policies formally where socioeconomic inequality is concerned and our participants have sometimes conflated low socioeconomic groups with other social categories, disability in particular. This struggle with how to deal with structural disadvantage in the context of celebrating individual attainment "regardless of background" was evidenced by narratives about how some institutions work hard to create positive group identities for other social groups at higher education recruitment fairs but struggle to forge that group identity for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups "they don't have that same sense of belonging" [Orientation B]. It was also evidenced by narratives about how offers should be framed for individual students:

"what we've agreed to do is just to send a communication to any Scottish domiciled applicant or UK domiciled who is getting a lower than standard offer because of a contextual factor, to essentially say we really want you. You're getting this offer because we think you're great. And they're thinking hang on, that's a bit odd. I thought … [institution]'s supposed to be great and now … and I think it probably is necessary to send that out for some applicants to be reassured … and to feel wanted" [Orientation A]

And making a similar point:

> "if they look at the entry requirements then they will see that their offer is different to the published entrance requirements. But they're not … we don't send them a big note saying congratulations you've got a contextual offer … obviously people do, institutions do what's right for them and I think for me, I don't know, I just wonder about the potential for negative perceptions around that. Well, did you get an offer on the basis of your academic merits or did you get an offer because of your family circumstances?" [Orientation C]

Other institutions cited examples where offers conditional on attaining high grades acted as an incentive for disadvantaged applicants. Others still cited examples of practice that made conditional offers on the basis of the subjects applicants were taking. The letter of offer included the entry requirements but for disadvantaged applicants this was regarded as a first step in what might be best thought of as a 'negotiated entry'. Individual and direct engagement with disadvantaged applicants, as opposed to indirect engagement mediated by third parties, provided a point of contact from pre to post-admission. This type of approach facilitated a continuing dialogue with applicants that extended beyond the publication of assessment results and enabled an individual negotiation to take place. The individual terms of that negotiation included the possibility of admission with lower than expected attainment:

> "But it would always be a lesser academic offer … so if we ask for a graded unit per se for a normal applicants we wouldn't ask for a graded unit for that group, so we try and make it a little bit easier for them to achieve what they have to achieve to get an entry … we're there to kind of recognise that it is difficult for these applicants … make it possible for these people to actually come to university" [Orientation C]

Inevitably, this function of engagement with potential applicants at a pre-admission stage fell outside the remit of admissions and contextualised admissions but is inextricably related to recruitment. Typically, responsibility for this function was located in widening participation/widening access teams who were situated variously in organisational structures. What was apparent to us were what may be significant differences between organisations where widening participation was situated on the periphery of and distant from admissions, and this included organisations that managed their widening participation function using third parties such as local authorities [Orientation A], and organisations where widening access was situated more centrally in the organisational structure and included student support post-admission [Orientation B], and in some cases, in more direct relation with the admissions function [Orientation C].

5.5 Accountability to external stakeholders

Our conversations with participants were frequently peppered with narratives of accountability, instances where they were required to account for their decision-making. At times these mechanisms of accountability were internal, one-way encounters in some cases but more of a two-way encounter between professionals and academics in others. The influence of external stakeholders on the formulation and implementation of contextualised admissions was apparent in a number of ways most obviously in terms of the additional requirements put in place by professional bodies. The extent to which professional bodies had engaged with contextualised admissions was not clear. In one case [Orientation B], good communications with industrial partners had established support for widening access work, yet in another case [Orientation D], a participant talked about the pressure from industry on widening access students to exit the institution at sub-degree level in order to enter the workforce. What did emerge from time to time however, were the voices of other external stakeholders, including "… Heads of independent schools … donors removing money" [Orientation A]

> "By parents, teachers, career guidance schools, etc. And, you know I worked in ... [institution] for this, I remember as well I was in ... [institution] for 10 years. I wasn't directly involved with admissions then, but I do remember when the … [department] there introduced a formal contextualised admissions. […] And there was a lot of winning over hearts and minds and bad publicity around that. The perception was they were disadvantaging all these people who had put huge effort into sending their kids and spending lots of money on fees and etc. So, we're on a journey. I think we're getting there. I think contextualised admissions will work, but it works faster if it's in the context of people who see it as something that has to be managed. So, I do see that there is something that if we had centralised admissions, I think the whole process would have been much more straightforward" [Orientation B]

> "I think we just have to be very clear about it. I mean we're working in a sort of framework which is difficult because, you know, at one stage I'm saying to an applicant 'Oh you've got A Levels', 'Right what happens if I narrowly miss my grades?' 'Well we'll consider it at the time', the likelihood is we'll probably bending round the edges like every other university in the country because, you know, we don't have to artificially inflate the grades where there's non-capped numbers. We can take the kind of basic academic minimum and that's fine. For Scottish students I am very… if we are ever challenged I am very, very clear about the policy restrictions that we operate under and I don't ever get into a discussion about… because we sometimes get parents who will say 'But little Johnny in his class has got less grades than him and got an offer', now by nature I don't get into conversation about anyone else's grades anyway for obvious reasons and I usually have to explain to the parents that actually I don't have the authority to speak to them either unless they have notified me on the UCAS form or they send me a written statistics. But you know I spoke to a guy last night who phoned me, whose son has been rejected five times by the university over a two year period" [Orientation B]

"admissions is one of these areas where you can guarantee that someone's next-door neighbour's son didn't get into your university and therefore you'll hear about why that student did not get in, because they're the best student in the world, and how could that possibly be, so one of the things that I've been very clear about since I came here was to get senior manager buy-in on how we operate so that they are not surprised by anything that we do and that they are happy with how we are operating and again that it's not just fair and transparent to the outside world, but it's fair and transparent within the university as well" [Orientation B]

External stakeholders are an important dimension in the construction of organisational identity and if universities in general and admissions personnel in particular are being held to account for contextualised policies and practices in an increasingly competitive higher education environment, it suggests more needs to be done at a macro level to support this work in the public sphere.

6. Summary of key findings and recommendations

Our analysis of the range of approaches to contextual admissions identifies four broad types of approach, each entailing different institutional orientations to the wider educational and social system, different orientations to the purpose of admissions in general and to contextual admissions in particular, and different uses of a range of systems and tools to identify applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds with the potential to succeed in higher education. While the four types of institutional orientation identified are broadly drawn and do not serve to fully represent any particular institutional case, they nevertheless capture key points of difference in the philosophies underpinning the range of institutional approaches to contextualised admissions across the sector.

All of the case study institutions included in this study demonstrate engagement with the contextualised admissions agenda, and a number of institutions have already travelled some distance towards developing extensive and nuanced contextualised admissions systems. However, our interview data highlights a number of issues that have yet to be resolved, and we recommend that all institutions consider these as they continue to review and to develop their contextualised admissions policies and practices.

6.1 Structural versus individual explanations the socioeconomic gap in school attainment

Most of the participants we spoke to recognised that the socioeconomic gap in school attainment has structural rather than individual causes; that it is rooted in wider socioeconomic inequalities, rather than being a consequence of individual differences in ability and effort. However, this recognition often proved difficult to square with the overriding notion that university admissions procedures are first and foremost an exercise in academic selection. These tensions are particularly evident in Orientation A institutions which tend to be the most academically selective, but are also applicable to Orientation B institutions where some courses are highly academically selective (and other courses have become more so over time), as well as to Orientation D institutions where grades are not decisive but where the display of talent cultivated at home and at school features heavily in admissions criteria.

The idea that structural inequalities produce disparities in academic achievement was regularly invoked by participants when interpreting anomalous instances in which contextually disadvantaged students achieved high grades despite the odds. The obverse of this – that most contextually disadvantaged students do not achieve high grades because of structural inequality – was rarely acknowledged explicitly. This emphasis on relatively rare instances in which the *individual* overcomes structural inequality serves, albeit unintentionally, to downplay the tendency for *structural inequality* to impede the individual.

In practical terms, the result is that contextualised admissions strategies often focus disproportionately on identifying high achieving students from contextually disadvantaged backgrounds, to the relative neglect of contextually disadvantaged students whose achievement levels are low in comparison to the institutional norm but may be appreciable relative to those from similar backgrounds.

In developing more effective contextualised admissions strategies, institutions will need to work to develop a more symmetric and therefore a more complete understanding of how student attainment is affected by socioeconomic disadvantage.

6.2 The definition, identification, and nurturing of potential

Many of our study participants associated contextualised admissions strategies with the search for potential; that is, with the search for evidence that an applicant's achievements do

not do full justice to their true ability. In most cases, potential was operationalised with primary reference to applicants' grades and with reference to the grades (and/or interview/audition performances) associated with typical applicants. Where information other than grades or interviews or auditions was used, the burden of proof tended to fall on the applicant to demonstrate that they possess what it takes to do well, not only at degree level, but also at that particular institution.

Consequently, potential was often equated with the ability to conform to normative expectations derived with reference to the existing student body. For institutions corresponding most closely to Orientation A, and for some areas of provision in Orientation B and Orientation C institutions, potential was conceived of in terms of an already-demonstrated capacity to achieve a first or upper second class degree or its equivalent. In contrast, a different conception of potential could be found in Orientation B and Orientation C institutions with strong widening access orientations, where university study was regarded as involving learning progression facilitated by appropriate support.

If contextualised admissions strategies are to be as effective as possible, all institutions will need to grapple with the concept of potential and its implications for what it means to educate students at degree level. If contextually disadvantaged students are regarded as having 'equal potential' only if they are judged likely to be able to hit the ground running, much as their more advantaged peers can be expected to do, the scope for contextualised admissions to widen participation in higher education is limited. In contrast, if 'equal potential' is seen as capacity to do well if supported to achieve a step-up, the scope for widening participation via contextual admissions is considerably increased.

6.3 The identification of robust indicators of contextual disadvantage and of robust evidence to support contextualised offer making

Some institutions, particularly those which correspond most closely to Orientation A and Orientation B, have invested significant time and resource in establishing an evidence base for the use of particular contextual indicators and for the application of particular forms of contextual offer making. However, across the sector, participants in the study expressed a desire for more robust evidence in relation to the range of potential practices. A number of study participants expressed concerns about the contextual indicators available, particularly regarding the risk that indicators may identify applicants as contextually disadvantaged when they are not. Participants were also sometimes uncertain about what the evidence shows in relation to the significance of pre-university attainment for achievement once at university.

These data and evidence concerns are likely to inhibit the development of contextualised admissions strategies, and for good reason – a strategy predicated on questionable data and uncertain evidence may fail to achieve its objectives, or even do more harm than good. These data and evidence concerns will need to be addressed at the institutional and sector-wide level if institutions are to have confidence in further development of their contextual admissions strategies.

6.4 Making the case for contextualised admissions to wider publics

Although our participants generally spoke positively about contextualised admissions, some displayed a degree of wariness about proclaiming the virtues of contextualised admissions to wider publics. This was evident in concerns about stigmatising applicants and students from disadvantaged backgrounds by openly applying a 'contextual admission' label, and in concerns about charges of unfairness levelled by various external stakeholders including unsuccessful applicants from more advantaged backgrounds.

Much of this unease appears to stem from the as yet unresolved issues described above: (1) the tension between recognising socioeconomic differences in school achievement as having structural causes and the primary focus of undergraduate selection on grades achieved by the individual; (2) the uncertainty about what constitutes and indicates potential and whether disparities between potential and formal academic achievement can and should be addressed at degree level; and (3) concerns about the robustness of the data and evidence underpinning contextualised admissions policies.

In light of this, the reticence with which some institutions communicate publicly about their contextualised approach to admissions is understandable. However, the potential consequences of this are that contextualised admissions strategies develop more slowly and less ambitiously in these institutions, and that the legitimacy of contextualised approaches to admission in the eyes of wider publics is reduced as a result of its uneven application.

Notably, those institutions which have already engaged significantly with the issues highlighted above tend to express their commitment to contextualised admissions publicly with more confidence. This indicates that internal and sector-wide engagement with the issues outlined above is critical to the continued development of more effective contextualised admissions policies and practices.